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Assessing uncertainty in the rooting of the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny

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Abstract

The rooting of the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny is important for understanding the origin and early spread of the virus. Previously published phylogenies have used different rootings that do not always provide consistent results. We use several different strategies for rooting the SARS-CoV-2 tree and provide measures of statistical uncertainty for all methods. We show that methods based on the molecular clock tend to place the root in the B clade, while methods based on outgroup rooting tend to place the root in the A clade. The results from the two approaches are statistically incompatible, possibly as a consequence of deviations from a molecular clock or excess back-mutations. We also show that none of the methods provide strong statistical support for the placement of the root in any particular edge of the tree. Our results suggest that inferences on the origin and early spread of SARS-CoV-2 based on rooted trees should be interpreted with caution.

Key words: SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny, outgroup rooting, molecular clock rooting

Letter

Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing COVID-19 or 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome,' has a single-stranded RNA genome 29,891 nucleotides in length (Wu *et al.*, 2020b; Zhou *et al.*, 2020b). The exact origin of the virus causing the human pandemic is unknown, but two coranoaviruses isolated from bats — RaTG13 isolated from *Rhinolophus affinis* (Zhou *et al.*, 2020a) and RmYN02 isolated from *Rhinolophus malayanus* (Zhou *et al.*, 2020b), both from the Yunnan province of China — appear to be closely related. After accounting for recombination, the divergence time between these bat viruses and

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SARS-CoV-2 is estimated to be approximately 52 years [95% C.I. (28, 75)] and 37 years [95% C.I. (18,56)] (Wang *et al.*, 2020), for RaTG13 and RmYN02 respectively, using one method, or 51 years [95% HPD credible interval (40, 70)] for RaTG13 (Boni *et al.*, 2020) using another, quite different, method. After the emergence of the virus was first reported from Wuhan in China (Li *et al.*, 2020a) it rapidly spread to many other areas of the world (World Health Organization, 2020). However, the events leading to the early spread of the viruses are still unclear, in part because there is substantial uncertainty about the rooting of the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny. For example, Forster *et al.* (2020) estimated a phylogenetic network and used a singular rooting based on outgroup rooting with RaTG13 to track the infection pathway of the virus. Based on this rooting they inferred an origin in a group they labeled A which consists of almost half of the individuals from outside East Asia. One of the two basal clades around the root included individuals exclusively outside Wuhan. However, other analyses have assumed other rootings (Benvenuto *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2020b; Tang *et al.*, 2020) and obtained quite different trees, such as Wu *et al.* (2020a) who rooted using one of the earliest sequenced SARS-CoV-2 strains. The rooting of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is critical for our understanding of the origin and early spread of the virus. However, it is not clear how best to root the tree and how much confidence can be placed in any particular rooting of the tree. There are many different methods for inferring the root of a phylogenetic tree, but they largely depend on three possible sources of information: outgroups, the molecular clock, and non-reversibility. The latter source of information can be used if the underlying mutational process is non-reversible, that is, for some pair of nucleotides (i,j), the number of mutations from i to j differs from the number of mutations from j to i, in expectation at stationarity. However, this source of information is rarely used to root trees because it relies on strong assumptions regarding the mutational process, and it has been shown to perform poorly on real data (Huelsenbeck *et al.*, 2002). Most studies use methods based on either outgroup rooting, molecular clock rooting, or a combination of both. Outgroup rooting is perhaps the conceptually easiest method to understand, and arguably the most commonly used method. In outgroup rooting, the position in which one or more outgroups connects to the ingroup tree is the root position. Outgroup rooting can be challenged by long-branch attraction if distant outgroups are being used (e.g. Felsenstein, 1978; Graham *et al.*, 2002; Hendy and Penny, 1989; Maddison *et al.*, 1984). In such cases, the outgroup will have a tendency to be placed on the longest branches of the ingroup tree. In viruses, in particular, because of their high mutation rate, it can be challenging to identify an outgroup sequence that is sufficiently closely related to the ingroup sequences to allow reliable rooting. An alternative

