Alpine lakes harbor diverse, endemic and structurally unique RNA viruses

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Abstract

Alpine lakes, characterized by isolation, low temperatures, oligotrophic conditions, and intense ultraviolet radiation, remain a poorly explored ecosystem for RNA viruses. In this study, we utilized BLASTp, HMM searches, and the deep learning algorithm LucaProt to analyze metatranscriptomes of 20 water samples from Lake Nam Co, a high-altitude alkaline saline lake to uncover RNA viruses. We identified 742 RNA virus species, including 383 novel genus-level groups and 14 unique phylogenetic clades exclusively found in Lake Nam Co, significantly expanding the known diversity within the five phyla of *Orthornavirae*. The newly identified lineage, *f.0167*_Nam_Co, occupied an unknown evolutionary position between *Birnaviridae* and *Kitrinoviricota*, distinguishing from members of *Birnaviridae* and *Kitrinoviricota* by disappearance, rearrangement, and relocation of conserved motif C in RNA-dependent RNA polymerase. RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co exhibited distinct physicochemical properties and RNA secondary structures compared to those found in other ecosystems (*e.g.* estuarine and terrestrial environments). We discovered 13 previously unknown RNA virus families infecting prokaryotes, expanding beyond the currently recognized groups. The presence of genes encoding cytochrome c oxidase and ATP synthase in viral genomes suggested a strategy employed by RNA viruses to exploit host energy production mechanisms to ensure sufficient energy for their replication. Overall, this study sheds light on the diversity and evolutionary dynamics of RNA viruses in extreme plateau aquatic environments.

Introduction

Since the isolation of the first RNA virus from a crab in 1968, the study of RNA viruses has advanced significantly[1]. Early efforts focused on culturing virus particles, while recent researches leverage high-throughput sequencing data to uncover new viruses more efficiently[2]. Over the past two decades, comprehensive omics surveys have led to exponential growth in identifying RNA viruses, particularly through the identification of RNA-dependent RNA polymerases (RdRPs) encoding sequences in specific organisms[3-5] and environmental samples[6-9]. The methodologies for discovering RNA viruses from metatranscriptomes have evolved from traditional sequence similarity searches (*e.g.*, BLAST) and profile alignment-based approaches (*e.g.*, Hidden Markov Model, HMM) to more advanced techniques using deep learning frameworks[10-14].

In 2018, Wolf and colleagues identified five distinct orthornaviran branches[15], which were later recognized as five major phyla within *Orthornavirae*[16]. Recent discoveries of numerous novel groups have led to various proposed classifications of RNA viruses. For instance, an analysis of over 5000 metatranscriptomes has identified vast clades of RNA bacteriophages[17]. Additionally, a deep learning algorithm named LucaProt has revealed a hidden realm of viral diversity[18]. Although these novel groups have not been officially proposed, their significance in RNA virus retrieval and identification is undeniable. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that currently discovered orthornaviran RNA viruses only represent a small fraction of the total diversity, with many yet to be discovered[6, 19].

The abundance and diversity of RNA viruses vary greatly across different habitats, with their distribution closely related to environmental differences and specific hosts[14, 20]. Recent studies have explored RNA viruses in various ecological niches, such as hot springs, significantly expanding our understanding of RNA viral diversity[20, 21]. Freshwater ecosystems exhibit richer alpha diversity and higher RNA virus

abundance compared to other habitats[14], with cold conditions being more beneficial

for viral survival[22]. Given this information, lakes in cold regions have the potential to

harbor undiscovered RNA virus diversity. High-altitude lakes, in particular, represent

a relatively extreme and isolated ecological niche, offering the potential to uncover

novel clades of RNA viruses with distinct host specificities.

The Tibetan Plateau, often referred to as the "Third Pole" due to its extensive

coverage of glaciers and high-altitude lakes beyond the polar regions[23], boasts over

1,400 lakes larger than 1.0 km^2 [24]. This region, characterized by unique topography,

serves as a crucial water tower supplying numerous streams and rivers[25, 26]. Studies

indicated that bacteria inhabiting the Tibetan Plateau have evolved the capacity to

generate a diverse array of secondary metabolites with distinctive structural and

functional characteristics, adapting to the region's harsh environmental conditions[26].

