Recovery of deleted deep sequencing data sheds more light on the early Wuhan SARS-CoV-2 epidemic

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ABSTRACT The origin and early spread of SARS-CoV-2 remains shrouded in mystery. Here I identify a data set containing SARS-CoV-2 sequences from early in the Wuhan epidemic that has been deleted from the NIH’s Sequence Read Archive. I recover the deleted files from the Google Cloud, and reconstruct partial sequences of 13 early epidemic viruses. Phylogenetic analysis of these sequences in the context of carefully annotated existing data suggests that the Huanan Seafood Market sequences that are the focus of the joint WHO-China report are not fully representative of the viruses in Wuhan early in the epidemic. Instead, the progenitor of known SARS-CoV-2 sequences likely contained three mutations relative to the market viruses that made it more similar to SARS-CoV-2’s bat coronavirus relatives.

Understanding the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan is crucial to tracing the origins of the virus, including identifying events that led to infection of patient zero. The first reports outside of China at the end of December 2019 emphasized the role of the Huanan Seafood Market (ProMED 2019), which was initially suggested as a site of zoonosis. However, this theory became increasingly tenuous as it was learned that many early cases had no connection to the market (Cohen 2020; Huang et al. 2020; Chen et al. 2020). Eventually, Chinese CDC Director Gao Fu dismissed the theory, stating “At first, we assumed the seafood market might have the virus, but now the market is more like a victim. The novel coronavirus had existed long before” (Global Times 2020).

Indeed, there were reports of cases that far preceded the outbreak at the Huanan Seafood Market. The Lancet described a confirmed case having no association with the market whose symptoms began on December 1, 2019 (Huang et al. 2020). The South China Morning Post described nine cases from November 2019 including details on patient age and sex, noting that none were confirmed to be “patient zero” (Ma 2020). Professor Yu Chuanhua of Wuhan University told the Health Times that records he reviewed showed two cases in mid-November, and one suspected case on September 29 (Health Times 2020). At about the same time as Professor Chuanhua’s interview, the Chinese CDC issued an order forbidding sharing of information about the COVID-19 epidemic without approval (China CDC 2020), and shortly thereafter Professor Chuanhua re-contacted the Health Times to say the November cases could not be confirmed (Health Times 2020). Then China’s State Council issued a much broader order requiring central approval of all publications related to COVID-19 to ensure they were coordinated “like moves in a game of chess” (Kang et al. 2020a). In 2021, the joint WHO-China report dismissed all reported cases prior to December 8 as not COVID-19, and revived the theory that the virus might have originated at the Huanan Seafood Market (WHO 2021).

In other outbreaks where direct identification of early cases has been stymied, it has increasingly become possible to use genomic epidemiology to infer the timing and dynamics of spread from analysis of viral sequences. For instance, analysis of SARS-CoV-2 sequences has enabled reconstruction of the initial spread of SARS-CoV-2 in North America and Europe (Bedford et al. 2020; Worobey et al. 2020; Deng et al. 2020; Fauver et al. 2020).

But in the case of Wuhan, genomic epidemiology has also proven frustratingly inconclusive. Some of the problem is simply limited data: despite the fact that Wuhan has advanced virology labs, there is only patchy sampling of SARS-CoV-2 sequences from the first months of the city’s explosive outbreak. Other than a set of multiply sequenced samples collected in late December of 2019 from a dozen patients connected to the Huanan Seafood Market (WHO 2021), just a handful of Wuhan sequences are available from before late January of 2020 (see analysis in this study below). This paucity of sequences could be due in part to an order that unauthorized Chinese labs destroy all coronavirus samples from early in the outbreak, reportedly for “laboratory biological safety” reasons (Pingui 2020).

However, the Wuhan sequences that are available have also confounded phylogenetic analyses designed to infer the “progenitor” of SARS-CoV-2, which is the sequence from which all other currently known sequences are descended (Kumar et al. 2021). Although there is debate about exactly how SARS-CoV-2 entered the human population, it is universally accepted that the virus’s deep ancestors are bat coronaviruses (Lytras et al. 2021). But the earliest known SARS-CoV-2 sequences, which are mostly derived from the Huanan Seafood Market, are notably more different from these bat coronaviruses than other sequences collected at later dates outside Wuhan. As a result, there is a direct conflict between the two major principles used to infer an outbreak’s progenitor: namely that it should be among the earliest sequences, and that it should be most closely related to deeper ancestors (Pipes et al. 2021).