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to outgroup rooting is molecular clock rooting, which is based on the assumption that mutations occur at an approximately constant rate, or at a rate that can be modeled and predicted using statistical models (e.g., using a relaxed molecular clock such as Drummond *et al.* (2006); Yoder and Yang (2000)). The rooting is then preferred that makes the data most compatible with the clock assumption by some criterion. Early methods for rooting using molecular clocks were often labeled midpoint rooting as some original methods were based on placing the root halfway between the most distant leaf nodes in the tree (e.g. Swofford *et al.*, 1996). More modern methods use more of the phylogenetic information, for example, by finding the rooting that minimizes the variance among leaf nodes in their distance to the root (e.g. Mai *et al.*, 2017) or produces the best linear regression of root-to-tip distances against sampling times when analyzing heterochronous data (Rambaut *et al.*, 2016). Methods for inferring phylogenetic trees that assume an ultrametric tree (i.e. a tree that perfectly follows a molecular clock), such as unweighted pair group method with arithmetic mean (UPGMA; Sokal and Michener, 1958), directly infers a rooted tree. Similarly, Bayesian phylogenetic methods using birth-death process priors (Kendall, 1948; Thompson, 1975) or coalescence priors (Kingman, 1982a, b, c) also implicitly infers the root. But even with uninformative priors on the tree the placement of the root can be estimated in Bayesian phylogenetics using molecular clock assumptions. An advantage of such methods, over methods that first infer the branch lengths of the tree and then identifies the root most compatible with a molecular clock, is that they explicitly incorporate uncertainty in the branch length estimation when identifying the root and they simultaneously provide measures of statistical uncertainty in the rooting of the tree. Huelsenbeck *et al.* (2002) investigated the use of Bayesian inference of root placement and found high consistency between outgroup rooting and molecular clock rooting. The objective of this study is to determine how well the root of the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny can be identified and to provide measures of statistical uncertainty for the placement of the root of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. There are several challenges when doing so. First, and most importantly, there is very little variability among the early emerging strains of the virus, challenging both molecular clock and outgroup rooting. Secondly, while the nearest outgroup sequence (RmYN02) is 97.2% identical to SARS-CoV-2 (Zhou *et al.*, 2020a), the synonymous divergence is >11% revealing the presence of appreciable homoplasy, providing potential additional uncertainty for outgroup rooting. Thirdly, it is unclear if a molecular clock assumption is suitable during the early phases after zoonotic transfer where selection could possibly be quite strong. Finally, coronaviruses experience substantial recombination (e.g. Boni

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et al., 2020; Patino-Galindo *et al.*, 2020), and while there likely has not been any substantial recombination into SARS-CoV-2 since its divergence with RaTG13 and RmYN02, both of these viruses show evidence of recombination with other viruses, particularly around the gene encoding the Spike protein, that elevates the divergence locally (e.g. Boni *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2020). To investigate the possible rootings of the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny we used six different methods and quantified the uncertainty in the placement of the root for each method on the inferred maximum likelihood topology. We note that the question of placement of a root, is a question idiosyncratic to a specific phylogeny, and to define this question we fixed the tree topology, with the exception of the root placement, in all analyses. In all cases, we applied the method to the alignment of 64 SARS-CoV-2 sequences and two putative outgroup sequences, RaTG13 and RmYN02, (see Table S1) that was constrained such that the protein-coding portions of the SARS-CoV-2 genome were in frame, and is described in detail in Wang *et al.* (2020). There are two orders of magnitude more strains available in public databases, however these sequences are more terminally located and would provide little additional information about the placement of the root but have the potential to add a significant amount of additional noise. We are therefore focusing our efforts on the limited data set of early sequences with basal positions in the phylogeny. However, we note that future inclusion of more sequences with a basal position in the phylogeny could add additional information. The maximum likelihood estimate of the phylogeny was obtained using the program `RAxML-NG` (Kozlov *et al.*, 2019) under the GTR+Γ model of DNA substitution. The topology of the tree is shown in Figure 1. The outgroup sequences were pruned from the tree using `nw_prune` from Newick utilities v1.6 (Junier and Zdobnov, 2010). Bootstrapping was preformed using the `RAxML-NG --bootstrap` option. For the RaTG13+RmYN02 analysis, only bootstrapped trees that formed a monophyletic group for RaTG13 and RmYN02 were kept. The clades of the tree were assigned according to nomenclature proposed by Rambaut *et al.* (2020) where the A and B clades are defined by the mutations 8782 and 28144 and based on whether or not they share those sites with RaTG13. The six different methods for identifying the root of the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny were:

(1) Outgroup rooting using RaTG13. We constrained the tree topology to be equal to the unrooted SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny, i.e. the only topological parameter estimated was the placement of the RaTG13 sequence on the unrooted SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny. We masked the potential recombination segment (NC_045512v2 positions 22851 to 23094) in RaTG13 identified in Wang *et al.* (2020) from the alignment. To quantify

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uncertainty we obtained 1,000 bootstrap samples. We note that while interpretation of bootstrap proportions in phylogenetics can be problematic (see Efron *et al.*, 1996), in the current context they have a more simple interpretation as providing a confidence set for the placement of the root, i.e. if the sum of bootstrap proportions exceed 0.95 for a set of edges, under repeated sampling we would expect the root to be placed on one of these edges with probability >0.95.