These prokaryotes are known to be infected by diverse DNA viruses, while no RNA

virome investigations have been carried out in plateau environments[27]. Lake Nam Co,

situated at an elevation of 4,718 meters, spans a surface area of around 2,000 square

kilometers, making it the second-largest lake on the Tibet Plateau[28]. A study

conducted on Lake Nam Co revealed complex patterns of microbial diversity and

abundance across different water layers with distinct temperature and salinity

stratifications[29], indicating the possibility of discovering new RNA viruses that infect

a diverse and unique range of hosts.

In this study, we utilized traditional similarity-based methods—BLAST and

HMM—along with the deep learning approach LucaProt, in conjunction with

structure-based protein clustering analysis, to examine RdRP sequences from Lake

Nam Co. By analyzing metatranscriptomes in this distinct and isolated high-altitude

plateau lake, we aimed to investigate the diversity and key characteristics of RNA

viruses in this habitat compared to other environments. Through a comprehensive

examination encompassing the ICTV classification and recent taxonomic

advancements, we discovered a significant array of novel and endemic RNA viruses,

substantially broadening our understanding of RNA viruses associated with microbial

communities predominantly comprising bacteria in Lake Nam Co. Additionally, we

identified multiple protein and genome characteristics that likely contribute to the

adaptation of RNA viruses to extreme high-altitude environments.

Results and Discussion

Diverse microbial life in Lake Nam Co's cold, alkaline, and oligotrophic waters

Environmental analysis of the 20 water samples from four distinct depths (surface,

upper-middle, lower-middle, and bottom) in Lake Nam Co reveals its high-altitude,

cold, alkaline, moderately saline, and oligotrophic conditions (**Figure 1 and Tables**

S1, S2)[23, 29]. The lake's significant exposure to intense sunlight is marked by a peak

photosynthetically active radiation of 1,379 W m^{-2}. Temperatures at the surface drop

significantly with depth, from 12.9°C to 3.6°C even during summer, while the pH

levels remained stable between 9.3 and 9.4. Salinity showed minor fluctuations,

ranging from 1.05 to 1.08‰. Dissolved oxygen levels increased with depth, from 11.1

to 13.6 mg L^{-1}. Dissolved organic carbon concentrations were narrowly constrained

between 3.42 to 3.45 mg L^{-1}. Nutrient concentrations, including nitrate, phosphates,

and ammonium, were below 1 μM, and generally increased from the surface to the

bottom, with the lower-middle layer showing the highest concentrations (**Table S2**).

Based on sequencing of 16S rRNA and 18S rRNA transcripts in Lake Nam Co, the

active microbial landscape reveals a significant bacterial and eukaryotic diversity

(**Figures S1–S4**). At the class level, *Cyanobacteriia* dominantly comprises 28.0% to

68.7% of the bacterial community. Other notable contributors to the bacterial diversity

include *Gammaproteobacteria*, *Bacteroidia*, *Alphaproteobacteria*, *Planctomycetes*,

Verrucomicrobiales, *Actinobacteria*, *Bdellovibrionota*, *Desulfuromonadia*, and

Acidimicrobiia. For the eukaryotic community, diversity spans several groups with

Spirotrichea (ranging from 2.8% to 59.5%) and *Dinophyceae* (17.5% to 55.5%)

among the most prominent. Other key eukaryotic classes include *Bacillariophyta*,

Cryptophyceae, *Arthropoda*, *Heterotrichea*, *Choanoflagellatea*, *MAST-2*,

Trebouxiophyceae, *CONThreeP*, *Chrysophyceae*, *Rotifera*, *Zygnemophyceae*,

Litostomatea, *Chytridiomycota*, and *Filosa-Sarcomonadea*.

Discovery of 14 novel RNA viral clades

Using BLAST and HMM, along with the deep learning algorithm LucaProt, followed

by a series of validation processes (**Figure 1**), we identified 742 non-redundant

complete RdRP sequences from 20 metatranscriptomes of Lake Nam Co. Among

these, 724 RdRPs, which were subsequently used for phylogenetic analysis, were

identified through both sequence-alignment-based and protein structure-based

clustering analyses (**Figure 2A**), with the remaining 18 detected solely via

structure-based clustering (**Figure 2B**). For the former 724 RdRPs, 334 RdRP

sequences were assigned to families currently defined by ICTV, while another 390

belonged to families identified in the RVMT database[17] but not officially proposed

(**Figures S5-S20 and Table S3**). Of the 18 RdRPs identified exclusively by

structure-based clustering, 15 were identified to current phyla within *Orthornavirae*

without classification into more refined taxonomic levels, while the remaining three

could not be assigned to any existing *Orthornavirae* taxonomy (**Figures S21-S31**).

