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Review

Molecular epidemiology, evolution and phylogeny of SARS coronavirus

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ABSTRACT

Shortly after its emergence in southern China in 2002/2003, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) was confirmed to be the cause of SARS. Subsequently, SARS-related CoVs (SARSr-CoVs) were found in palm civets from live animal markets in Guangdong and in various horseshoe bat species, which were believed to be the ultimate reservoir of SARSr-CoV. Till November 2018, 339 SARSr-CoV genomes have been sequenced, including 274 from human, 18 from civets and 47 from bats [mostly from Chinese horseshoe bats (*Rhinolophus sinicus*), $n = 30$; and greater horseshoe bats (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*), $n = 9$]. The human SARS-CoVs and civet SARSr-CoVs were collected in 2003/2004, while bat SARSr-CoVs were continuously isolated in the past 13 years even after the cessation of the SARS epidemic. SARSr-CoVs belong to the subgenus *Sarbecovirus* (previously lineage B) of genus *Betacoronavirus* and occupy a unique phylogenetic position. Overall, it is observed that the SARSr-CoV genomes from bats in Yunnan province of China possess the highest nucleotide identity to those from civets. It is evident from both multiple alignment and phylogenetic analyses that some genes of a particular SARSr-CoV from bats may possess higher while other genes possess much lower nucleotide identity to the corresponding genes of SARSr-CoV from human/civets, resulting in the shift of phylogenetic position in different phylogenetic trees. Our current model on the origin of SARS is that the human SARS-CoV that caused the epidemic in 2002/2003 was probably a result of multiple recombination events from a number of SARSr-CoV ancestors in different horseshoe bat species.

1. Introduction

Shortly after its emergence in southern China in 2002/2003, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) was confirmed to be the cause of SARS (Peiris et al., 2003). There has been a total of 8096 laboratory-confirmed cases of SARS, leading to 774 mortalities in 11 countries (World Health Organization, 2004). Subsequently, SARS-related CoV (SARSr-CoV) was found in palm civets from live animal markets in Guangdong province (Guan et al., 2003). However, the initial hypothesis that civets may act as animal reservoir of SARS-CoV was soon overturned by several observations. Firstly, SARSr-CoV was only detected in civets from the market, but not those in the wild (Kan et al., 2005; Tu et al., 2004). Secondly, the high ratio of nonsynonymous to synonymous mutation rates (Ka/Ks ratios) of the Spike (S), open reading frame (ORF) 3a and non-structural protein (nsp) genes in civet SARSr-CoVs collected in both the 2003 and the minor 2004 outbreaks suggested that the virus was undergoing rapid evolutionary gene

adaptation in civets (Song et al., 2005). Thirdly, compared with SARS-CoV collected from human during the 2003 epidemic, functional changes have been observed in the S protein of civet SARSr-CoV and the SARS-CoV isolated from the 2004 minor outbreak. The latter showed less efficient use of the human angiotensin converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) receptor (Li et al., 2005b) and demonstrated resistance to antibody inhibition (Yang et al., 2005). Finally, while significant levels of antibody to SARS-CoV were detected in 80% of the civets from one animal market in Guangzhou, low seroprevalence rates in civets from various civet farms in China suggested that civets were largely brought to the animal market infection-free (Guan et al., 2003; Tu et al., 2004). The SARSr-CoV was likely contracted during later mixing and trading.

In view of these observations, we carried out a molecular surveillance study in various mammals in Hong Kong to hunt for the ultimate source of the virus (Lau et al., 2005). Among the 127 bats (including 8 bat species), 20 monkeys and 60 rodents surveyed, SARSr-CoV was only detected in 39% of the fecal samples of 59 Chinese horseshoe bats

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(*Rhinolophus sinicus*, Rs) (Lau et al., 2005). Western blot analysis showed that antibodies against the nucleocapsid (N) protein of bat SARSr-CoV was present in 67% of the serum samples of Chinese horseshoe bats, while 8% of the serum of Chinese horseshoe bats were tested positive for human SARS-CoV-neutralizing antibody with titer $\geq 1:20$ (Lau et al., 2005). Shortly afterward, another independent group also reported the detection of SARSr-CoV in Chinese horseshoe bats, greater horseshoe bats (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*, Rf), and big-eared horseshoe bats (*Rhinolophus macrotis*, Rm) in Hubei and Guangxi provinces of China (Li et al., 2005a). In the past few years, SARSr-CoVs have been isolated from a variety of horseshoe bats in Yunnan province of China by several groups (Ge et al., 2013; He et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2017; Lau et al., 2015).

Three hundred and thirty nine SARSr-CoV genomes have been sequenced from 2003 to 2018. These include 274 genomes from human, 18 from civets and 47 from bats. The human SARS-CoV and civet SARSr-CoV were collected in 2003/2004, while bat SARSr-CoVs were continuously detected even after the cessation of the SARS epidemic. In this article, we review our current understanding of the molecular epidemiology, evolution and, phylogeny of SARSr-CoVs based on analysis of these 339 genomes.

2. The SARS-CoV genome

The genome size of the SARS-CoV varies from 29.0 kb to 30.2 kb. Its genome structure follows the characteristic gene order of other known CoVs: the 5' two thirds of the genome comprises ORF1ab encoding replicase polyproteins, while the 3' one third consists of genes encoding structural proteins including S, envelope (E), membrane (M), and N proteins (Fig. 1). Both the 5' and 3' ends of the SARS-CoV genome contain short untranslated regions. The translational product of ORF1ab is cleaved by proteases encoded by SARS-CoV itself into 16 nsp, which include major enzymes such as papain-like protease(s) (PL^{pro}), chymotrypsin-like protease (3CL^{pro}), RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp) and helicase (Hel) (Fig. 1). In contrast to the genome of viruses belonging to lineage A *Betacoronavirus* (recently renamed as subgenera *Embecovirus*), haemagglutinin-esterase gene is absent from the genome of SARS-CoV. In addition, SARS-CoV contains 6–7 accessory proteins, encoded by ORF3a, ORF3b, ORF6, ORF7a, ORF7b and ORF8 [or ORF8a and ORF8b as a result of a 29-nucleotide (nt) deletion]. This is unique to lineage B *Betacoronavirus*, a subgenus recently renamed *Sarbecovirus* and contains all SARSr-CoVs (Fig. 2).

