Mechanical regulation of organ asymmetry in leaves

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How appendages, such as plant leaves or animal limbs, develop asymmetric shapes remains a fundamental question in biology. Although ongoing research has revealed the genetic regulation of organ pattern formation, how gene activity ultimately directs organ shape remains unclear. Here, we show that leaf dorsoventral (adaxial-abaxial) polarity signals lead to mechanical heterogeneity of the cell wall, related to the methyl-esterification of cell-wall pectins in tomato and Arabidopsis. Numerical simulations predict that mechanical heterogeneity is sufficient to produce the asymmetry seen in planar leaves. Experimental tests that alter pectin methyl-esterification, and therefore cell wall mechanical properties, support this model and lead to polar changes in gene expression, suggesting the existence of a feedback mechanism for mechanical signals in morphogenesis. Thus, mechanical heterogeneity within tissue may underlie organ shape asymmetry.

During development, gene expression patterns are established to direct the formation of biological shapes. Compared with gene expression patterns, our understanding of how genes regulate biological shapes remains rudimentary¹. Organ growth involves physical processes. Emerging evidence indicates that mechanical stresses act as instructive signals to control morphogenesis in animals and in plants²,³. In plants, the mechanical constraints that arise from shared cell walls can orchestrate plant cell growth. Recent studies have shown that mechanical signals can regulate diverse aspects of development, such as cell division plane orientation⁴, cell shape patterning, organ initiation⁵, organ initiation⁶, organ shape⁷ and plant architecture⁸. Although cells can rearrange their relative position in animals, tissue connectivity and associated stress may also help orchestrate growth in that kingdom⁹.

In plants, cell wall determines cell, and ultimately tissue, growth rate and direction. The cell wall allows plant cells to maintain high internal turgor pressure, preventing them from bursting. It is widely assumed that cell expansion results from irreversible yielding of the cell walls to high internal turgor pressure⁹. As an external matrix, the cell wall is composed of polysaccharides or proteins¹²,¹³. Growing cells are surrounded by the primary cell wall, which is mainly made up of pectin, cellulose and hemicellulose. Pectins are small polysaccharides synthesized by the cell mainly in a methyl-esterified form but subject to enzymatic de-methyl-esterification¹⁴. Pectin de-methyl-esterification reduces growth in the pollen tube, but increased de-methyl-esterification leads to increased cell wall extensibility and cell expansion in the shoot apex¹⁵. Cellulose reorientation may affect the mechanical anisotropy of cell walls and cellulose content affects wall elasticity¹⁶.

The leaf, as a representative plant lateral organ, provides an excellent model to study the establishment of organ asymmetry. Leaf primordia initiate as rounded bulges from the periphery of the shoot apical meristem (SAM), which maintains stem cells in the shoot apex. Soon after initiation, asymmetries become established. The establishment of adaxial-abaxial (dorsoventral) polarity has been proposed to condition establishment of the central-marginal axis and subsequent lateral expansion⁷. Extensive molecular genetic studies have identified a transcriptional regulatory network of genes that promote abaxial and adaxial fates and show adaxial or abaxial expression in the leaf¹⁶,¹⁷. Regulatory genes expressed in the abaxial domain suppress those expressed in the adaxial domain, and vice versa. Among others, REVOLUTA (REV) and related HD-ZIPIII genes, as well as the LOB-domain gene ASYMMETRIC LEAVES2 (AS2), are expressed in the adaxial domain to promote the adaxial cell fate¹⁸. On the other hand, FILAMENTOUS FLOWER (FIL) is expressed in the abaxial side⁹. It has long been proposed that the SAM produces a signal to promote leaf adaxial-abaxial patterning¹⁹. More recent work showed that transport of the phytohormone auxin from leaf primordia to the SAM leads to a transient low-auxin zone in the adaxial domain, which regulates leaf asymmetric development¹⁹. How these adaxial- and abaxial-promoting genes regulate cell growth to change leaf primordium shape from round to flattened remains largely unknown.

In this study, we attempt to bridge the gap between gene expression patterns and biological shape. Our results show that leaf polarity signals lead to mechanical heterogeneity of the cell wall, which is related to the wall pectin methyl-esterification. Further numerical simulations, in combination with experimental validations, suggest that mechanical heterogeneity is sufficient to produce the planar leaf asymmetry. Thus, tissue-level mechanical heterogeneity may lead to organ shape asymmetry.