(2) Outgroup rooting using RmYN02. We used the same methods as in (1) but with RmYN02 replacing RaTG13. The two potential recombination segments in RmYN02 identified in (Wang *et al.*, 2020) from the alignment (NC_045512v2 positions 21225-24252 and positions 25965-27859) were masked.

(3) Outgroup rooting using both RmYN02 and RaTG13. In this case we masked all of the recombination segments identified in either RmYN02 and RaTG13 and additionally constrained the topology to make RmYN02 and RaTG13 form a clade in the unrooted phylogeny.

(4) We use the '`rtt`' function implemented in the R package APE (Paradis and Schliep, 2018) based on the regression method of Rambaut (2000, 2009) applied to the maximum likelihood tree. This method uses the molecular clock to root the tree. We again quantified uncertainty using 1,000 bootstrap samples.

(5) We used the Bayesian molecular clock rooting method described in Huelsenbeck *et al.* (2002) but constrained to maintain the maximum likelihood topology as in the previous rooting methods. We wrote specialized software to calculate the posterior probability distribution of the root position under the molecular clock and outgroup criteria (the "Rooter" method). The program maintained the unrooted tree of the human SARS-CoV-2 sequences, estimated via maximum likelihood. However, all other parameters of the phylogenetic model were treated as random variables. The GTR+Γ model of DNA substitution was assumed in all Bayesian analyses. We used Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) with 10,000,000 cycles with a sample frequency of 1,000 to update all of the model parameters. For the outgroup criterion, we initialized the tip dates using the sample dates of the viruses (which ranged from December 23, 2019 to March 5, 2020). The molecular clock was enforced, with an exponential prior with parameter $\lambda = 1000$ placed on the tree height.

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(6) We used an outgroup rooting method (the "Ogrooter" method) as described in (5) except where each branch length had an independent exponential prior with parameter $\lambda = 1000$. The outgroup criterion was used to root the tree. That is, we kept track of where the RaTG13 and RmYN02 sequences, which were forced to be monophyletic, joined the ingroup tree of 64 human SARS-CoV-2 sequences. We report the marginal posterior probability of the root position, which is approximated using MCMC as the fraction of the time the various branches were the root of the tree.

Notice, that the four ways of using outgroup rooting are largely compatible (Figure 1). Most of the bootstrap replicates place the root in one of three places: in the position inferred by Forster *et al.* (2020) (with probability varying between 0.05 and 0.3), in a clade leading to three Japanese sequences and one from Guangdong, and on an edge leading to three sequences from the USA. There is also positive bootstrap probabilities on other edges of the tree. Importantly, there is not a single placement that has high bootstrap probability. In fact, when using both RmYN02 and RaTG13, no placement has a higher bootstrap probability than 0.2. Perhaps surprisingly, the probability does not get more concentrated when adding both RmYN02 and RaTG13. A possible explanation for this is the reduction in alignment length when removing the recombination fragments from RmYN02. The two methods for placing the root using a molecular clock are also mostly compatible with each other. Rooter has the highest posterior probability on edges leading to Wuhan sequences (Wuhan/WIV07/2019 with probability 0.226834 and Wuhan/WIV07/2019 with probability 0.201416). The root-to-tip regression rooting method (rtt) places more than half of the bootstrap probability (0.516) at the earliest collected sequence from Wuhan (Wuhan/IPBCAMS-WH-01/2019). However, there is also considerable probability assigned in various other positions in the tree, particularly in a clade consisting of a South Korean sequence. Again, no singular placement in the tree receives more than 0.516.

While molecular clock rooting and the outgroup rooting strategies internally give qualitatively similar results, they are largely incompatible with each other. The molecular clock rooting places the root in the B clade with high confidence, while outgroup rooting places the root in the A clade with similarly high confidence. The reason for this discrepancy is unclear, but it could be caused either by deviations from a molecular clock or excess back-mutations, i.e. unexpectedly many mutations in the same site occurring both within the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny and on the lineage leading to the outgroup(s). We were able to capture outgroup rooting compatible with the

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molecular clock rooting (obtaining an outgroup rooting in clade B instead of clade A) by removing three positions from the alignment (8782, 18060, and 28144) (Figure S1). All of these positions have negative phyloP values based on the UCSC 119way alignment (Fernandes *et al.*, 2020), which suggests fast evolution. While positions 8782 and 18060 are synonymous changes, position 28144 is a missense mutation in orf8 whose function is unclear, but which has also back mutated in more recent samples of the A clade. Also, all three mutations are between T and C which which occur with particularly high rate within SARS-CoV-2 (see e.g., https://virological.org/t/issues-with-sars-cov-2-sequencing-data/473). The most likely explanation for the observed discrepancy between the rootings might be hypermutatibility in these sites causing excess back-mutations, suggesting that the molecular clock rooting is more reliable. However, we cannot exclude an increased rate of mutation (or sequencing errors) in the A clade that would attract the root to this clade. However, both methods of rooting reveal substantial uncertainty in the placement of the root. At the moment, it would be prudent to avoid strong inferences regarding the early divergence of SARS-CoV-2 based on a fixed rooting in either the A or the B clade.