Studies in the past 15 years have partly revealed the biochemical functions of these accessory proteins (Liu et al., 2014). Protein 3a triggers apoptosis and induces the production of proinflammatory cytokines such as RANTES (Regulated on Activation, Normal T cell Expressed and Secreted; also known as C-C motif chemokine ligand 5, CCL5) and CXCL8 (C-X-C motif chemokine ligand 8). Protein 3b inhibits type I interferon and also induces apoptosis. Protein 6 inhibits interferon signaling and stimulates DNA synthesis. Protein 7a activates NF- κ B (nuclear factor kappa B) and MAPK8 (mitogen-activated protein kinase 8) for CXCL8 and RANTES production. The function of protein 7b is not well characterized yet. ORF8 is present in all SARSr-CoV genomes in bats and civets, as well as in SARS-CoVs isolated from human during the early phase of the epidemic. Protein 8 activates the ATF6 (activating transcription factor 6) branch of unfolded protein

response. In the genomes of SARS-CoVs isolated from human during the late phase of the epidemic, there was a signature 29-nt deletion in ORF8, splitting it into two separate ORFs 8a and 8b. Protein 8a includes caspase-dependent apoptosis whereas protein 8b modulates cellular DNA synthesis.

3. Unique phylogenetic position of SARS-CoV

Before the SARS epidemic, there were just around 10 CoVs with complete genome sequences available. These CoVs were classified into three groups: Group 1, Group 2 and Group 3. In 2011, the Coronavirus Study Group of the International Committee for Taxonomy of Viruses renamed these three groups into three genera: *Alphacoronavirus*, *Betacoronavirus*, and *Gammacoronavirus* (de Groot et al., 2011). When SARS-CoV was first discovered in 2003, phylogenetic analysis of the SARS-CoV genome showed that it occupied a unique position in *Betacoronavirus*, which was subsequently placed into the subgenus *Sarbecovirus*. The traditional betaCoVs (e.g. mouse hepatitis virus, human CoV OC43, bovine CoV) were classified as *Embecovirus* (Fig. 2). After the SARS epidemic, an unprecedented number of novel CoVs were discovered (Lau et al., 2016; Lau et al., 2007; Lau et al., 2012a; Lau et al., 2012b; Lau et al., 2014; Woo et al., 2005; Woo et al., 2014a; Woo et al., 2014b). This led to the description of lineage C *Betacoronavirus*, which comprises important members such as *Tylonycteris* bat coronavirus HKU4, *Pipistrellus* bat coronavirus HKU5, *Hypsugo* bat coronavirus HKU25 and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome CoV (Lau et al., 2013; Lau et al., 2018b; Woo et al., 2007; Woo et al., 2006a), and lineage D *Betacoronavirus* (Lau et al., 2010b) as well as a novel genus *Deltacoronavirus* (Lau et al., 2018a; Woo et al., 2012; Woo et al., 2017) (Fig. 2). Lineage C and lineage D *Betacoronavirus* were now renamed as subgenera *Merbecovirus* and *Nobecovirus*.

4. Molecular epidemiology and evolution of SARS-CoV

4.1. Circulation of SARSr-CoV in horseshoe bats in 2004 to 2018

Since its first discovery in Chinese horseshoe bats in 2004 (Lau et al., 2005), SARSr-CoVs have been continuously found in various horseshoe bat species in the last 13 years (Drexler et al., 2010; Ge et al., 2013; He et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2017; Lau et al., 2005; Lau et al., 2010a; Li et al., 2005a; Tang et al., 2006; Wu et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2015; Zeng et al., 2016). This is in contrast to the case for civets and human, where SARSr-CoVs were only found in 2003/2004, and never reported afterward. For the 47 bat SARSr-CoV genomes, 30 are from Chinese horseshoe bats, 9 from greater horseshoe bats, 2 from big-eared horseshoe bat, 2 from least horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus pusillus*, Rp), and 1 each from intermediate horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus affinis*, Ra), Blasius's horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus blasii*, Rb), Stoliczka's Asian trident bat (*Aselliscus stoliczkanus*, As) in the neighboring family *Hipposideridae* and wrinkled-lipped free-tailed bat (*Chaerephon plicata*, Cp) in the genetically more distant family *Molossidae*. SARSr-CoVs have also been detected in countries other than China, including Thailand, Italy, Luxembourg, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Hungary, Japan, Kenya, etc. However, only partial sequences were available for these isolates. Nevertheless, the immediate progenitor of SARS-CoV has not been pinpointed.

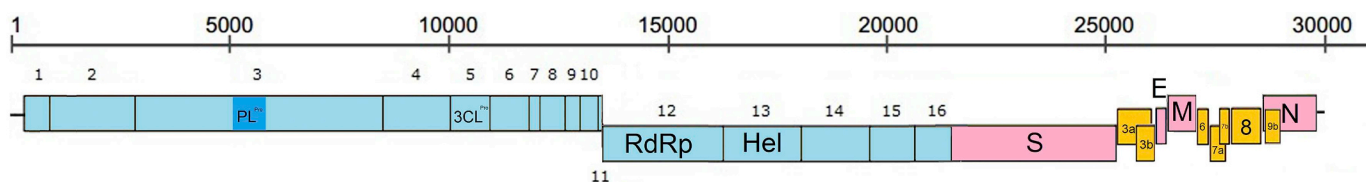


Fig. 1. Genome organization of SARS-CoV. ORF1ab with nsp1–16 are colored in blue. Structural proteins including S, E, M and N are in pink. Accessory proteins were numbered and in yellow. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