Here I take a step towards resolving these questions by identifying and recovering a deleted data set of partial SARS-CoV-2 sequences from outpatient samples collected early in the Wuhan epidemic. Analysis of these new sequences in conjunction with careful annotation of existing ones suggests that the early Wuhan
samples that have been the focus of most studies including the joint WHO-China report (WHO 2021) are not fully representative of the viruses actually present in Wuhan at that time. These insights help reconcile phylogenetic discrepancies, and suggest two plausible progenitor sequences, one of which is identical to that inferred by Kumar et al. (2021). Furthermore, the approach taken here hints it may be possible to advance understanding of SARS-CoV-2’s origins or early spread even without further on-the-ground studies, such as by more deeply probing data archived by the NIH and other entities.

Results

Identification of a SARS-CoV-2 deep sequencing data set that has been removed from the Sequence Read Archive

During the course of my research, I read a paper by Farkas et al. (2020) that analyzed SARS-CoV-2 deep sequencing data from the Sequence Read Archive (SRA), which is a repository maintained by the NIH’s National Center for Biotechnology Information. The first supplementary table of Farkas et al. (2020) lists all SARS-CoV-2 deep sequencing data available from the SRA as of March 30, 2020.

The majority of entries in this table refer to a project (BioProject PRJNA612766) by Wuhan University that is described as nanopore sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 amplicons. The table indicates this project represents 241 of the 282 SARS-CoV-2 sequencing run accessions in the SRA as of March 30, 2020. Because I had never encountered any other mention of this project, I performed a Google search for “PRJNA612766,” and found no search hits other than the supplementary table itself. Searching for “PRJNA612766” in the NCBI’s SRA search box returned a message of “No items found.” I then searched for individual sequencing run accessions from the project in the NCBI’s SRA search tool.

The SRA is designed as a permanent archive of deep sequencing data. The SRA documentation states that after a sequencing run is uploaded, “neither its files can be replaced nor filenames can be changed,” and that data can only be deleted by e-mailing SRA staff (SRA 2021). An example of this process from another study is in Figure 2, which shows an e-mail by the lead author of a paper on pangolin coronaviruses (Xiao et al. 2020) requesting deletion of two sequencing runs. Subsequent to March 30, 2020, a similar e-mail request must have been made to fully delete SARS-CoV-2 deep sequencing project PRJNA612766.

The deleted data set contains sequencing of viral samples collected early in the Wuhan epidemic

The metadata in the first supplementary table of Farkas et al. (2020) indicates that the samples in deleted project PRJNA612766 were collected by Aisu Fu and Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University. Google searching for these terms revealed the samples were related to a study posted as a pre-print on medRxiv in early March of 2020 (Wang et al. 2020a), and subsequently published in the journal Small in June of 2020 (Wang et al. 2020b).

The study describes an approach to diagnose infection with SARS-CoV-2 and other respiratory viruses by nanopore sequencing. This approach involved reverse-transcription of total RNA from swab samples, followed by PCR with specific primers to generate amplicons covering portions of the viral genome. These amplicons were then sequenced on an Oxford Nanopore Grid-ION, and infection was diagnosed if the sequencing yielded sufficient reads aligning to the viral genome. Importantly, the study notes that this approach yields information about the sequence of the virus as well enabling diagnosis of infection.

The pre-print (Wang et al. 2020a) says the approach was applied to “45 nasopharyngeal swab samples from outpatients with suspected COVID-19 early in the epidemic.” The digital object identifier (DOI) for the pre-print indicates that it was processed by medRxiv on March 4, 2020, which is one day after China’s State Council ordered that all papers related to COVID-19 must be centrally approved (Kang et al. 2020a). The final published manuscript (Wang et al. 2020b) from June of 2020 updated the description from “early in the epidemic” to “early in the epidemic” (January 2020).” Both the pre-print and published manuscript say that 34 of the 45 early epidemic samples were positive in the sequencing-based diagnostic approach. In addition, both state that the approach was later applied to 16 additional samples collected on February 11–12, 2020, from SARS-CoV-2 patients hospitalized at Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University.