Results
Dynamic changes in the asymmetry of epidermal cell wall elasticity during early leaf growth. We recently found that the adaxial domain has a lower auxin concentration than the abaxial domain

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during early leaf development. In the shoot, auxin can promote cell wall loosening and then cell elongation, although the detailed molecular mechanism has not been fully resolved. In this study, we first determined if mechanical heterogeneity exists between the adaxial domain and the abaxial domain. Using tomato, we applied atomic force microscopy (AFM) to directly measure the elastic modulus of the epidermal cell wall in living leaf primordia (Fig. 1 and Supplementary Figs. 1 and 2). Following a recent AFM protocol, we measured the local elastic modulus of the outer wall within different leaf domains, which is relatively independent from turgor pressure (see Methods for more details). To this end, we randomly selected multiple cells from the adaxial side facing the meristem and the opposite abaxial side of the youngest leaf primordium (P1) (Fig. 1a). For P2 and P3 stages, we also included the middle region, the adaxial-abaxial junction (Fig. 1a). AFM allowed us to examine the morphology of the epidermal cells and the elastic modulus of their cell walls (Fig. 1b,c,e–g,i–k). We maintained indentation depth substantially lower than wall thickness, as indicated by indentation curves (Supplementary Fig. 2), to avoid artefacts. In general, cells are dome-shaped and high elastic modulus lines match the position of the anticlinal walls. Presumably, newly formed anticlinal cell walls do not lead to changes in the surface shape but result in increased elastic modulus. Our AFM-based elastic modulus map of epidermal cells revealed clear spatiotemporal mechanical differences. We quantitatively compared the elastic moduli of epidermal cell walls from regions without vertical cell walls below. At both P1 and P2 stages, we measured a higher elastic modulus from adaxial cells than abaxial cells (Fig. 1d,h and Supplementary Fig. 1c,d). At the P3 stage, cells in the middle region have elastic moduli significantly higher than cells in the abaxial side. However, the elastic moduli of the adaxial side cells decreased to a level similar to those of the abaxial side cells at the P1 stage (Fig. 1l and Supplementary Fig. 1e). The cells in the middle region continued to have high elastic moduli at the P3 stage, even higher than at the P2 stage. By using a different AFM setup and protocol with the ramp mode, we obtained similar differences among domains (Supplementary Fig. 1a,b), as we did with the quantitative nano-mechanical (QNM) mode (Fig. 1). Taken together, our observations show that the asymmetry of cell wall mechanical properties change dynamically during early leaf development.

**Table 2.** Values are mean ± s.e.m. *Student’s t-test P < 0.0001 and the value change above twofold. Scale bars, 100 μm in a, and 10 μm in b, c, e–g and i–k.**
Three domains with different methyl-esterification status of cell wall pectins. Recent work has related de-methyl-esterification of pectins, a major component of the primary cell wall, with wall elasticity\(^9\). In particular, pectin de-methyl-esterification may be controlled by auxin\(^3\), which has asymmetric distribution in early leaf primordia\(^2\). Thus, we focused on pectin de-methyl-esterification. We used the monoclonal antibodies LM19 and JIM5\(^2,3\), which specifically label de-methyl-esterified but not methyl-esterified pectin homogalacturonan (HG), to analyse the methyl-esterification status of HG in emerging tomato and Arabidopsis leaves. We also used the 2F4 antibody, which detects Ca\(^{2+}\)-crosslinked HG with up to 40% methyl-esterification\(^4\) and is commonly used to recognize low methyl-esterified HG\(^5\). In the tomato shoot apex, we labelled successive transverse sections through the SAM and leaf primordia with 2F4 (Fig. 2a–d and Supplementary Fig. 3a–c), LM19 (Supplementary Fig. 4a–c) or JIM5 (Supplementary Fig. 4e–g). The centre of the SAM was unlabelled, as described previously for Arabidopsis\(^5\), but leaf primordia showed dynamic, domain-specific labelling. The labelling patterns of 2F4, LM19 and JIM5 were generally consistent with each other. The small size of early P1 stage leaves prohibited us from unambiguously detecting signals (Fig. 2 and Supplementary Fig. 3d–e,g–h). In P2 and older stage leaves, we observed striking labelling in the walls of abaxial domain cells, suggesting selective HG de-methyl-esterification in this region (Fig. 2 and Supplementary Figs. 3a–c and 4a–c,e–g). Starting from the P2 stage, cell walls in the adaxial domain were also labelled (Fig. 2 and Supplementary Fig. 4a–c,e–g), but the middle domain remained unlabelled until the P5 stage. The outermost layer of epidermal cell walls had much weaker labelling than inner cell walls (Supplementary Fig. 3i), suggesting higher HG methyl-esterification in the outermost cell walls. In chemically de-esterified controls, we observed strong homogenous labelling of all cell walls in the shoot apex, including leaves (Supplementary Figs. 3l–n and 4d,h,i). We also detected partially methyl-esterified HG with LM20, which does not bind to unesterified HG, and obtained a complementary staining pattern to that of 2F4, LM19 or JIM5 (Supplementary Fig. 4j). No signal was detected when no primary antibody was added (Supplementary Fig. 4m,n), excluding non-specific cross-reactivity of the secondary antibody. In addition to tomato, we found similar labelling patterns in Arabidopsis leaves (Fig. 2e–h and Supplementary Fig. 3f–h), suggesting evolutionary conservation of the observed HG methyl-esterification dynamics.