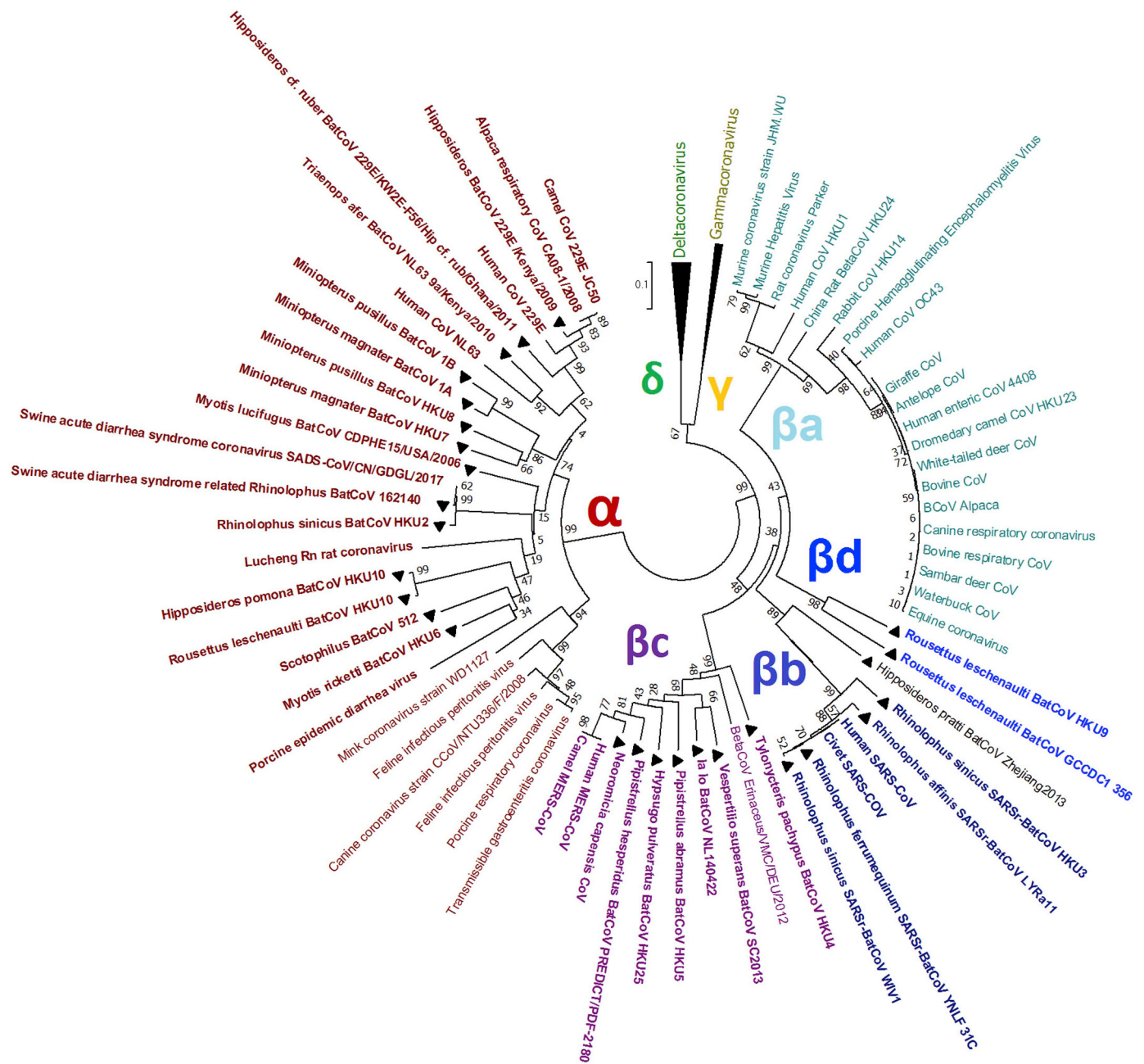


Fig. 2. The diversity of CoVs as demonstrated with a phylogenetic tree targeting the 303 bp partial RdRp sequence (position 15,293–15,596 with respect to Human SARS-CoV TOR2). The neighbor-joining phylogenetic tree was constructed with maximum composite likelihood method by MEGA 7.0. The test of phylogeny was statistically supported by the bootstraps value calculated from 1000 trees. Bat CoVs were labeled with black triangles. The branches of *Gammacoronavirus* and *Deltacoronavirus* were compressed.

4.2. Geographical gradient of SARSr-CoV

Among the 45 SARSr-CoV genomes from bats in China, 11 of them were from Hong Kong, 2 were from Guangdong, 2 from Guangxi, 5 from Hubei, 20 from Yunnan and one each from Shaanxi, Shanxi, Jilin, Guizhou, Hebei, respectively. Overall, it is observed that the SARSr-CoV genomes from bats in Yunnan possess relatively higher, whereas those from Guangdong, Jilin, Shanxi and Hebei possess relatively lower nt identity to those from civets (Fig. 3A). This is an interesting phenomenon since the SARS epidemic that emerged in late 2002 was first noticed in Guangdong province as an outbreak of acute community-acquired atypical pneumonia syndrome. Severe cases were later retrospectively traced back to five cities around Guangzhou, with the index case reported in Foshan, a city 24 km away from Guangzhou. The