From the total RdRP dataset, 602 newly identified RdRPs formed 383 genus-level

novel groups at a 75% amino acid identity (AAI) [30], and 118 RdRPs formed 84

family-level novel groups at a 40% AAI[30]. Based on sequence and structural

similarities (**Table S3 and Figure 1A**), except for the three previously mentioned

unclassified RdRPs, the RdRP dataset comprised viruses from the five established

phyla: 248 from *Lenarviricota*, 216 from *Pisuviricota*, 128 from *Kitrinoviricota*, 123

from *Duplornaviricota*, and 21 from *Negarnaviricota*. Additionally, the dataset

includes three *Birnaviridae* viruses that could not be assigned to any of the 5 major

phyla due to the permutation of three essential motifs forming the RdRP catalytic

core[18, 30] (**Figure 1**).

Expansions were observed in various phyla through the phylogenetic analysis, and 14

novel and Lake Nam Co-specific phylogenetic clades (with ≥ 3 representative

sequences) at the sub-family or family level were identified. These clades shared less

than 50% AAI with RdRP reference sequences from other environments[9, 14, 17, 31]

(**Table S4 and Figures S5-S20**). In *Lenarviricota*, although the majority of newly

identified RdRP sequences were found (**Figure 2A I**), only two novel clades

(*Lenarviricota*_Clades_I-II) were discovered, corresponding to the families

Narnaviridae and *f.0388* from the RVMT database[17] (**Table S4 and Figures S5, S8**).

For *Pisuviricota*, six newly identified clades were observed: one in *Picornavirales*

(*Pisuviricota*_Clade_I) within *Pisoniviricetes* and five in *Durnavirales*

(*Pisuviricota*_Clades_II-VI) within *Duplopiviricetes* (**Figure 2A II**) (**Table S4 and**

Figures S9, S12, S13). In *Kitrinoviricota*, the primary expansion was observed in the

order *o.0045* of class *c.0034* (**Figure 2A III**), where 45 sequences formed an

independent clade (*Kitrinoviricota*_Clade_I)[17] (**Figure S14**). These sequences

diverged from the closest reference sequences in family *f.0176* with similarities

ranging from 29.4% to 36.3% (**Table S4**). In *Duplornaviricota*, 76 RdRP sequences,

mostly within the *Ghabrivirales* (**Figure 2A IV**), formed five novel clades

(*Duplornaviricota*_Clades_I-V) (**Table S4 and Figures S18-S20**). Among them, three

clades (*Duplornaviricota*_Clades_III, IV and V) corresponded to families *f.0295*,

f.0286 and *f.0287* in the RVMT database, exhibiting low AAI (<40%) with other

sequences and were distantly clustered (**Figures S18 and S20**). In *Negarnaviricota*,

the fewest newly identified RdRP sequences were observed, predominantly belonging

to *Bunyavirales* within *Ellioviricetes* of *Polyploviricotina* (**Figure 2A V**), with no

novel clades discovered.

Novel RdRPs with unique structural characteristics in Lake Nam Co

The polymerase domain of RdRPs consists of three subdomains: palm, fingers, and

thumb[32]. To determine the taxonomy of sequence-alignment-based unclassified

RdRPs, which could not be recognized through sequence alignment, we predicted the

structures of the polymerase domain of all Lake Nam Co RdRPs and their closely

related reference sequences, and conducted structural clustering (**Figures 3 and 4**).

Through structural clustering and root mean squared deviation values (RMSD)

comparison, we assigned the phyla of 15 sequence-alignment-based unidentified

RdRPs, seven of which exhibited unique structural features in their core regions

(**Figures 3A and S21-S28**). For instance, Nam-Co_*Birnaviridae*_001 had a special

β-sheet structure between two typical α-helices in the non-conserved region between

motifs A and B (**Figures 3A I, S21**). Nam-Co_*Lenarviricota*_001 featured multiple

α-helices and irregular coils with distinctive amino acids in motifs A and B (**Figures

3A II, S22**). Nam-Co_*Pisuviricota*_004 and Nam-Co_*Pisuviricota*_007 exhibited

extra helix and distinctive β-sheet structures, respectively (**Figures 3A III, IV, S24B,

S25B**). Nam-Co_*Kitrinoviricota*_001 showed a shorter first α-helix between motifs A

and B, with an extra α-helix at the β-turn between motifs B and C (**Figure S26**).

These unique features highlight the diversity and endemism of RdRPs in Lake Nam

Co.