There is complete concordance between the accessions for project PRJNA612766 in the supplementary table of Farkas et al. (2020) and the samples described by Wang et al. (2020a). There are 98 accessions corresponding to the 45 early epidemic sam-

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**Figure 1** Accessions from deep sequencing project PRJNA612766 have been removed from the SRA. Shown is the result of searching for “SRR11313485” in the SRA search tool. This result has been digitally archived on the Wayback Machine at https://web.archive.org/web/20210502131630/https://trace.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Traces/sra/?run=SRR11313485.

**Figure 2** Example of the process to delete SRA data. The image shows e-mails between the lead author of the pangolin coronavirus paper Xiao et al. (2020) and SRA staff excerpted from USRTK (2020).
amples, with these samples named like wells in a 96-well plate (A1, A2, etc). The number of accessions is approximately twice the number of early epidemic samples because each sample has data for two sequencing runtimes except one sample (B5) with just one runtime. There are 31 accessions corresponding to the 16 samples collected in February from Renmin Hospital patients, with these samples named R01, R02, etc. Again, all but one sample (R04) have data for two sequencing runtimes. In addition, there are 7 accessions corresponding to positive and negative controls, 2 accessions corresponding to other respiratory virus samples, and 112 samples corresponding to plasmids used for benchmarking of the approach. Together, these samples and controls account for all 241 accessions listed for PRJNA612766 in the supplementary table of Farkas et al. (2020).

Neither the pre-print (Wang et al. 2020a) nor published manuscript (Wang et al. 2020b) contain any correction or note that indicates a scientific reason for deleting the study’s sequencing data from the SRA. I e-mailed both corresponding authors of Wang et al. (2020a) to ask why they had deleted the deep sequencing data and to request details on the collection dates of the early outpatient samples, but received no reply.

Recovery of deleted sequencing data from the Google Cloud

As indicated in Figure 1, none of the deleted sequencing runs could be accessed through the SRA’s web interface. In addition, none of the runs could be accessed using the command-line tools of the SRA Toolkit. For instance, running fastq-dump SRR11313485 or vdb-dump SRR11313485 returned the message “err: query unauthorized while resolving query within virtual file system module - failed to resolve accession ‘SRR11313485’.

However, the SRA has begun storing all data on the Google and Amazon clouds. While inspecting the SRA’s web interface for other sequencing accessions, I noticed that SRA files are often available from links to the cloud such as https://storage.googleapis.com/nih-sequence-read-archive/run/<ACCESSION>/.

Based on the hypothesis that deletion of sequencing runs by the SRA might not remove files stored on the cloud, I interpolated the cloud URLs for the deleted accessions and tested if they still yielded the SRA files. This strategy was successful; for instance, as of June 3, 2021, going to https://storage.googleapis.com/nih-sequence-read-archive/run/SRR11313485/SRR11313485 downloads the SRA file for accession SRR11313485. I have archived this file on the Wayback Machine at https://web.archive.org/web/20210502130820/https://storage.googleapis.com/nih-sequence-read-archive/run/SRR11313485/SRR11313485.

I automated this strategy to download the SRA files for 97 of the 99 sequencing runs corresponding to the 34 SARS-CoV-2 positive early epidemic samples and the 16 hospital samples from February (files for SRR11313490 and SRR11313499 were not accessible via the cloud). I used the SRA Toolkit to get the object timestamp (vdb-dump --obj_timestamp) and time (vdb-dump --info) for each SRA file. For all files, the object timestamp is February 15, 2020, and the time is March 16, 2020. Although the SRA Toolkit does not clearly document these two properties, my guess is that the object timestamp may refer to when the SRA file was created from a FASTQ file uploaded to the SRA, and the time may refer to when the accession was made public.

The data are sufficient to determine the viral sequence from the start of spike through the end of ORF10 for some samples

Wang et al. (2020a) sequenced PCR amplicons covering nucleotide sites 21,563 to 29,674 of the SARS-CoV-2 genome, which spans from the start of the spike gene to the end of ORF10. They also sequenced a short amplicon generated by nested PCR that covered a fragment of ORF1ab spanning sites ~15,080 to 15,550. In this paper, I only analyze the region from spike through ORF10 because this is a much longer contiguous sequence and the amplicons were generated by conventional rather than nested PCR. I slightly trimmed the region of interest to 21,570 to 29,550 because many samples had poor coverage at the termini.