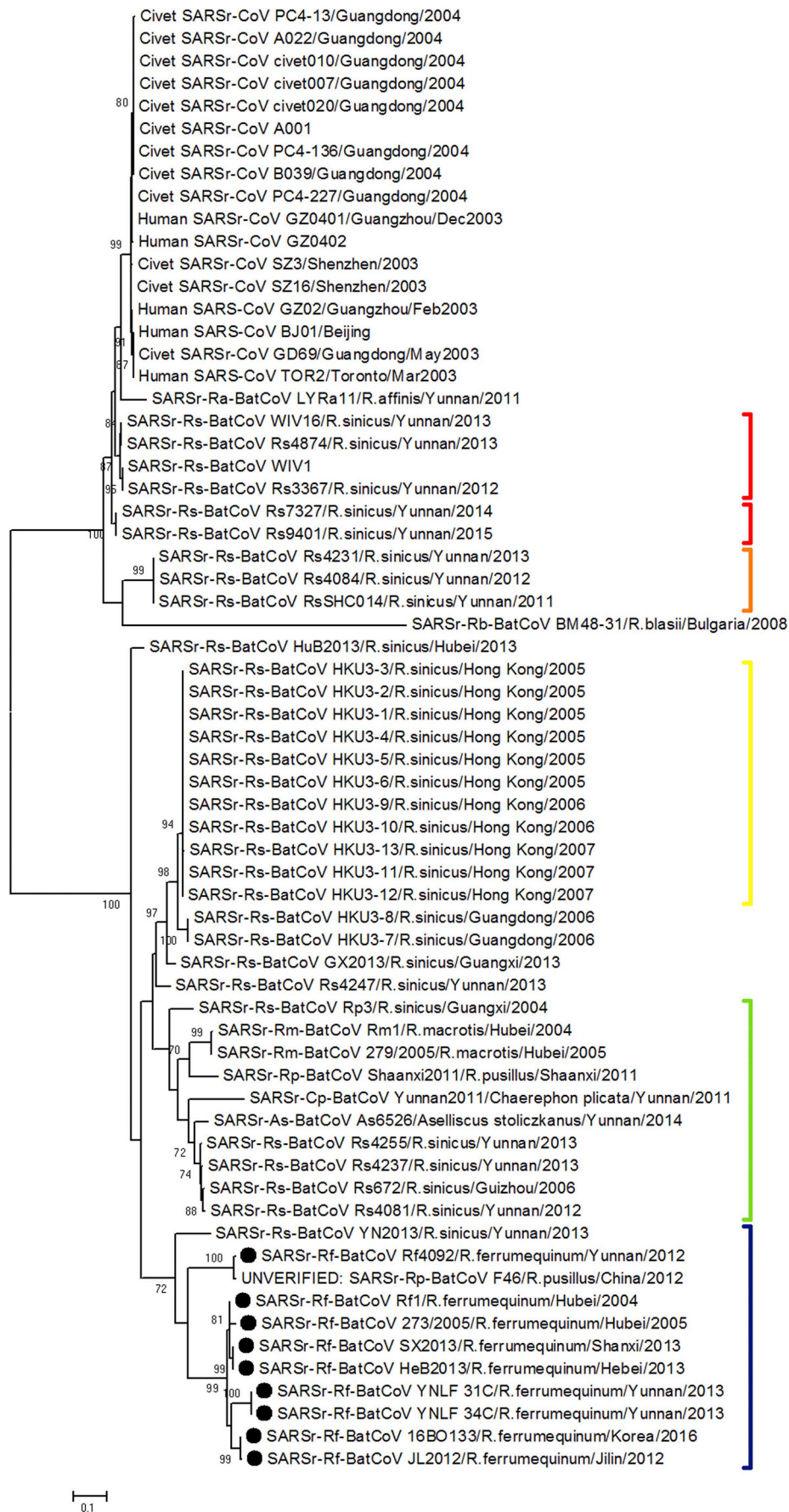
second case was a chef from Heyuan who worked in a restaurant in Shenzhen who contacted with wild game-food animals regularly. This mismatch between clinical events and apparent gradient of nt identity could either be due to a missing link during evolutionary adaptation among the SARSr-CoVs in different provinces or simply as a result of sampling error.

4.3. Recombination and evolution

The high frequency of homologous RNA recombination is one of the major factors contributing to a plastic genome underpinning the evolutionary force in CoVs. This has resulted in different genotypes or even different CoVs adapted to new hosts (Herrewegh et al., 1998; Lau et al., 2011; Terada et al., 2014; Woo et al., 2006b). As for SARSr-CoVs, it is