Three sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs remain unclassified based on

structural clustering. Their RMSD values closely align with reference structures from

different   phyla,   indicating   their   unique   structural   features.   For

Taxa_unknown_RdRP_001, the RMSD values of its structure compared to relatively

close reference structures belonging to *Pisuviricota* and *Kitrinoviricota* both exceed 2

(**Figures 3B I and S29**). It shared β-turn features with *Kitrinoviricota* reference and

similar α-helical structures with the *Pisuviricota* reference, though its helical structure

was longer and divided into three segments. Taxa_unknown_RdRP_002 referenced

Lenarviricota and *Kitrinoviricota*, with RMSD values of 2.694 and 3.259,

respectively. It shared more similarities with *Kitrinoviricota* reference in the

composition of motifs A and B, along with the β-turns at the edges of motifs A and C

(**Figures 3B II and S30**). Taxa_unknown_RdRP_003 was associated with

Lenarviricota and *Kitrinoviricota* references, with both RMSD values greater than 4,

suggesting a high degree of specificity. It presented a highly unique area comprising

two α-helices and two β-folds between motifs A and B (**Figures 3B III and S31**).

These three RdRPs, identified exclusively by structure-based clustering with remote

sequence and structural similarity, suggest the potential emergence of new phyla.

Besides the confirmation of phyla of sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs,

structural clustering unveiled a unique RNA virus group in Lake Nam Co. Six RdRP

sequences, initially identified as *Kitrinoviricota* based on sequence alignments from

Lake Nam Co (referred to as *f.0167*_Nam_Co), did not cluster with other

Kitrinoviricota sequences. Instead, they formed a distinct cluster situated between

Birnaviridae and the five orthornaviran phyla according to protein structural

clustering analysis (**Figure 4A**). The RdRPs of *Birnaviridae* or related viruses are

permutated, meaning that their motifs might shift places (**Figure 4B**)[33]. The low

RMSD values (RMSD = 2.16) between *f.0167*_Nam_Co and *Birnaviridae* references,

along with the similar rearranged motif sequences (motifs C-A-B) suggest a similarity

between *f.0167*_Nam Co and *Birnaviridae* (**Figures 4B and 4C I**). Reference

sequences of *f.0167*_Nam_Co, previously classified in the family *f.0167* within the

class *c.0032* of *Kitrinoviricota*, were thought to contain the SDD sequence as motif C

with the general arrangement[17]. However, structural predictions revealed that these

sequences did not possess motif C in the palm region of the polymerase domain

(**Figure 4C II**). The distinct arrangement of motifs in *f.0167* between Lake Nam Co

and other aquatic environments[17, 34] reveals the evolutionary process of motif C

positions, reflecting reconstitution and loss in the conserved core region.

Genome and protein features of RNA viruses adapting to alpine environments

A total of 1,159 RNA viral contigs, representing viral genomes, were identified based

on the presence of genes encoding RdRPs. Among these, 166 contigs contained more

than three open reading frames (ORFs), with genome lengths ranging from 1,371 to

16,715 bases. Besides genes encoding RdRPs and capsid proteins, the majority of

these RNA virus genomes contained predominantly unannotated genes (**Figure S32**).

Other annotated viral proteins encoded by RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co included

movement proteins (MP), glycoproteins, helper-component proteinases (HCP),

replicases, methyltransferases (MT), packaging NTPase P4, and peptidases S39 and

A21 (**Figures 5A, S33A**).

Six of viral genomes contained auxiliary metabolic genes (AMGs), impacting various

metabolic processes in hosts, including energy generation (*atpA*, *cyoA*), translation

(*rplA*), phospholipid metabolism (*ugpQ*), and heme biosynthesis (*hemX*, *hemY*).

(**Figure 5A and Table S8**). Among them, a virus belonging to the family *f.0102*

within *Pisuviricota* carries a gene encoding cytochrome c oxidase subunit II in *Achlya*

(**Figure 5A, Table S8**). An RNA virus identified as Nam-Co_family_51 within

Kitrinoviricota carries a gene encoding ATP synthase CF1 alpha subunit of an

unknown host (**Figure 5A, Table S8**). These two AMGs encode proteins that have

been confirmed to function in the host's mitochondria[35] or chloroplasts[36], can affect

the energy metabolism processes, which reflects a viral strategy to exploit host energy

production. Genes related to other metabolism were also identified, such as AMGs

encoding uroporphyrinogen-III C-methyltransferase and heme biosynthesis-associated

TPR protein in *Hydrogenobacter*, are possibly associated with multiple processes like

electron transfer and oxygen transport[37]. Besides AMGs, two genes associated with

anti-prokaryotic immune systems, like APIS022 and AcrVIA7, suggest an ongoing

arms race between viruses and their hosts[38] (**Figure 5A and Table S8**).