I aligned the recovered deep sequencing data to the SARS-CoV-2 genome using minimap2 (Li 2018), combining accessions with the SARS-CoV-2 sequence could be called at ≥95% of sites between 21,570 and 29,550, and the substitutions in this region relative to the putative SARS-CoV-2 progenitor proCoV2 inferred by Kumar et al. (2021). Numbers in parentheses after each substitution give the deep sequencing reads with each nucleotide identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sample</th>
<th>fraction sites called (21570-29550)</th>
<th>patient group</th>
<th>substitutions relative to proCoV2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>0.9827 early outpatient</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>0.9966 early outpatient</td>
<td>G22081A (A=924, C=4, G=9), C28144T (C=6, T=1185), T29483G (C=1, G=45, T=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.9962 early outpatient</td>
<td>C29095T (C=1, G=1, T=751)</td>
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<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>0.9536 early outpatient</td>
<td>C28144T (C=3, T=823), C28514T (G=1, T=36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D9</td>
<td>0.9585 early outpatient</td>
<td>C28144T (C=4, T=1653)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D12</td>
<td>0.9970 early outpatient</td>
<td>C28144T (C=8, T=2400)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>E1</td>
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<td>C28144T (T=125)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5</td>
<td>0.9758 early outpatient</td>
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<td>C25460T (C=2, T=246), C28144T (C=1, T=412)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.9594 early outpatient</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.9959 early outpatient</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G11</td>
<td>0.9677 early outpatient</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H9</td>
<td>0.9941 early outpatient</td>
<td>C28144T (C=2, T=1254)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>R11</td>
<td>0.9987 hospital patient (Feb)</td>
<td>C21707T (T=401), C28144T (A=1, C=18, T=4265)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Figure 3 The reported collection dates of SARS-CoV-2 sequences in GISAID versus their relative mutational distances from the RaTG13 bat coronavirus outgroup. Mutational distances are relative to the putative progenitor proCoV2 inferred by Kumar et al. (2021). The plot shows sequences in GISAID collected no later than February 28, 2020. Sequences that the joint WHO-China report (WHO 2021) describes as being associated with the Wuhan Seafood Market are plotted with squares. Points are slightly jittered on the y-axis. Go to https://jbloom.github.io/SARS-CoV-2_PRJNA612766/deltadist.html for an interactive version of this plot that enables toggling of the outgroup to RpYN06 and RmYN02, mouseovers to see details for each point including strain name and mutations relative to proCoV2, and adjustment of the y-axis jittering. Static versions of the plot with RpYN06 and RmYN02 outgroups are in Figure S3.

for the same sample. Figure S1 shows the sequencing coverage for the 34 virus-positive early epidemic samples and the 16 hospitalized patient samples over the region of interest; a comparable plot for the whole genome is in Figure S2.

I called the consensus viral sequence for each sample at each site with coverage \( \geq 3 \) and \( > 80\% \) of the reads concurring on the nucleotide identity. With these criteria, 13 of the early outpatient samples and 1 of the February hospitalized patient samples had sufficient coverage to call the consensus sequence at \( > 95\% \) of the sites in the region of interest (Table 1), and for the remainder of this paper I focus on these high-coverage samples. Table 1 also shows the mutations in each sample relative to proCoV2, which is a putative progenitor of SARS-CoV-2 inferred by Kumar et al. (2021) that differs from the widely using Wuhan-Hu-1 reference sequence by three mutations (C8782T, C18060T, and T28144C). Although requiring coverage of only \( \geq 3 \) is relatively lenient, Table 1 shows that all sites with mutations have coverage \( \geq 10 \). In addition, the mutations I called from the raw sequence data in Table 1 condense with those mentioned in Wang et al. (2020b).

I also determined the consensus sequence of the plasmid control used by Wang et al. (2020a) from the recovered sequencing data, and found that it had mutations C28144T and G28085T relative to proCoV2, which means that in the region of interest this control matches Wuhan-Hu-1 with the addition of G28085T. Since none of the viral samples in Table 1 contain G28085T and the samples that prove most relevant below also lack C28144T (which is a frequent natural mutation among early Wuhan sequences), plasmid contamination did not afflict the viral samples in the deleted sequencing project.