We next confirmed that cell wall pectin de-methyl-esterification has significant effects on wall elasticity in leaf primordia. In tomato, we locally applied pectin methylesterase (PME), which is responsible for in vivo de-methyl-esterification of pectin. We positioned one or more sepharose beads loaded with citrus PME on the adaxial side of tomato P1 leaf primordia under the microscope (Supplementary Fig. 5a), which resulted in ectopic HG de-methyl-esterification in the adaxial domain (Supplementary Fig. 5b,d). Furthermore, the PME treatment substantially reduced the elastic moduli of the treated side (Supplementary Figs. 4o and 5f–h). We also locally applied lanolin containing the catechin-derivative (-)-epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), an inhibitor of PME activity\(^6\), to the abaxial domain of tomato P1 leaf primordia. Similarly, the EGCG treatment ectopically reduced HG de-methyl-esterification (Supplementary Fig. 5b,c) and increased the elastic moduli of the abaxial side (Supplementary Figs. 4o and 5e,g–h). Thus, we concluded that cell wall pectin de-methyl-esterification negatively correlates with wall elasticity in the epidermis in leaf primordia, as in the shoot apex\(^1\). However, outermost cell walls of epidermal cells are uniformly methyl-esterified (Supplementary Fig. 3i), suggesting an additional regulatory mechanism of wall elastic modulus. Nevertheless, inner cells with higher wall de-methyl-esterification and epidermal cells with lower elastic moduli are located in the same domain. Similarly, inner cells with lower wall de-methyl-esterification and epidermal cells with higher elastic moduli are located in the same domain.

To test if the chemical and genetic signals affecting leaf polarity regulate HG methyl-esterification, we first manipulated auxin distribution and signalling in tomato leaf primordia. We applied lanolin containing auxin (indole-3-acetic acid) to the adaxial side of tomato P2 leaves, which would cause radial leaves\(^8\). As shown in the shoot apex\(^5\), HG de-methyl-esterification increased after auxin treatment (Supplementary Fig. 6b). By AFM, we also confirmed that auxin treatment decreased the elastic moduli of the adaxial side (Supplementary Fig. 6d–f). We next abaxially applied the auxin antagonistic auxinoline, which binds TIR1/AFB proteins to block auxin signalling\(^6\). We found that this treatment could also induce radial leaves (34 out of 104). Auxinoline treatment led to reduced HG de-methyl-esterification in the abaxial domain (Supplementary Fig. 6a) and increased elastic moduli (Supplementary Figs. 4o and 6c,e–f).

To determine whether adaxial-abaxial leaf polarity influences pectin methyl-esterification, we next analysed the HG methyl-esterification status in Arabidopsis lines with leaf polarity defects. The pMP::MP\(^2\) plants with ectopic auxin signalling in the adaxial domain have abaxialized leaves\(^9,30\). We hypothesized that pMP::MP\(^2\) leaves may acquire precocious HG de-methyl-esterification in the adaxial side. Indeed, we detected high HG de-methyl-esterification in both the adaxial and abaxial domains, but not the middle domain of young leaf primordia (Supplementary Fig. 3j). We also speculated that the phvoluta-1d (pvh-1d) mutant with fully adaxialized...
Asymmetric cell wall elasticity is sufficient for asymmetric leaf growth. Previous theoretical predictions suggest that early patterns of growth can generate organ asymmetry in animals and plants. Changes in elasticity correlates with wall extensibility can lead to differences in cell expansion and growth. Thus, we next used a computational model to predict whether the observed dynamics of mechanical properties are sufficient to generate shape change and to produce asymmetric leaves.

To determine how dynamic differences in mechanical properties can generate asymmetry in leaves, we implemented a conceptual modelling framework that can describe the epidermal tissue and the inner tissue. We developed a two-dimensional (2D) hybrid model specialized for regional differences in mechanical properties, which also avoids the complexity of cellularized growth. Briefly, this model considers the epidermis as a continuous, viscoelastic material without explicitly individualized epidermal cells and with non-cell autonomous expansion, which we used the finite element method to describe. The inner cells follow the widely accepted concept of turgor-driven plant cell growth, in which cell expansion involves irreversible yielding of the cell walls to high internal turgor pressure. We used the energy minimization method to describe inner cells. The generalized Maxwell solid model (Supplementary Fig. 7) for mimicking the epidermis contains three parallel elements: two Maxwell elements (accounting for the viscoelastic effect) and one spring element (accounting for the long-term or steady-state elastic response). More details of the model and the strategies bridging the gap between AFM measurement and numerical simulation are described in the Methods and in the Supplementary Information.