To illustrate the RNA virus protein characteristics in Lake Nam Co, we compared the

physicochemical properties of capsid proteins and RdRPs from RNA viruses in Lake

Nam Co, various terrestrial sites (16 provinces and regions in China)[8], and estuarine

environments (Yangshan Port)[7], including hydrophobicity, polarity, mutability,

transmembrane tendency, and refractivity (**Figure S34**). Capsid proteins from the two

aquatic environments showed no obvious difference (wilcox test, $p > 0.05$) but were

significantly different from terrestrial capsid proteins (wilcox test, $p < 0.05$).

Comparing to capsid proteins, Lake Nam Co RdRPs significantly differed from both
estuarine and terrestrial environments across all five indices (wilcox test, $p < 0.001$)
(**Figure S34**). For instance, Lake Nam Co RdRPs showed broader, more uniform
refractivity values (**Figure 5B)**, potentially linked to intense UV radiation[39, 40]. These
results demonstrate the consistency of capsid proteins' physicochemical properties in
the aquatic environment and the uniqueness of Lake Nam Co RdRPs.

Besides characteristics of given proteins, the genome features of RNA viruses in Lake
Nam Co were also shaped by its environment and hosts. We compared the RNA
secondary structural features of RNA viruses from Lake Nam Co with RVMT
references[17] within the same classes, analyzing hairpins, stems, interior loops,
multiloops, unpaired ratios, and minimum free energy (MFE)[41] (**Figures 5C, 5D and**
S35). We focused on taxonomic groups at the class level with over ten relatively
complete RNA genomes, averaging 90 sequences per class, including *Alsuviricetes*,
Amabiliviricetes, *c.0013*, *c.0031*, *c.0034*, *c.0069*, *Chrymotiviricetes*, *Duplopiviricetes*,
Ellioviricetes, *Howeltoviricetes*, *Leviviricetes*, *Miaviricetes*, and *Tolucaviricetes*
(**Figures S36-41**). Overall, the variation trends of secondary structural features along
classes of Lake Nam Co viral RNAs aligned with those of RVMT viral RNAs[17],
indicating stable differences across taxa (**Figures 5C and S36-41A**). However, within
viral classes, except *Ellioviricetes*, the secondary structural features of Lake Nam Co
viral RNAs exhibit distinct density distributions, indicating specificity compared to
RVMT references. (**Figures 5D and S36-41B**). For example, compared to RVMT
references[17], *Amabiliviricetes* viruses of Lake Nam Co have fewer hairpins (wilcox
test, $p < 0.05$) (**Figure S36B**) but more stems (wilcox test, $p < 0.01$) (**Figure S37B**)
and interior loops (wilcox test, $p < 0.05$) (**Figure S38B**). In comparison to RVMT
references[17], *Chrymotiviricetes* viruses of Lake Nam Co have fewer stems (wilcox test,
$p < 0.0001$) (**Figure S37B**), interior loops (wilcox test, $p < 0.01$) (**Figure S38B**),
multiloops (wilcox test, $p < 0.05$) (**Figures S39B**) but higher unpaired ratio (wilcox
test, $p < 0.001$) (**Figure S40B**) and MFE (wilcox test, $p < 0.0001$) (**Figure S41B**).

Host range of RNA viruses predominantly targeting prokaryotic organisms

We employed various methods to determine the relationship between RNA viruses and their hosts in Lake Nam Co. Eighty-three RNA viruses were identified with direct host evidence. Of these viruses, nine were predicted to infect eukaryotes, 73 to target bacteria, and one to infect archaea (**Figure 6A**). Previous studies have identified only three groups known to infect bacteria: *Leviviricetes*, *Cystoviridae*, and *Picobirnaviridae*[4, 17, 42, 43], however, infection evidences in our study revealed 13 additional families in Lake Nam Co (**Table S7**). These 13 families included *Totiviridae*, *Mitoviridae*, *Narnaviridae*, and *Benyviridae* currently defined by ICTV, as well as *f.0028*, *f.0076*, *f.0102*, *f.0111*, *f.0176*, *f.0283*, *f.0286*, *f.0295*, and *f.0296* identified in the RVMT database but not yet officially proposed[17]. Among these families, *Benyviridae* and *f.0176* are within *Kitrinoviricota*, a phylum previously unrecognized for bacterial infection.