Analysis of existing SARS-CoV-2 sequences emphasizes the perplexing discordance between collection date and distance to bat coronavirus relatives

To contextualize the viral sequences recovered from the deleted project, I first analyze early SARS-CoV-2 sequences already available in the GISAID database (Shu and McCauley 2017). The analyses described in this section are not entirely novel, but synthesize observations from multiple prior studies (Kumar et al. 2021; Pekar et al. 2021; Rambaut et al. 2020; Forster et al. 2020; Pipes et al. 2021) to provide key background.

Known human SARS-CoV-2 sequences are consistent with expansion from a single progenitor sequence (Kumar et al. 2021; Pekar et al. 2021; Rambaut et al. 2020; Forster et al. 2020; Pipes et al. 2021). However, attempts to infer this progenitor have been confounded by a perplexing fact: the earliest reported sequences from Wuhan are not the sequences most similar to SARS-CoV-2’s bat coronavirus relatives (Pipes et al. 2021). This fact is perplexing because although the proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2 remains unclear (i.e., zoonosis versus lab accident), all reasonable explanations agree that at a deeper level the SARS-CoV-2 genome is derived from bat coronaviruses (Lytras et al. 2021). One would therefore expect the first reported SARS-CoV-2 sequences to be the most similar to these bat coronavirus relatives—but this is not the case.

This conundrum is illustrated in Figure 3, which plots the collection date of SARS-CoV-2 sequences in GISAID versus the relative number of mutational differences from RaTG13 (Zhou et al. 2020b), which is the bat coronavirus with the highest full-genome sequence identity to SARS-CoV-2. The earliest SARS-CoV-2 sequences were collected in Wuhan in December, but these sequences are more distant from RaTG13 than sequences collected in January from other locations in China or even other countries (Figure 3). The discrepancy is especially pronounced for sequences from patients who had visited the Huanan Seafood Market (WHO 2021). All sequences associated with this market differ from RaTG13 by at least three more mutations than sequences subsequently collected at various other locations (Figure 3)—a fact that is difficult to reconcile with the idea that the market was the original location of spread of a bat coronavirus into humans. Importantly, all these observations also hold true if SARS-CoV-2 is compared to other related bat coronaviruses (Lytras et al. 2021) such as RpYN06 (Zhou et al. 2021) or RmYN02 (Zhou et al. 2020a) rather than RaTG13 (Figure S3).

This conundrum can be visualized in a phylogenetic con-
Several plausible explanations have been proposed for the discordance of phylogenetic rooting with evidence that Wuhan was the origin of the pandemic. Rambaut et al. (2020) suggest that viruses from the clade labeled “B” in Figure 4 may just “happen” to have been sequenced first, but that other SARS-CoV-2 sequences are really more ancestral as implied by phylogenetic rooting. Pipes et al. (2021) discuss the conundrum in detail, and suggest that phylogenetic rooting could be incorrect due to technical reasons such as high divergence of the outgroup or unusual mutational processes not captured in substitution models. Kumar et al. (2021) agree that phylogenetic rooting is problematic, and circumvent this problem by using an alternative algorithm to infer a progenitor for SARS-CoV-2 that they name proCoV2. Notably, proCoV2 turns out to be identical to one of the putative progenitors yielded by my approach in Figure 4 of simply placing the root at the nodes closest to the outgroup. However, neither the sophisticated algorithm of Kumar et al. (2021) nor my more simplistic approach explain why the progenitor should be so different from the earliest sequences reported from Wuhan.

Before moving to the next section, I will also briefly address two less plausible explanations for the discordance between phylogenetic rooting and epidemiological data that have gained traction in discussion of SARS-CoV-2’s origins. The first explanation, which has circulated on social media, suggests that the RaTG13 sequence might be faked in a way that confounds phylogenetic inference of SARS-CoV-2’s progenitor. But although there are un-
usual aspects of RaTG13’s primary sequencing data (Singla et al. 2020; Rahalkar and Bahulikar 2020), the conundrum about inferring the progenitor holds for other outgroups such as RpYN06, RpYN02, and more distant bat coronaviruses reported before emergence of SARS-CoV-2 such as ZC45 (Tang et al. 2020). The second explanation, which was proposed in a blog post by Garry (2021) and amplified by a popular podcast (Racaniello et al. 2021), is that there were multiple zoonoses from distinct markets, with the Huanan Seafood Market being the source of viruses in clade B, and some other market being the source of viruses that lack the T8782C and C28144T mutations. However, inspection of Figure 4 shows that clade B is connected to viruses lacking T8782C and C28144T by single mutational steps via other human isolates, so this explanation requires not only postulating two markets with two progenitors differing by just two mutations, but also the exceedingly improbable evolution of one of these progenitors towards the other after it had jumped to humans.