To test the importance of cell wall mechanical dynamics on asymmetric leaf growth, we applied the above model to a 2D template, as a proxy for a leaf cross-section. Starting from a round shape, the morphological evolution of the modelled leaf is governed by the energy minimization principle for the inner cells, coordinated with mechanical balance for the epidermis upon various mechanical parameter settings of both inner and epidermal cell walls. Assuming increased pectin de-methyl-esterification increases elasticity, the observed inner cell pectin methyl-esterification status and neighbouring epidermal cell elasticity share similar trends—that is, more elastic epidermal cells cover de-methyl-esterified inner cells. Like inner cells, mechanical properties of the epidermis are differentially regulated among abaxial, middle and adaxial regions. We assumed a link between the wall elasticity and cell growth, which is further associated with wall plasticity. In the model, we allowed local softening of inner cell wall in accord with that of the neighbouring epidermis. In addition, we applied an epidermal restriction—that is, higher wall elastic modulus than neighbouring inner cells— which we describe below. To mimic the softening behaviour in our model setting, as observed experimentally, we allowed a certain number of inner cells and their adjacent epidermal cells to change their properties when the area of leaf surpassed a threshold value. Such dynamically changing wall mechanics resulted in formation of organ asymmetry that mimics the shape of a P3/4 leaf (Fig. 2i–l, Supplementary Fig. 7a,b). Briefly, this model considers the epidermis as a continuous, viscoelastic material without explicitly individualized epidermal cells and with non-cell autonomous expansion, which we used the finite element method to describe. The inner cells follow the widely accepted concept of turgor-driven plant cell growth, in which cell expansion involves irreversible yielding of the cell walls to high internal turgor pressure.

Fig. 3 | A conceptual mechanical model is sufficient to predict organ asymmetry formation. Growth simulation of multi-cellular leaf transverse sections. a, Reduced cell wall elasticity in the adaxial and middle domain. b, Increased cell wall elasticity in the abaxial and adaxial domain. c, Fastened adaxial cell wall loosening, in which the adaxial and abaxial domains have identical wall elasticity patterns. Asymmetry is reduced. d, Two-domain partition with the abaxial domain acquiring the middle domain cell wall property, that is, constitutively stiffening in the abaxial and middle domains. e, An alternative two-domain partition with the adaxial domain acquiring the middle domain cell wall property. In all the simulations, the leftmost shape represents the initial round shape with domain-specific rigidities. The subsequent steps are shown to the right. Panels a and b show only the initial step and the final step. Green represents low rigidity and red represents high rigidity. The perturbations in the model are labelled with approximately corresponding Arabidopsis genotypes.
Establishment of leaf asymmetry requires cell wall mechanical property dynamics. To specifically alter cell wall mechanical properties and test model predictions, we used exogenous enzymes and chemicals to alter pectin methyl-esterification status in specific leaf domains. We first locally applied the treatments in tomato. We used adaxial-specific PME treatment to decrease the cell wall elastic modulus in the adaxial (and possibly middle) domains (Fig. 3a,c). Consistent with the prediction of the model, we reproducibly observed partial or full loss of leaf asymmetry in treated leaves (60 out of 132, Fig. 4a–d). Epidermal morphology and vascular tissue structure suggested conversion of adaxial identity to abaxial identity (Fig. 4d). Non-glandular trichomes (Supplementary Fig. 8h), which are typical to abaxial epidermis, dominated the adaxial epidermis. Next, we used abaxial-specific EGCG treatment to increase cell wall elastic modulus in the abaxial (and possibly middle) domains (Fig. 3b,d). We obtained leaves with a range of polarity defects (13 out of 128), including radially symmetrical, split or disappeared vascular tissue (Fig. 4e,f and Supplementary Fig. 8a–c). On the epidermis, abaxial-specific EGCG treatment also led to mostly abaxial non-glandular trichomes (Supplementary Fig. 8g).

Furthermore, we simultaneously applied PME to the adaxial side and EGCG to the abaxial side of P1. Again, this double treatment resulted in abaxialized leaves rather than flipped adaxial-abaxial polarity (26 out of 46), as suggested by non-glandular trichomes (Supplementary Fig. 8i,j). Treatment of leaf primordia older than P1, no longer affected morphological asymmetry, suggesting that the mechanical signal functions early in leaf development. In our control experiments, in which leaf primordia were treated with PME on the abaxial side (none out of 51), EGCG adaxially (none out of 53) or adaxial treatment with denatured PME (none out of 37), we did not observe any radially symmetrical leaves. Thus, stress induced by PME or EGCG treatment, if there is any, is insufficient to cause polarity growth defects.

We also tested the model predictions in Arabidopsis using transgenic plants. The Arabidopsis genome encodes PMEs and endogenous PME inhibitor (PMEI) proteins. Both families are highly redundant, with 66 members in the PME family and 69 members in the PMEI family; moreover, many PME and PMEI genes are expressed in leaves, hindering mutant analysis. We therefore adopted a domain-specific ectopic-expression approach.