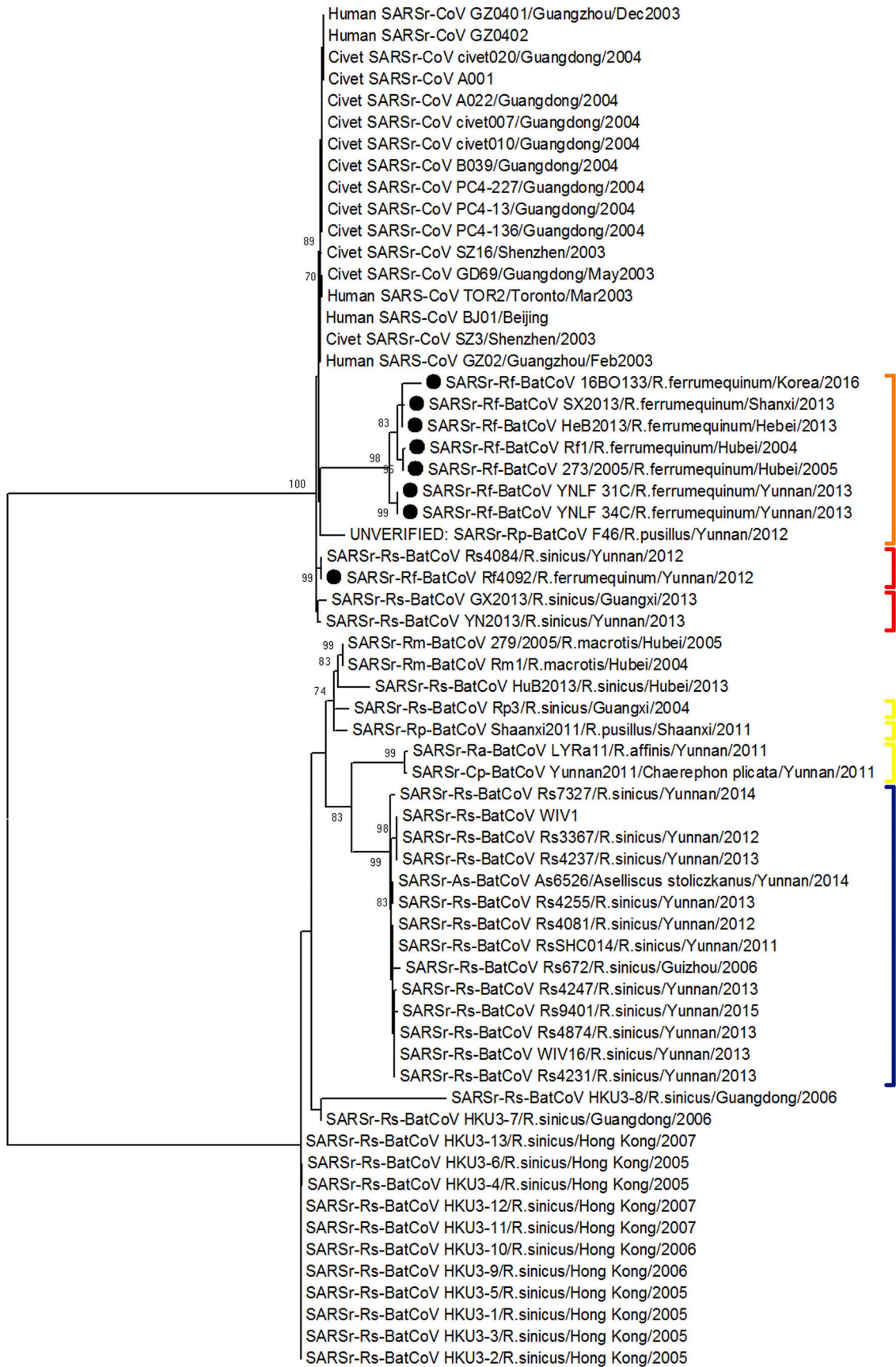
SARSr-CoV strains	nsp1	nsp2	nsp3	nsp4	nsp5	nsp6	nsp7	nsp8	nsp9	nsp10	nsp11	nsp12	nsp13	nsp14	nsp15	nsp16	NTD	RBD	S2	ORF3	ORF8	E	M	N	Genome	
Civet SARSr-CoV SZ16/Shenzhen2003	99.8	99.8	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	100	100	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8
Human SARSr-CoV G202/GuangzhouFeb2003	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8	99.8
Human SARSr-CoV B301/Beijing	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6
Human SARSr-CoV G2022/GuangzhouMar2003	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6	99.6
Civet SARSr-CoV civet020/Guangdong2004	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5
Civet SARSr-CoV PC4-136/Guangdong2004	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5
Civet SARSr-CoV civet135/Guangdong2004	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5
Human SARSr-CoV G22402/Guangdong2004	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5
Civet SARSr-CoV A001	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5
Civet SARSr-CoV PC4-227/Guangdong2004	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5
Civet SARSr-CoV civet019/Guangdong2003	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5	99.5
Human SARSr-CoV G22401/GuangzhouDec2003	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1
Civet SARSr-CoV civet007/Guangdong2004	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1
Civet SARSr-CoV B039/Guangdong2004	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1
Civet SARSr-CoV civet110/Guangdong2004	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1	99.1
Civet SARSr-CoV A022/Guangdong2004	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9	98.9
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4084/R.sinicus/Yunnan2012	95.7	97.4	96.8	95.9	97.3	98.1	98.9	98.8	98.8	98.8	98.6	98.3	96.6	95.7	93.7	93.5	72.2	81.0	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.7	95.7
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4231/R.sinicus/Yunnan2013	95.7	97.4	96.8	95.9	97.3	98.1	98.9	98.8	98.8	98.8	98.6	98.3	96.6	95.7	93.7	93.5	71.9	81.0	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.7	95.7
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4018/R.sinicus/Yunnan2015	95.6	97.6	96.8	95.9	97.3	98.6	99	98.8	98.7	98.8	98.6	98.2	96	93.4	93	71.9	81.0	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.7	95.6	95.6
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs3367/R.sinicus/Yunnan2012	95.4	97.8	96.4	95.8	97.3	98.7	98.9	98.8	98.8	98.8	98.6	98.3	96.8	95.6	93.6	93.6	72	81.0	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.6	95.6
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV RsH014/R.sinicus/Yunnan2011	95.2	97.8	96.5	95.6	97.5	98.6	99.1	98.8	98.8	98.8	98.6	98.4	96.9	95.7	93.8	93.4	71.9	81.0	97.4	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.6	95.6
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV WW16/R.sinicus/Yunnan2013	94.3	97.8	96.8	95.5	97.3	98.1	98.7	98.4	98	97.6	97.6	98.1	95.8	96	93.5	93.6	72.4	81.0	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.5	95.5
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4874/R.sinicus/Yunnan2013	94.2	97.6	96.8	95.5	97.3	98.3	98.6	98.4	98	97.6	97.6	98.1	95.5	96.1	93.5	93.6	72.4	81.0	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.4	95.4
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs7327/R.sinicus/Yunnan2014	93.9	97.6	97	95.8	97.3	98.6	99	98.8	98.7	98.8	98.6	98.1	95.9	95.9	93.4	93	71.9	81.0	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.3	95.3