**Sequences recovered from the deleted project and better annotation of Wuhan-derived viruses help reconcile inferences about SARS-CoV-2’s progenitor**

To examine if the sequences recovered from the deleted data set help resolve the conundrum described in the previous section, I repeated the analyses including those sequences. In the process, I noted another salient fact: four GISAID sequences collected in Guangdong that fall in a putative progenitor node are from two different clusters of patients who traveled to Wuhan in late December of 2019 and developed symptoms before or on the day that they returned to Guangdong, where their viruses were ultimately sequenced (Chan et al. 2020; Kang et al. 2020b). Since these patients were clearly infected in Wuhan even though they were sequenced in Guangdong, I annotated them separately from both the other Wuhan and other China sequences.

Repeating the analysis of the previous section with these changes shows that several sequences from the deleted project and all sequences from patients infected in Wuhan but sequenced in Guangdong are more similar to the bat coronavirus outgroup than sequences from the Huanan Seafood Market (Figure 5). This fact suggests that the market sequences, which are the primary focus of the genomic epidemiology in the joint WHO-China report (WHO 2021), are not representative of the viruses that were circulating in Wuhan in late December of 2019 and early January of 2020.

Furthermore, it is immediately apparent that the discrepancy between outgroup rooting and the evidence that Wuhan was the origin of SARS-CoV-2 is alleviated by adding the deleted sequences and annotating Wuhan infections sequenced in Guangdong. The rooting of the middle tree in Figure 6 is now highly plausible, as half its progenitor node is derived from early Wuhan infections, which is more than any other equivalently large node. The first known sequence identical to its progenitor was not collected until January 24.

**Discussion**

I have identified and recovered a deleted set of partial SARS-CoV-2 sequences from the early Wuhan epidemic. Analysis of these sequences leads to several conclusions. First, the Huanan Seafood Market sequences that were the focus of the joint WHO-China report (WHO 2021) are not representative of all SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan early in the epidemic. The deleted data as well
as existing sequences from Wuhan-infected patients hospitalized in Guangdong show early Wuhan sequences often carried the T29095C mutation and were less likely to carry T8782C / C28144T than sequences in the joint WHO-China report (WHO 2021). Second, given current data, there are two plausible identities for the progenitor of all known SARS-CoV-2. One is proCoV2 described by Kumar et al. (2021), and the other is a sequence that carries three mutations (C8782T, T28144C, and C29095T) relative to Wuhan-Hu-1. Crucially, both putative progenitors are three mutations closer to SARS-CoV-2’s bat coronavirus relatives than sequences from the Huanan Seafood Market. Note also that the progenitor of all known SARS-CoV-2 sequences could still be downstream of the sequence that infected patient zero depending on the transmission dynamics of the first infections.

The fact that such an informative data set was deleted has implications beyond those gleaned directly from the recovered sequences. Samples from early outpatients in Wuhan are a gold mine for anyone seeking to understand spread of the virus. Even my analysis of the partial sequences is revealing, and it clearly would have been more scientifically informative to fully sequence the samples rather than surreptitiously delete the partial sequences. There is no plausible scientific reason for the deletion: the sequences are perfectly concordant with the samples described in Wang et al. (2020a,b), there are no corrections to the paper, the paper states human subjects approval was obtained, and the sequencing shows no evidence of plasmid or sample-to-sample contamination. It therefore seems likely the sequences were deleted to obscure their existence. Particularly in light of the directive that labs destroy early samples (Pingui et al. 2021), novel algorithms (Kumar et al. 2021), and correction of sequencing errors (Turakhia et al. 2020), this suggests a less than wholehearted effort to trace early spread of the epidemic.