**Fig. 4 | Dynamics of cell wall pectin methyl-esterification are critical for leaf polarity patterning in tomato.** a, b, Control tomato leaf primordia, showing a primordium 7 days after emergence (a) and a transverse section through the midrib and adjacent lamina regions with close-up insertion of vascular strand (b). c, d, Tomato leaf primordia after adaxial microapplication of PME beads, showing an early leaf (c) and a transverse section through the midrib and adjacent lamina regions (d). Note that phloem cells (p) surround the xylem (x) elements. e, f, Tomato leaf primordia after abaxial microapplication of EGCG-containing lanolin, showing an early leaf (e) and a transverse section through the midrib and adjacent lamina regions (f). More examples are shown in Supplementary Fig. 9. g, i, Patterns of LeFIL transcript accumulation in transverse sections through untreated (g), PME-treated (h) and EGCG-treated (i) P1. Samples were fixed 48 hr after treatment and all leaves have the adaxial side facing up. LeFIL accumulation in the untreated leaf is excluded from the adaxial domain (g), but is invaded or even enriched in the adaxial domain after treatment (h and i). Fractions of samples showing the displayed features are in parentheses. Note that mis-expression may be underestimated due to difficulties in unambiguously scoring images. j, Relative expression of selected polarity genes in mock-, adaxial PME- and abaxial EGCG-treated tomato leaf primordia. RNA was isolated from stage P1+5 leaf primordia with and without detectable morphological changes. Transcript levels were measured by RT-qPCR in triplicate. Results in treated leaf primordia were normalized against expression in mock-treated leaf primordia of the same experimental pair. Values are mean ± s.d., with three or more biological replicates, and five leaves were used for each biological replicate. *Student’s t-test P < 0.01. Scale bars, 1 mm in a, c and e; 100 μm in b, d and f, and 50 μm in i and in insertions of b, d and f. w/ phenotype with detectable morphological changes; w/o, without detectable morphological changes.
To this end, we expressed *Arabidopsis* PME5 under the adaxially expressed ASYMMETRIC LEAVES2 (AS2) promoter, and expressed *Arabidopsis* PMEI3 under the abaxially expressed FILAMENTOUS FLOWER (FIL) promoter. We introduced these transgenes into Col-0 wild-type plants and the revoluta-6 (rev-6) background, which does not have leaf adaxial-abaxial polarity defects but is more sensitive to alterations of leaf patterning (Fig. 5a–b)\(^4\). The domain-specific AS2 and FIL promoter activities were not changed in the mutant background (Supplementary Fig. 9a–d). Although the AS2 promoter is activated mostly in the adaxial epidermis (Supplementary Fig. 9a and b), we could still detect polarity defects in 27 of 75 independent rev-6 lines transgenic for pAS2::PME5 (Fig. 5e,f). We also obtained lines with radially symmetrical leaves in eight of 24 independent rev-6 lines transgenic for pFIL::PMEI3, which ectopically express PMEI3 in the abaxial and middle domains\(^9\) (Supplementary Fig. 9c–e). Similar results were obtained in the Col-0 wild type, as in rev-6 (Supplementary Fig. 9f,g) and Supplementary Table 1). Vascular tissue structure and epidermal morphology of symmetric leaves from both genotypes suggested abaxialization (Fig. 5i,l and Supplementary Fig. 10a–f). However, we were unable to obtain transgenic lines with high level transgene expression, and the obtained transgenic lines were often infertile, indicating that transformants with strong expression could be embryonic or early seedling lethal. Taken together, these experimental results validate the model predictions that cell wall mechanical property dynamics lead to leaf asymmetry (Fig. 3c,d). In addition to leaf morphology changes, we observed gene expression changes in plants with altered pectin methyl-esterification status. In situ analysis uncovered an adaxialized and enlarged domain of LeFIL expression in adaxial-specific PME-treated and abaxial-specific EGCG-treated tomato leaf primordia (Fig. 4g–i). Whereas LeFIL expression is restricted to the abaxial and middle domains in normal leaves\(^5\), it was detected in the adaxial region after treatment. In Arabidopsis, FIL expression was similarly enlarged in young pAS2::PME5 rev-6, but not rev-6, leaf primordia (Supplementary Fig. 9c–e). By contrast, the adaxially expressed LeREV had reduced and less defined expression after either PME or EGCG treatment (Supplementary Fig. 8d–f). We further used quantitative PCR with reverse transcription (RT-qPCR) analysis to quantify gene expression in mock-, PME- or EGCG-treated leaf primordia. Compared with mock-treated leaf primordia, the expression of LeFIL increased substantially in both adaxial PME-treated and abaxial EGCG-treated tomato P\(_{50}\) stage leaf primordia (Fig. 4j). By contrast, the expression of LeREV and the middle domain gene LeWOX1 significantly decreased. Thus, mechanical signals may feed back on gene expression. This feedback could be direct through the mechanical signals or indirect through chemical signals such as oligo galacturonic acids. Note that both hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.

Epidermal restriction is required for asymmetric leaf growth. In addition to cell wall elasticity, our modelling simulation predicted that epidermal restriction is necessary for asymmetric leaf growth. Removal of epidermal restriction by assigning epidermal cell walls a uniform, low elastic modulus led to reduced leaf shape symmetry (Fig. 6a and Supplementary Video 4). Assigning the epidermis a uniform, high elastic modulus in the slow creeping phase also led to a less symmetrical shape (Fig. 6b and Supplementary Video 5). Although domain-specific epidermal restriction is necessary for asymmetric leaf growth, it is not sufficient with uniform inner cell wall elasticity (Fig. 6c).