SARSr-Rf-BatCoV Rf4092/R.ferreumquim/Yunnan2012	93.8	97.6	96.1	95.8	97.3	98.3	99.2	98	98.1	98.4	97.6	98	97.3	95.8	93.1	92.5	70.5	80.4	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.2	95.2
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV WW	93.8	97.6	96.1	95.7	97.3	98.3	99.2	98	98.1	98.4	97.6	98	97.3	95.8	93.1	92.5	70.5	80.4	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.1	95.1
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV R4237/R.sinicus/Yunnan2013	93.6	97.8	97.1	95.9	97.6	98.5	99	98.8	98.7	98.8	98.6	98.1	97	95.5	93.5	93.1	70.7	80.4	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	95.0	95.0
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Aa6526/Aselliscus stoliczkanus/Yunnan2014	93.6	97.8	96.7	95.8	97.3	98.9	98.6	98.4	98.8	98.7	97.9	97.1	98.3	96.7	96.3	93.7	69.7	80.9	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	94.9	94.9
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4247/R.sinicus/Yunnan2011	93.5	97.8	96.7	95.6	97.3	98.9	98.6	98.4	98.8	98.7	97.9	97.1	98.3	96.7	96.3	93.7	69.7	80.9	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	94.8	94.8
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV R4255/R.sinicus/Yunnan2011	93.4	97.6	96.8	95.5	97.3	98.7	99	98.8	98.8	98.8	98.6	98.2	95.8	96.1	93.6	93.9	72	80.7	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	94.7	94.7
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV R4818/R.sinicus/Yunnan2012	93.4	98	96.8	95.5	97.4	98.3	98.7	98.4	98.1	97.6	97.8	98.2	95.8	95.9	93.6	94.8	72	80.7	97.2	98.6	96.2	98.7	97.3	98.7	94.6	94.6
SARSr-Rf-BatCoV VNF1_31C/R.ferreumquim/Yunnan2013	93.2	93.2	93.1	92.7	98.5	96.2	98.4	98.4	98.8	100	97.1	98.6	97.8	96	93.6	93.8	61.7	83.5	84.3	90.1	82.8	99.1	95.9	97	93.2	93.2
SARSr-Rf-BatCoV VNF1_31C/R.ferreumquim/Yunnan2013	93.2	93.1	93	92.7	98.5	96.2	98.4	98.4	98.8	100	97.1	98.6	97.8	96	93.6	93.8	61.7	83.5	84.3	90.1	82.8	99.1	95.9	97	93.2	93.2
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV VZ1013/R.sinicus/Yunnan2013	92.3	96.3	96	95.5	97.3	98.6	99.1	98.8	99.1	98.5	98.3	98.2	96.9	95.8	93.8	93.9	64.4	85.1	90.5	86.1	90.5	98.1	98.7	97.1	97.7	97.3
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rp3/R.sinicus/Guangxi2004	92.2	93.5	95.2	93.7	93.8	96.2	98.2	98.4	98.7	98.8	97.4	98	96.5	95.7	94.4	93.9	60.8	86	87.5	84.7	87.5	97.8	93.2	96.5	92.2	92.2
UNVERIFIED: SARSr-Rp-BatCoV F468/Pussillus/Yunnan2012	91.9	92.2	87.1	91.3	95.4	94	97.4	95.2	99	97.9	97.6	97.9	98.1	95.6	94.2	93.6	70.5	80.5	85.9	88.3	95.2	98.7	97	98.1	91.9	91.9
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rf2/R.sinicus/Guizhou2006	91.1	97.6	96.2	95.8	96.3	97.9	98.0	97.8	98.3	96.4	97.8	95.8	96.1	93.3	93.8	92	66.4	86.8	90.4	85.2	98.6	97.6	97.7	91.1	91.1	
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV LYRa11/R.rhinis/Yunnan2011	90.8	92.4	87	91.2	90.5	92.3	92.9	90.4	93.1	93.5	94	91.7	91.3	90.5	70.7	68.8	87	90	57.2	88.3	94.6	97	90.8	90.8	90.8	90.8
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV GX2013/R.sinicus/Guangxi2013	90.5	93.5	88.2	93.2	93.5	97.5	97.7	96.8	98.5	97.1	97.8	97.6	96.5	95.4	94	93.1	80	67.1	86.4	84.1	89.9	98.7	95.5	97.2	90.5	
SARSr-Cp-BatCoV Yunnan2011/Chaerophora pilicata/Yunnan2011	89.8	92	87.1	95	95.5	92.3	91.2	91.2	93.9	93.2	94.9	92.4	92.1	94.1	91.6	89.6	86.3	90	57.7	80.7	94.6	97.1	90.8	90.8	90.8	90.8
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Hu2019/R.sinicus/Hubei2015	88.6	94.4	89.6	87.1	89.9	91.3	92.5	91.6	93.9	94.1	91.6	92.3	90.5	91	92.1	91.8	60.3	88.6	87.5	83.6	55.4	97.8	95.2	96.4	88.6	
SARSr-Rm-BatCoV Z792005/R.microtis/Hubei2005	88	92.2	86.1	85.6	90.3	91.1	91.8	92	94.4	94.1	91.															