Another important implication is that genomic epidemiology studies of early SARS-CoV-2 need to pay as much attention to the provenance and annotation of the underlying sequences as technical considerations. There has been substantial scientific effort expended on topics such as phylogenetic rooting (Pipes et al. 2021; Morel et al. 2021), novel algorithms (Kumar et al. 2021), and correction of sequencing errors (Turakhia et al. 2020). Future studies should devote equal effort to going beyond the annotations in GISAID to carefully trace the location of patient
infection and sample sequencing. The potential importance of such work is revealed by the observation that many of the sequences closest to SARS-CoV-2’s bat coronavirus relatives are from early patients who were infected in Wuhan, but then sequenced in and attributed to Guangdong.

There are several caveats to this study. Most obviously, the sequences recovered from the deleted data set are partial and lack full metadata. Therefore, it is impossible to unambiguously place them phylogenetically, or determine exactly when they were collected. However, little can be done to mitigate this caveat beyond my failed attempt to contact the corresponding authors of Wang et al. (2020a). It is also important to note that my phylogenetic analyses use relatively simple methods to draw qualitative conclusions without formal statistical testing. Further application of more advanced methods would be a welcome advance. However, qualitative and visual analyses do have advantages when the key questions relate more to the underlying data than the sophistication of the inferences. Finally, both plausible putative progenitors require that an early mutation to SARS-CoV-2 was a reversion towards the bat coronavirus outgroups (either C18060T or C29095T) on a branch that subsequently gave rise to multiple distinct descendants. Such a scenario can only be avoided by invoking recombination very early in the pandemic, which is not entirely implausible for a coronavirus (Boni et al. 2020). However, because the outgroups have ~4% nucleotide divergence from SARS-CoV-2, a mutation towards the outgroup is also entirely possible. Of course, future identification of additional early sequences could fully resolve these questions.

More broadly, the approach taken here suggests it may be possible to learn more about the origin or early spread of SARS-CoV-2 even without an international investigation. Minimally, it should be immediately possible for the NIH to determine the date and purported reason for deletion of the data set analyzed here, since the only way sequences can be deleted from the SRA is by an e-mail request to SRA staff (SRA 2021). In addition, I suggest it could be worthwhile to review e-mail records to identify other SRA deletions, which are already known to include SRR11119760 and SRR11119761 (USRTK 2020). Importantly, SRA deletions do not imply any malfeasance: there are legitimate reasons for removing sequencing runs, and the SRA houses >13-million runs making it infeasible for its staff to validate the rationale for all requests. However, the current study suggests that at least in one case, the trusting structures of science have been abused to obscure sequences relevant to the early spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan. A careful re-evaluation of other archived SRA files could not be downloaded from the Google Cloud using the aforementioned method, and so are not part of this study.

Recovery of SRA files from deleted project PRJNA612766

I parsed the first supplementary table of Farkas et al. (2020) to extract the accessions for sequencing runs for deleted SRA BioProject PRJNA612766. By cross-referencing the samples described in this table to Wang et al. (2020a), I identified the accessions corresponding to the 54 early outpatient samples who were positive, as well as the accessions corresponding to the 16 hospitalized patient samples from February. Samples had both 10 minute and 4 hour sequencing runtime accessions, which were combined in the subsequent analysis. I also identified the samples corresponding to the high-copy plasmid controls to enable analysis of the plasmid sequence to rule out contamination. The code used to parse the Excel table is available as a Jupyter notebook at https://github.com/jbloom/SARS-CoV-2.PRJNA612766/tree/main/manual_analyses/PRJNA612766.

I recovered the SRA files from the Google Cloud by using uget to download files with from paths like https://storage.googleapis.com/nih-sequence-read-archive/run/SRR11313427/SRR11313427 to https://storage.googleapis.com/nih-sequence-read-archive/run/SRR11313485/SRR11313485. Note that I cannot guarantee that these Google Cloud links will remain active, as my analyses of other deleted SRA runs (beyond the scope of this study) indicates that only sometimes are deleted SRA files still available via the Google Cloud. For this reason, key runs have been archived on the Wayback Machine as described above, and all downloaded SRA files relevant to this study are included in the GitHub repository. Note also that as described in this paper’s main text, two SRA files could not be downloaded from the Google Cloud using the aforementioned method, and so are not part of this study.