To predict host range of RNA viruses that lack direct evidence, we predicted the tendency of their infection by calculating and visualizing amino acid usage frequency (AAUF) (**Figure S42A**) and di-/tetra-nucleotide usage frequency (D/TUF)[44, 45] (**Figures 6B, 6C and S42B**). Visualization of AAUF showed that viruses predominantly clustered independently, with a few overlapping with bacteria (**Figure S42A**). In contrast, RNA viral D/TUF closely matched their potential hosts, particularly bacteria, indicating a preference for infecting prokaryotes (**Figures 6B, S42B**). According to the TUF aggregation of RNA viruses with microbes at the phylum level, they primarily infected bacteria from *Bacteroidota*, *Actinomycetota*, *Chloroflexota*, and *Cyanobacteriota* phyla (**Figure 6C**).

We analyzed the relative abundance of prokaryotic RNA viruses across samples to investigate potential host and environmental influences (**Figures S43 and S44**). Prokaryotic viruses were most abundant in upper-middle water layers and decreased in deeper layers (**Figure S43**). Distribution of individual prokaryotic viruses varied

across samples **(Figure S44)**, with the most significant differences observed between sampling sites, followed by water layers. These differences align with the distribution of prokaryotic host groups **(Figures S45 and S1).** The distribution of prokaryotic RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co was also influenced by unique environmental conditions. For instance, prokaryotic viruses were less active in surface waters (**Figure S43**), likely due to high levels of UV radiation on the Tibetan Plateau[46], which compromised virus integrity, especially in simpler prokaryotic hosts[47]. Analogously, their abundance was higher at lakeshores than at lake centers (**Figure S43**), where suspended particles reduce UV effects[48].

Summary

Through comprehensive analyses, we elucidated the diversity and adaptive strategies of RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co's unique ecosystem. Our results uncovered numerous novel and endemic groups/clades of RNA viruses, which exhibited significant specificity in their genomes, RNA secondary structures, and protein structures. Contrary to conventional assumptions, our study revealed a significant bias of these viruses towards bacterial hosts, with potential implications for archaeal infection as well. Additionally, the RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co directly impacted host metabolic processes through AMGs. Overall, this study sheds light on the diversity, adaptation, and host interactions of RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co, providing insights into their ecological roles and evolutionary dynamics in extreme alpine environments. However, due to experimental limitations, we did not capture particles smaller than 0.2 μm, which means our results primarily represent RNA viruses actively infecting hosts within cells, missing free viruses dispersed in water. Additionally, the lack of direct evidence from CRISPR-Cas limits our ability to confidently predict virus-host linkages. Although constrained by the limited number of metatranscriptomic samples from Lake Nam Co, our research highlights numerous novel RNA virus groups and characterizes their genomic and proteomic features. Future work should include

349 collecting more metatranscriptomic samples to discover additional novel groups and

350 achieve a more comprehensive understanding of RNA virus-host interactions across

351 diverse environments.

Methods

Sample collection

Water samples were collected from two sampling stations in Lake Nam Co, Tibet,

China (**Figure 1 and Table S1**) **-** the LS station near the lakeshore (90.98°E, 30.79°N)

and the LC station near the lake center (90.48°E, 30.46°N). At the LS station, 20 liters

of surface water (at a water depth of 0.5 m) was collected. Simultaneously, at the LC

station, samples were taken from four different layers - surface (0.5 m), upper-middle

(20 m), lower-middle (50 m), and bottom (80 m), with 20 liters collected from each

layer. All water samples were pre-filtrated using nylon sieves with a pore size of 60

μm and then filtered through polycarbonate membranes (Millipore) of different pore

sizes within 5 hours after collection. The membranes of 10 μm, 3 μm, 1.2 μm, and 0.2

μm were collected, rapidly frozen with liquid nitrogen, and stored at -80 °C until

RNA extraction. Additionally, 40 ml of filtrate was transferred to a 50 ml clean tube

and stored at -20 °C for inorganic nutrient analysis. For dissolved organic carbon

(DOC) analysis, water samples were filtered through 0.7-μm GF/F glass fiber filters

(precombusted at 450 °C for 4 hours, Whatman). The 20 ml filtered water samples

were collected directly into two 40 ml glass vials (acid-washed, rinsed with Milli-Q

water, and pre-combusted, CNW) and immediately stored at -20 °C for DOC

concentration measurements.