We experimentally tested these predictions from the modelling simulation in Arabidopsis. To this end, we expressed either PME5 or PMEI3 under the epidermal layer-specific *ARABIDOPSIS THALIANA MERISTEM LAYER1* (ATML1) promoter\(^22\) in wild-type and as2-2 plants (Supplementary Fig. 9f,g), and obtained similar leaf polarity defects. Within the epidermis, we observed that enhanced HG de-methyl-esterification increased in pATML1::PME5 plants. In pATML1::PMEI3 plants, the walls in between L1 and L2 no longer had HG de-methyl-esterification (Supplementary Fig. 11). The as2-2 mutant does not exhibit obvious adaxial defects, but is more sensitive to alterations of leaf patterning. In five out of 27 transgenic T1 pATML1::PME5 as2-2 plants (and their progenies if available), we identified trumpet-like or rod-like symmetric leaves. Analysis of vascular tissue structure and epidermal morphology indicated these abnormal leaves were abaxialized (Fig. 6d–g). Similarly, we identified abaxialized leaves in five out of 24 transgenic T1 pATML1::PMEI3 as2-2 plants (Fig. 6h,i). Similar results were obtained in the Col-0 wild type (Supplementary Fig. 9j,k and Supplementary Table 1). These experiments validated the importance of epidermal restriction, as predicted by our model.

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**Fig. 5** | Dynamics of cell wall pectin methyl-esterification are critical for leaf polarity patterning in Arabidopsis. Arabidopsis Col-0 wild-type (a), rev-6 (c), pAS2::PME5 rev-6 (e) and pFIL::PMEI3 rev-6 (g) plants showing leaf morphology. Arrowheads highlight leaves with disrupted polarity in e and g, b, d, f, h. Transverse sections through blade base regions of Col-0 wild-type (b), rev-6 (d), pAS2::PME5 rev-6 (f) and pFIL::PMEI3 rev-6 (h) leaves. Mesophyll morphology and vascular structure indicate abaxialization in transgenic plants. Fractions of samples showing the displayed features are in parentheses. Scale bars, 1 mm in a, c, e and g; 100 μm in b, d, f and h; and 50 μm in insertions of b, d, f and h. Col, Col-0 wild-type; p, phloem cells; x, xylem cells.
Discussion

Although molecular genetic studies have identified and deciphered many of the signalling pathways that regulate patterning, the mechanisms that generate dynamic yet precise biological shapes during organ growth remain an open area of investigation. Mechanical influences on development have long been proposed, and recent studies in plants and animals have started to reveal the importance of mechanical factors. Recent studies in animal cells have proposed that tissue-level mechanical stress is needed to explain a range of developmental phenomena. We previously identified abaxial enrichment of auxin distribution in early leaf primordia, which may lead to domain-specific cell wall loosening. In this study, we found that relatively simple changes in mechanical properties can account for dynamic shape changes during asymmetric leaf development, providing a simple unifying framework for the control of asymmetric development of organs. By connecting gene expression with wall modifier activity and wall elasticity, we were able to link gene activity to leaf adaxial-abaxial growth asymmetry. We found that pectin methyl-esterification status of inner cell walls is likely causal to inner cell wall elasticity difference. Outermost cell walls of epidermal cells presumably share similar trends of elastic moduli with neighbouring inner cells, although a pectin-independent regulation is likely involved. A recent study showed that wall mechanics underlie sepal proximo-distal organ polarity growth, which is achieved through feedback of mechanical forces on microtubule array organization. Whether microtubule re-orientation affects leaf adaxial-abaxial asymmetry remains an open question. Mechanical signals may also affect the expression of genes affecting leaf polarity. In addition, monocot cell walls are very low in pectins, suggesting the involvement of an additional biochemical process in monocots.

The importance of epidermal restriction has long been discussed and debated, and our experimental and theoretical studies support the idea that the epidermis plays a leading role in restricting and controlling growth. Our analysis of the methyl-esterification status of cell-wall pectins identified three distinct, non-overlapping domains. These domains show a temporal sequence of de-methyl-esterification, with the abaxial domain first, then the adaxial and finally the middle domain (Fig. 2). These patterns support the existence of the recently proposed middle domain, which expresses WUSCHEL-RELATED HOMEBOX genes. Our modelling simulation shows that the middle domain is necessary for leaf asymmetry and flattening (Fig. 3d,e). The dynamic changes of wall mechanics also indicated that there is no simple association between wall elasticity and polarity gene expression, such as adaxial genes associated with stiffened walls. It is likely that the absolute elasticity of the cells is less important than the differences among the three domains, as our model simulation suggests. Without a mechanical difference along the adaxial-abaxial axis, the abaxial fate will be the default fate of leaf cells.52