Alignment of recovered reads and calling of consensus sequences

The downloaded SRA files were converted to FASTQ files using fastq-dump from the SRA Toolkit. The FASTQ files were preprocessed with Fastp (Chen et al. 2018) to trim reads and remove low-quality ones (the exact settings using in this pre-processing are specified in the Snakemake file in the GitHub repository).

The reads in these FASTQ files were then aligned to a SARS-CoV-2 reference genome using minimap2 (Li 2018) with default settings. The reference genome used for the entirety of this study is proCoV2 (Kumar et al. 2021), which was generated by making the following three single-nucleotide changes to the Wuhan-Hu-1 reference (ASNB9858992) available on NCBI: C8782T, C18060T, and T28144C.

I processed the resulting alignments with samtools and pybam to determine the coverage at each site by aligned nucleotides with a quality score of at least 20. These coverage plots are in Figure S1 and Figure S2; the legends of these figures also link to interactive versions of the plots that enable comparing running and mouseovers to get statistics for specific sites. I called the consensus sequence at a site if this coverage was ≥3 and >80% of the reads agreed on the identity. These consensus sequences over the entire SARS-CoV-2 genome are available at https://github.com/jbloom/SARS-CoV-2.PRJNA612766/raw/main/result_s=consensus/consensus_seq.csv; note that they are mostly N nucleotides.
since the sequencing approach of Wang et al. (2020a) only covers part of the genome. I only used the recovered consensus sequences in the downstream analyses if it was possible to call the consensus identity at >95% of the sites in the region of interest from site 21,570 to 29,550. These are the sequences listed in Table 1, and as described in that table, all mutation calls were at sites with coverage ≥ 10. These sequences in the region of interest (21,570 to 29,550) are available at https://github.com/jbloom/SARS-CoV-2_PRJNA612766/blob/main/results/recovered_seq.fa.

Bat coronavirus outgroup sequences

For analyses that involved comparisons to SARS-CoV-2’s bat coronavirus relatives (Lytras et al. 2021), the bat coronavirus sequences were manually downloaded from GISAID (Shu and McCauley 2017). The sequences used were RaTG13 (Zhou et al. 2020b), RmYN02 (Zhou et al. 2020a), and RpYN06 (Zhou et al. 2021)—although the multiple sequence alignment of these viruses to SARS-CoV-2 also contains PrC31 (Li et al. 2021), which was not used in the final analyses as it more diverged from SARS-CoV-2 than the other three bat coronaviruses at a whole-genome level. The GISAID accessions for these sequences are listed at https://github.com/jbloom/SARS-CoV-2_PRJNA612766/blob/main/data/comparisons/gisaid_accessions.txt, and a table acknowledging the labs and authors is at https://github.com/jbloom/SARS-CoV-2_PRJNA612766/blob/main/data/comparator_genomes_gisaid/acknowledgments.csv. Sites in SARS-CoV-2 were mapped to their corresponding nucleotide identities in the bat coronavirus outgroups via a multiple sequence alignment of proCoV2 to the bat coronavirus genera using mafft (Katoh and Standley 2013).

Curation and analysis of early SARS-CoV-2 sequences from GISAID

For the broader analyses of existing SARS-CoV-2 sequences, I downloaded all sequences from collected prior to March 2020 from GISAID. The accessions of these sequences are at https://github.com/jbloom/SARS-CoV-2_PRJNA612766/blob/main/data/accessions.txt, and a table acknowledging the labs and authors is at https://github.com/jbloom/SARS-CoV-2_PRJNA612766/blob/main/data/early_gisaid_accessions.csv. The sequences from the deleted data set are then added to each node with which they are compatible given their mutations in an amount proportional to the size of the node, the logic being that a sequence is more likely to fall into larger clusters.

Interactive versions of some figures

Interactive versions of some figures are available at https://jbloom.github.io/SARS-CoV-2_PRJNA612766/, and were created using Altair (VanderPlas et al. 2018).

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Competing interests

The author consults for Moderna on SARS-CoV-2 vaccine development and epidemiology, consults for Flagship Labs 77 on viral evolution and deep mutational scanning, and has the potential to receive a share of IP revenue as an inventor on a Fred Hutch licensed technology/patent (application WO2020006494) related to deep mutational scanning of viral proteins.

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