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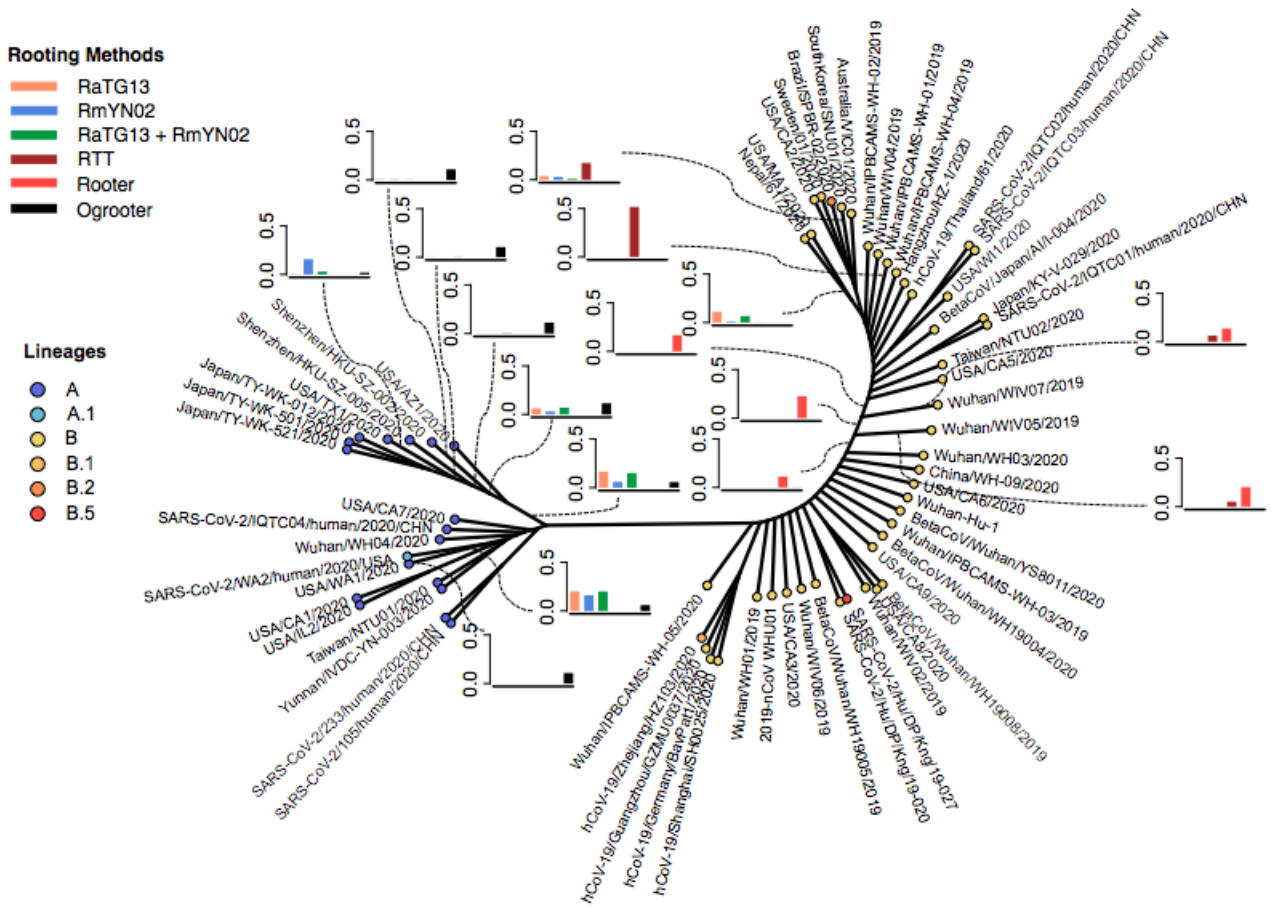

FIG. 1. The unrooted maximum likelihood topology for the SARS-CoV-2 phylogeny of 64 genomes with probabilities for six rooting methods. Only branches with substantial probability density for at least one method are shown. Branch lengths are not to scale. The software package pangolin (https://github.com/hCoV-2019/pangolin, updated on 2020-05-01) was used for lineage assignment based on lineages updated on 2020-04-27. After running the software for assignment, only lineages called for sequences where both `aLRT` and `UFbootstrap` values which quantify the branch support in phylogeny construction are >80.