SARSr-CoV strains	nsp1	nsp2	nsp3	nsp4	nsp5	nsp6	nsp7	nsp8	nsp9	nsp10	nsp12	nsp13	nsp14	nsp15	nsp16	NTD	RBD	S2	ORF3	ORF8	E	M	N	Genome	
Civet SARSr-CoV SZ16/Shenzhen/2003	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.000	0.000	0.001
Human SARSr-CoV G202/GuangzhouFeb2003	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.004	0.008	0.003	0.010	0.000	0.000	0.005	0.001	0.002	0.000
Human SARSr-CoV TOR2/TorontoMar2003	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.011	0.004	0.008	0.003	0.000	0.005	0.000	0.000	0.002
Human SARSr-CoV BJ01/Beijing	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.004	0.011	0.004	0.009	0.000	0.000	0.006	0.000	0.000	0.002
Civet SARSr-CoV civet010/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.002	0.003	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.004	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.005	0.003	0.005	0.005	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.002	0.002
Civet SARSr-CoV B039/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.001	0.003	0.000	0.001	0.006	0.008	0.005	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.003
Civet SARSr-CoV G209/GuangdongBlay003	0.000	0.002	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.002	0.005	0.011	0.005	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.003	0.003
Civet SARSr-CoV civet007/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.003	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.002	0.005	0.009	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.003
Civet SARSr-CoV A022/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.002	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.000	0.003	0.005	0.009	0.006	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.003	0.005	0.003
Human SARSr-CoV civet209/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.004	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.004	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.002	0.003	0.000	0.001	0.006	0.008	0.005	0.006	0.007	0.000	0.003	0.005	0.003	0.003
Civet SARSr-CoV PC4_227/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.002	0.003	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.002	0.000	0.002	0.005	0.011	0.005	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.003	0.003
Human SARSr-CoV G20401/GuangzhouDec2003	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.004	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.002	0.002	0.000	0.002	0.009	0.008	0.005	0.010	0.007	0.000	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.003
Civet SARSr-CoV PC4_136/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.002	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.004	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.003	0.003	0.000	0.001	0.006	0.008	0.005	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.003	0.003
Civet SARSr-CoV PC4_133/Guangdong2004	0.000	0.002	0.003	0.002	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.002	0.003	0.000	0.002	0.005	0.011	0.005	0.006	0.003	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.003	0.003
Civet SARSr-CoV A001	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.001	0.002	0.006	0.009	0.005	0.008	0.007	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.003	0.003	0.003
Human SARSr-CoV G20402	0.000	0.003	0.004	0.003	0.001	0.001	0.004	0.003	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.002	0.002	0.001	0.003	0.006	0.009	0.005	0.006	0.007	0.000	0.006	0.002	0.003	0.003
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV WIV16/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2013	0.023	0.033	0.045	0.028	0.019	0.013	0.037	0.020	0.024	0.024	0.019	0.042	0.040	0.040	0.067	0.066	0.079	0.058	0.028	0.014	1.064	0.009	0.031	0.015	0.035
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs474/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2013	0.024	0.033	0.045	0.028	0.019	0.014	0.037	0.020	0.024	0.024	0.019	0.042	0.040	0.040	0.067	0.066	0.079	0.058	0.028	0.014	1.064	0.009	0.031	0.015	0.035
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4231/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2013	0.026	0.033	0.041	0.027	0.019	0.012	0.032	0.017	0.021	0.021	0.017	0.043	0.038	0.035	0.066	0.079	0.069	0.037	0.021	1.064	0.013	0.031	0.014	0.036	0.036
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4018/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2015	0.024	0.033	0.041	0.028	0.014	0.010	0.032	0.014	0.012	0.015	0.018	0.031	0.040	0.069	0.074	0.337	0.064	0.018	0.021	1.050	0.013	0.024	0.013	0.038	0.038
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs7327/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2014	0.024	0.030	0.041	0.028	0.014	0.010	0.032	0.014	0.012	0.015	0.019	0.031	0.041	0.069	0.074	0.337	0.064	0.018	0.021	1.064	0.004	0.031	0.013	0.038	0.038
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs367/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2012	0.023	0.037	0.041	0.027	0.015	0.012	0.032	0.012	0.012	0.015	0.017	0.033	0.044	0.065	0.066	0.335	0.058	0.028	0.017	1.050	0.009	0.031	0.015	0.039	0.039
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV WIV1	0.023	0.036	0.044	0.026	0.014	0.009	0.032	0.012	0.012	0.015	0.017	0.033	0.043	0.064	0.069	0.337	0.058	0.028	0.017	1.050	0.013	0.031	0.015	0.041	0.041
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV RsSHC014/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2011	0.024	0.031	0.044	0.029	0.014	0.009	0.032	0.012	0.012	0.015	0.017	0.035	0.043	0.065	0.068	0.335	0.072	0.028	0.018	1.064	0.013	0.031	0.014	0.041	0.041
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4084/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2012	0.023	0.030	0.041	0.024	0.015	0.010	0.032	0.014	0.012	0.015	0.019	0.030	0.045	0.068	0.051	0.543	0.373	0.149	0.092	1.036	0.004	0.027	0.014	0.058	0.058
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4237/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2013	0.024	0.034	0.041	0.028	0.011	0.014	0.032	0.021	0.029	0.017	0.033	0.037	0.045	0.065	0.051	0.540	0.376	0.146	0.085	1.050	0.004	0.029	0.014	0.058	0.058
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4255/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2013	0.024	0.033	0.043	0.028	0.013	0.010	0.032	0.012	0.012	0.015	0.018	0.043	0.039	0.065	0.064	0.522	0.373	0.149	0.088	1.036	0.013	0.034	0.015	0.059	0.059
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4247/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2013	0.026	0.034	0.044	0.028	0.011	0.014	0.032	0.021	0.022	0.015	0.042	0.036	0.070	0.057	0.050	0.540	0.370	0.143	0.085	1.064	0.008	0.029	0.013	0.059	0.059
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV YN2013/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2013	0.032	0.041	0.046	0.027	0.014	0.009	0.032	0.017	0.015	0.017	0.018	0.031	0.042	0.064	0.064	0.483	0.382	0.153	0.089	0.921	0.013	0.023	0.063	0.063	0.063
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4081/Rs.sincus/Yunnan/2012	0.021	0.033	0.044	0.026	0.018	0.013	0.037	0.019	0.024	0.022	0.018	0.043	0.041	0.067	0.054	0.525	0.382	0.149	0.089	1.050	0.000	0.034	0.018	0.060	0.060
SARSr-Rf-BatCoV Rf4092/Rf.fernaequinam/Hubei/2005	0.024	0.040	0.042	0.028	0.018	0.008	0.020	0.019	0.008	0.024	0.020	0.027	0.042	0.073	0.079	0.602	0.382	0.159	0.095	0.024	1.064	0.034	0.017	0.062	0.062
SARSr-Rf-BatCoV Rf4092/Rf.fernaequinam/Hubei/2004	0.023	0.039	0.043	0.038	0.025	0.012	0.029	0.020	0.027	0.021	0.042	0.039	0.070	0.070	0.522	0.389	0.145	0.091	0.996	0.004	0.027	0.023	0.062	0.062	0.062
SARSr-Rf-BatCoV YNLF_31C/Rf.fernaequinam/Yunnan/2013	0.095	0.074	0.047	0.015	0.039	0.016	0.037	0.012	0.000	0.015	0.013	0.021	0.040	0.068	0.064	0.530	0.389	0.176	0.105	1.034	0.004	0.046	0.028	0.066	0.066
SARSr-Rf-BatCoV YNLF_34C/Rf.fernaequinam/Yunnan/2013	0.090	0.073	0.048	0.015	0.039	0.016	0.037	0.012	0.000	0.023	0.014	0.021	0.040	0.067	0.065	0.530	0.389	0.176	0.105	1.034	0.009	0.044	0.028	0.066	0.066
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rp3/Rs.sincus/Guangxi/2004	0.068	0.050	0.065	0.065	0.039	0.019	0.037	0.014	0.033	0.027	0.021	0.035	0.043	0.058	0.064	0.530	0.389	0.136	0.168	0.991	0.022	0.071	0.034	0.072	0.072
SARSr-Rs-BatCoV CZ13/Rs.sincus/Guangxi/2013	0.068	0.050	0.070	0.063	0.039	0.023	0.033	0.015	0.030	0.025	0.023	0.045	0.045	0.064	0.064	0.529	0.381	0.151	0.171	0.935	0.013	0.046	0.029	0.078	0.078
UNVERIFIED: SARSr-Rp-BatCoV F46R.pusillus/Yunnan/2012	0.082	0.141	0.096	0.047	0.062	0.027	0.050	0.018	0.021	0.024	0.022	0.019	0.045	0.060	0.066	0.610	0.379	0.158	0.114	0.068	0.013	0.034	0.018	0.083	0.083
SARSr-Ra-BatCoV LYRa11/Ra.afinis/Yunnan/2011	0.080	0.142	0.096	0.101	0.082	0.075	0.103	0.072	0.068	0.062	0.032	0.062	0.086	0.086	0.092	0.101	0.361	0.140	0.144	1.000	0.018	0.056	0.029	0.092	0.092
SARSr-Cp-BatCoV Yunnan2011/Cp.baerophon/pilicatus/Yunnan/2011	0.084	0.141	0.054	0.101	0.082	0.072	0.094	0.063	0.071	0.060	0.053	0.080	0.082	0.081	0.112	0.532	0.373	0.151	0.098	1.000	0.013	0.056	0.029	0.093	0