Measurement of environmental parameters

Solar radiation intensity was measured using Handheld TES-1333 solar power meter

digital radiation detector. Water temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen (DO), and salinity

were measured using in situ Conductivity-Temperature-Depth (CTD) sensors

(Sea-Bird Electronics, Bellevue, WA, USA). Inorganic nutrient concentrations,

including phosphate, nitrate, nitrite, and silicate, were measured using the PowerMon

Kolorimeter AA3 (Bran + Luebbe, Charlotte, NC, USA) following the

spectrophotometric methods[49]. The DOC concentrations were determined using a

Shimadzu TOC-VCPH analyzer through high-temperature (680 °C) catalytic

oxidation. Ammonium concentrations were measured spectrophotometrically using

the indophenol blue method.

16S/18S rRNA transcripts amplicon sequencing and data processing

Total RNA was extracted using the DNA/RNA Miniprep Kit (Zymo Research

Corporation) according to the manufacturer's instructions and subsequently stored at

-80 °C. One part of this RNA was reverse-transcribed into cDNA using random

hexamer primers and SuperScript III Reverse Transcriptase (Invitrogen), as per the

provided guidelines. To identify active microbial communities, the V4-V5 regions of

prokaryotic 16S rRNA were amplified using forward (515F

5'-GTGCCAGCMGCCGCGGTAA-3') and reverse (907R

5'-CCGTCAATTCMTTTRAGTTT-3') primers. Similarly, the V4 region of

microeukaryotic 18S rRNA was amplified with forward (TAReuk454FWD1

5'-CCAGCASCYGCGGTAATTCC-3') and reverse (TAReukREV3

5'-ACTTTCGTTCTTGATYRA-3') primers. Sequencing of the 16S/18S rRNA

transcripts was conducted on an Illumina NovaSeq 6000 system (pair-end sequencing,

2 × 250 bp) by Magigene (Guangdong, China). For the analysis, Qiime2 v2021.8.0

was employed to process the 16S/18S rRNA sequencing data from the 20 samples[50].

This process included merging, quality filtering, denoising, and the exclusion of

sequences originating from chloroplasts and mitochondria. Additionally, the software

supported the clustering and annotation of operational taxonomic units (OTUs),

enabling the profiling of the taxonomic composition.

Metatranscriptomic sequencing and data processing

After the RNA extraction, a part of total RNA was subjected to rRNA depletion using the Ribo-off® rRNA Depletion Kit V2. This rRNA-depleted RNA was then reverse-transcribed into cDNA using random hexamer primers and SuperScript III Reverse Transcriptase (Invitrogen). Metatranscriptomic sequencing was performed on the Illumina NovaSeq 6000 platform (pair-end sequencing, 2 × 150 bp) by Magigene (Guangdong, China). For the metatranscriptomic sequencing data, Fastp v0.23.2 was utilized for trimming and quality control, retaining only high-quality clean reads[51]. These clean reads were then mapped to the SortMeRNA database v4.3.4 [52] for separating rRNA reads from non-rRNA reads using Bowtie2 v2.4.3 [53]. Non-rRNA reads were assembled using MEGAHIT v1.2.9 [54] to generate assembled contigs, employing both single-sample assembly and multiple-sample co-assembly (LC + LS), resulting in a total of 22 assemblies. The getORF package from EMBOSS v6.6.0.0 [55] and Prodigal v2.6.3 [56] were used for open reading frame (ORF) prediction from the assembled contigs (using the 11th codon table), preserving ORFs longer than 200 amino acids.

Identification of RdRP sequences

To enhance the detection of RNA viruses within our datasets, we applied a comprehensive approach combining traditional sequence alignment, hidden Markov model (HMM) searches, and a deep learning algorithm (**Figure 1**). Specifically, we utilized: (1) BLASTp analysis (Diamond v2.0.15.15363)[57] to compare our sequences against a custom database comprising RdRP sequences gathered from four recent studies on RNA virus diversity[9, 14, 17, 31]; (2) HMM searches (HMMER v3.3.2)[58] targeting 77 different RdRP family profiles to identify potential matches[59]; (3) deep learning analysis through LucaProt (https://github.com/alibaba/LucaProt)[14], focusing on ORFs longer than 300 amino acids. Through this multifaceted approach, we initially identified 4,021 potential RdRP sequences (**Figure 1**).