Methods

Plant materials and growth conditions. Tomato (Solanum lycopersicum) cultivar Castlemart plants were grown in MS medium under controlled conditions (25°C at 60% humidity, with 16 hr of light and 22°C 8 hr of dark) until the fifth to seventh plastochron stage. Shoot apices were dissected, leaving only P0 or P1, and P2 intact, together with the subapical region, and cultured on MS medium containing 1 μg per ml f-zeatin (PhytoTechnology Laboratories, Lenexa, KS, United States). 100 μg per ml myo-inositol (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, United States) and 0.5 μg per ml folic acid (Sigma-Aldrich) at 25°C, with 16 hr of light and 8 hr of dark. Arabidopsis thaliana ecotypes Ler and Col-0 were used. The phb-1d mutant is in the Ler background; the atz-2 and rev-6 mutants and the pMP::MPD2 lines are in the Col-0 background. Seeds were sown in pots or in plates with MS medium. Plants were incubated at 22°C with 16 hr of light and 8 hr of dark.

Confocal, optical and electron microscopy. Confocal microscopy was taken with a Nikon A1R+ confocal microscope. Excitation and detection windows for 4’,6-diamino-2-phenylindole, green fluorescent protein, propidium iodide, Alexa Fluor 488 and Alexa Fluor 546 were as previously described54,55.
For optical microscopy, leaves were fixed in fresh formalin-acetic acid-alcohol solution under vacuum for 15–20 min, dehydrated in an ethanol series to 100% and embedded using the SPI low viscosity Spurr’s kit (SPI Supplies, West Chester, PA, United States). Sections were cut at 2 μm with Leica rotary microtomes mounted on slides and stained with 0.1% toluidine blue. Photographs were taken with a Nikon SMZ1000 stereoscopic microscope or an Olympus BX60 microscope equipped with a Nikon DS-R1 camera head.

Scanning electron microscopy was performed using a Hitachi S-3000N variable pressure scanning electron microscope after standard tissue preparation as previously described. For transmission electron microscopy, Arabidopsis shoot apices were fixed in 5% glutaraldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) for 4 h at room temperature, and then overnight in 2% osmium tetroxide at 4°C. Following three washes in phosphate buffer and distilled water, samples were stained in 1% uranyl acetate for 1 h. Samples were washed again in distilled water and then dehydrated in a graded alcohol series and embedded in Spurr’s resin (SPI Supplies). Ultrathin sections (70 nm) were cut using an ultramicrotome (UC7, Leica Microsystems, Wetzlar, Germany), mounted on copper grids with a single slot and stained with uranyl acetate and lead citrate. Then the samples were observed and imaged with an FEI Tecnai G2 20 TWIN electron microscope at 120 kV.

AFM. Topographical images were scanned with a Dimension Icon atomic force microscope (Bruker, Billerica, MA, United States) using the PeakForce QNM mode, which also detected for force curves. The topology image size was 20 × 20 μm2 or 10 × 10 μm2 with a resolution of 256 × 256 pixels. A 0.5 Hz scanning rate was used with a contact force of 0.2 N m−1. The spring constant of the probe was calibrated by the relative method on the Bruker’s polystyrene test sample (PDMS-SOFT-2 with 3.5 megapascals (Mpa)) for QNM measurement (Supplementary Fig. 1), and was calibrated by thermal tuning for ramp mode measurement. The QNM mode can scan the entire surface to obtain elastic modulus values at high resolution. For our samples, we obtained over 65,000 elastic modulus values for a 256 × 256 pixel area for every scan image. The three-dimensional elasticity maps in Fig. 1 and Supplementary Figs. 5 and 6 were obtained by the QNM mode. The QNM mode could detect a difference over the cell walls compared to the middle of the cells, as shown before. In comparison, the ramp mode can be used to obtain the absolute elastic modulus of selected discrete locations.

All measurements were carried out under water at room temperature to prevent cell plasmolysis. Tomato leaf P, and P, primordia were detached from the shoot apex with a tweezer and fixed to the stage of the AFM with a 200 nL drop of the 0.1% (w/v) BSA in PBS (for LM19, LM20 and JIM5 antibodies) or T/Ca/S (20 mM Tris-HCl, 150 mM NaCl, pH 8.2) stock solutions of EGCG (Sigma-Aldrich) prewarmed at 50 °C to a final concentration of 10 mM. The paste was manually administered to cultured tomato leaf primordia with syringe tips.