0.1

(caption on next page)



0.2

(caption on next page)

Fig. 6. Phylogenetic tree constructed based on the nt sequences of ORF8 of SARS-CoVs. SARSr-Rf-BatCoVs are labeled with dots. Brackets in red, orange, yellow and blue represented descending order of nt identity with respect to civet SARSr-CoV SZ16. The phylogenetic tree was constructed by Maximum Likelihood method with T92 + G as the substitution model by MEGA 6.0. The test of phylogeny was statistically supported by the bootstraps value calculated from 1000 trees. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

nt identity to the ORF8 of civet SARSr-CoV and have the greatest genetic distance observed over the whole genome of SARSr-CoV (Fig. 3B). They are detected across a wide range of bat species including *R. sinicus*, *R. macrotis*, *R. pusillus*, *R. affinis*, *A. stoliczkanus* and *C. plicata*, except *R. ferrumequinum* in which type III ORF8 has not been found. In short, the ORF8 of SARSr-Rf-BatCoV from greater horseshoe bats is phylogenetically closer to ORF8 of human/civet SARS-CoV.

As mentioned above, ORF8 in the late-phase human epidemic was split into 8a and 8b due to a unique 29 nt deletion. A similar 5-nt deletion was observed in the type I ORF8 isolated from the strain SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4084. However, since the majority of SARSr-Rs-BatCoVs' ORF8 genes belong to the type III ORF8 genotype, it raises the speculation that this minority of type I ORF8 plays a non-essential role in the Chinese horseshoe bats host environment.

In a recent study, recombinant SARS-CoV carrying three forms of ORF8 were constructed, including complete ORF8 as seen in the early phase of the 2003 human epidemic and civets, ORF8 that contained the characteristic 29 nt deletion, and a variant strain with ORF8 replaced by a 5 nt spacer sequence. Replication assay in VeroFM cells demonstrated a phenotypic hierarchy that the infectious clone with full type I ORF8 exhibited significantly more efficient growth than other variants. The same hierarchy of viral replication was observed in human airway epithelial cell cultures and several “non-host” cell lines transduced to express human ACE2, including *R. alcyone* lung epithelial cell line, cotton rat airway epithelial cell line, and goat and sheep lung cell lines. This study suggests that the 29 nt deletion actually conferred a loss of viral fitness during the initial phase of human-to-human transmission, contradicting the previous belief that the truncated products ORF8a and ORF8b favored adaptation to human (Muth et al., 2018).

4.6. Genomic overview of SARSr-BatCoVs

Complete genome analysis has been carried out for all sequenced SARSr-CoV with respect to civet SARSr-CoV. The importance of civet SARSr-CoV is underlined by its close genetic relationship to human SARS-CoV along the entire genome and especially at the RBD region where nt identity approaches 98.8–99.8%. Moreover, the genetic diversity within the group of civet SARSr-CoV strains is minimal, further supporting that civets are only recently infected. Adaptation of SARSr-BatCoV to civet as intermediate amplification host is likely needed, which is further corroborated by the phylogenetic position of civet ACE2 in-between bat and human ACE2. Recently, direct bat-to-human transmission of SARSr-CoV was proposed by some groups in view of the fact that some SARSr-BatCoVs could utilize human ACE2 receptors in vitro and that seropositive sera against SARSr-BatCoVs were detected in Yunnan residents (Menachery et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2018), despite the fact that human/civet SARS-CoV has never been reported in Yunnan. Our findings provide substantial evidence against this hypothesis from a phyloepidemiologic point of view and demonstrated the significance of an intermediate host during the transmission cascade (Fig. 3).

Referring to Fig. 3A, SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4084 was one of the two strains that possess the highest genome identity to civet/human SARSr-CoV. It is so far the only SARSr-BatCoV that possessed at least 70% nt identity in all parts of the genome, including the four hypervariable regions. The region sharing lowest similarity to civet/human SARSr-CoV was the N-terminal domain (NTD) of the S protein which was likely non-critical. As mentioned above, SARSr-Rs-BatCoV Rs4084 was predicted to be able to utilize human ACE2 as functional receptor since its RBD region is genetically similar to RsSHC014. SARSr-Rs-BatCoV

Rs4084 has not been studied either as whole virus or in the form of recombinant virus in terms of accessory protein function, tissue infectivity assay and replication kinetics; leaving a potential field for future investigations. Animal experiment using civet model would offer great promise in the studying of such virus, along with other SARSr-BatCoVs that could utilize human ACE2.

5. Concluding remarks

The > 300 genome sequences of SARS-CoV in human, civets and bats accumulated in the last 15 years allowed us to understand the cause of such a highly fatal epidemic that affected us in a global scale in 2003. After 15 years of work, we are now much closer to fully understand the origin of SARS-CoV and its evolution, as genomes with fragments that contain gene sequences with higher and higher nt identities to the SARS-CoV found in human were observed. Our current model on the origin of SARS is that the human SARS-CoV that caused the epidemic in 2003 was probably a result of multiple recombination events from a number of SARS-CoV ancestors. Yunnan is the province in China with the largest diversity of horseshoe bat species. It is also the area shown to have a high variety of SARS-CoV ancestors. Further in-depth molecular epidemiology studies in this and other provinces in its proximity, including Guangxi and Guangdong, will hopefully give us an even clearer picture on the origin and early evolution of SARS-CoV.

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