RT-qPCR. PME- or EGCG-treated P, primordia were separately collected according to morphological polarity phenotype 5 d after treatment, as described above. Mock-treated primordia were collected in parallel. Total RNA was extracted from each group of five primordia of the same treatment and phenotype using the RNeasy Micro kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany). First-strand complementary DNA (cDNA) synthesis was performed using 0.5 μg of RNA with Transcriptor One-Step gDNA Removal and cDNA Synthesis SuperMix (TransGen, Beijing, China) and 22-mer oligo(dt) primers according to the manufacturer’s instructions. RT-qPCR was performed on a Bio-Rad CFX96 real-time PCR detection system with the KAPA SYBR FAST qPCR kit (KAPA Biosystems, Wilmington, MA, United States) and gene-specific primers (Supplementary Table 1). Relative expressions of PME/EGCG-treated samples were measured by RT-qPCR compared with mock-treated samples of the same batch, and all their expressions were normalized against the expression of the LeActin (Soly037g078400), which is a widely used internal reference gene control with stable expression, of the same sample.

In situ hybridization. Details of methods used for fixation of plants, embedding in paraffin and in situ hybridization can be found at http://www.its.caltech.edu/~plantlab/protocols/insitu.html. Sections (8 μm thick) were cut with a Leica RM2255 rotary microtome. The Fil probe contains 612 bp of Fil cDNA amplified by PCR with primers 5′ - ATGGTCAATCTGTCTGCTAGTGC-3′ and 5′ - ATCAATTAAGAGAGCAAGTCCATAA-3′. The ATML1 probe contained 687 bp of ATML1 cDNA amplified by PCR with primers 5′ - GATGTTGCAATCTGGTTGATTGTA-3′ and 5′ - GTTCCACTATGATGCTACGGAA-3′. The LeFil probe contained 657 bp of LeFil cDNA amplified by PCR with primers 5′ - ATCAATTAGAGAGCAAGTCCATAA-3′ and 5′ - ATCAATTAAGAGAGCAAGTCCATAA-3′. The ATML1 probe contained 687 bp of ATML1 cDNA amplified by PCR with primers 5′ - GATGTTGCAATCTGGTTGATTGTA-3′ and 5′ - GTTCCACTATGATGCTACGGAA-3′. The LeFil probe contained 657 bp of LeFil cDNA amplified by PCR with primers 5′ - ATCAATTAGAGAGCAAGTCCATAA-3′ and 5′ - ATCAATTAAGAGAGCAAGTCCATAA-3′. All PCR amplicons were cloned into the pEASY-Blunt cloning vector (TransGen) for in vitro transcription.

Mechanical modelling. Morphological evolution of the leaf was predicted using a 2D mechanical model. The model assumes for simplicity that a leaf at its early (P) morphogenesis stage is a cylindrical disk, with the epidermis as its perimeter and the inner cells as its interior (Supplementary Fig. 7a). As detailed measurements for the interaction between the inner cells and the epidermis—that is, the squeezing force—are currently lacking, we introduced in our model a small cushion zone that separates the inner cells from the epidermis. Dynamic growth of the inner cells is governed by the Hamiltonian potential energy equation, which should evolve within the region around the epidermis. Besides, a ‘short-axis’ rule was also introduced for treating the division of inner cells.

The viscoelastic property of the epidermis was modelled by the generalized Maxwell element (Supplementary Fig. 7b) using creeping behavior for fast cells and dysmorphic behavior for slow cells under the first boundary condition. Multiple regulating parameters were included in numerical simulations (Supplementary Table 1), which present the mechanical parameters of cell walls in the dimensionless form. represented the mechanical difference of stiff and soft inner cells and epidermis, respectively. Sensitivity analysis of key parameters in the model was performed in Supplementary Fig. 7c-d. To numerically solve our hybrid model, an in-house algorithm that combines the stochastic energy minimization method with the determinative finite element method was developed. For details, please refer to the Supplementary Methods. Stress and strain dynamics of the epidermal layer upon different relaxation cycles at different stages of leaf primordia were shown in Supplementary Fig. 7c-d.

Data availability. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding authors upon request.
References

Acknowledgements
We thank K.-I. Hayashi (Okayama University of Science) for providing auxinole, N. Li (Institute of Mechanics, Chinese Academy of Sciences) and Z. Huang (Bruker Nano Surfaces Business, Beijing) for assistance with AFM measurement, the Core Facilities of Life Sciences of Peking University for use of the TEM and S.-N. Bu (Peking University) and S. Poethig (University of Pennsylvania) for discussions. This work was supported by National Natural Science Foundation of China grants 31430010 and 31627804, National Basic Research Program of China (973 Program) grants 2014CB943500 and 2011CB710900, National Key Research and Development Program of China grant 2016YFA0501601, the National Program for Support of Top-Notch Young Professionals, China Postdoctoral Science Foundation grant 2015M570171 and the State Key Laboratory of Plant Genomics.

Author contributions
Y.J. conceived and designed experiments. J.Q. and B.W. carried out most of the experiments. S.F., S.L. and M.L. carried out numerical simulations. C.G. contributed to phenotypic analysis. X.Z. and D.Q. contributed to AFM experiments. Y.H. performed TEM experiments. Y.Z. and C.L. provided materials/reagents. Y.J. and M.L. wrote the manuscript, with contributions from all the authors.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Additional information
Supplementary information is available for this paper at doi:10.1038/s41477-017-0008-6.

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