To refine our results for species-level analysis of RdRP, we applied CD-HIT version

4.8.1 to eliminate duplicates from the sequences, using a 90% amino acid identity

(AAI) similarity threshold[30, 60, 61], reducing the count to 3,089 non-redundant

candidate RdRP sequences. Further analysis for identifying three core RdRP motifs

(Motifs A, B, and C)[30] was conducted using PalmScan2[30]. Sequences exhibiting all

three motifs were considered viable RdRP candidates, resulting in a total of 809

sequences. These candidates underwent additional check against the non-redundant

(nr) database using Diamond BLASTp v2.0.15.15363 to ensure their viral origin. We

excluded sequences whose top BLAST hits (e-value < 0.001) did not match known

RNA virus proteins, thereby eliminating false positives and potential endogenous viral

elements[5]. This careful filtering process yielded 742 sequences that were identified as

RdRP sequences and selected for further analysis (**Figure 1**).

Phylogenetic tree construction and taxonomic assignment of RdRPs

The taxonomic classification of newly discovered RdRPs was determined through

sequence-alignment-based and protein structure-based clustering analyses. For the

sequence alignment approach, the determination of RdRP taxonomy was informed by

a synthesis of the top BLASTp hits across a range of databases, incorporating the

valuable contributions from the RVMT database[17], as well as research conducted by

Hou et al. [14], Charon et al. [31], and Zayed et al. [9, 62]. RdRPs with taxonomy references

here were considered to be sequence-alignment-based identified RdRPs, while others

were identified as sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs.

For the phylogenetic analysis of sequence-alignment-based identified RdRPs, due to

the rapid evolution of RNA viruses and substantial differences in RdRp sequences

among different classes, multiple gaps occurred during alignment, hindering the

construction of a robust phylogenetic tree. Therefore, separate alignments were

performed for the five phyla of RNA viruses: *Duplornaviricota*, *Kitrinoviricota*,

Pisuviricota, *Lenarviricota*, and *Negarnaviricota*. Subsequently, maximum likelihood

phylogenetic trees for RdRp proteins were constructed. For classes with over 100

identified RdRp sequences, sub-alignments were performed based on evolutionary

distances and protein clustering numbers, followed by sub-trees construction. Based

on different classifications, the identified complete RdRPs was aligned with reference

sequences using MAFFT v 7.508[63]. Initial trimming of aligned regions was performed

using trimAl v 1.4.rev15[64]. Sequences were manually trimmed to the adjacent area of

core RdRP region (including the three conserved motifs A, B, and C) and sequences

causing alignment confusion were manually removed using Jalview v 2.11.3.2[65].

FastTree v 2.1.10 was used to construct maximum likelihood phylogenetic trees for

each phylum and class [66], the trees were then visualized using the Chiplot online

website (https://www.chiplot.online/)[67]. New taxonomy groups of Lake Nam Co were

then identified according to the amino acid similarity.

To conduct the structure verification of RdRP candidates and ascertain the

approximate clades of sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs, Alphafold2 v

dtk22.04[68] was used to predict the structures of all RdRP candidates in Lake Nam Co

and their reference sequences[9, 14, 17, 31, 59]s. We conducted the paired structure

alignment based on template modeling score (TM-score) method[69] and the

structure-based clustering of all predicted RdRP structures[70]. RdRP candidates with a

TM-score over 5 compared to all references were excluded (Establishment of RdRP

dataset part). To eliminate the potential impact of non-core region sequences bias (too

much amino acid on the left or right) on structural similarity, all

sequence-alignment-based identified RdRP sequences were trimmed to the relative

conserved domain according to the sequence alignment results, while the

sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs remain untrimmed before re-clustering

implemented the same way as described above. For a sequence-alignment-based

unidentified RdRP, the phylum was determined by the RdRP structure with the lowest

TM-score. If the structure with the lowest TM-score was a sequence-alignment-based

identified RdRP from Lake Nam Co, an additional reference structure from RdRP

identification databases[9, 14, 17, 31, 59] with the lowest TM-score was also included. The

phylum of the sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRP was then determined

based on comparisons and visualization results of the region near the three motifs

with the reference structures[71, 72]. After integrating the phylum classification of

sequence-alignment-based identified RdRPs and sequence-alignment-based

unidentified RdRPs, the conservative motifs A, B, and C for different phyla of RNA

viruses were visualized using WebLogo v 2.1.10[73].

All reference sequences and newly identified RdRPs were subjected to palmprint

recognition by PalmScan2[30]. Palmprints were clustered using MMseq2 v 14.7e284 [74]

at 75% and 40% identity thresholds to identify clusters at the genus-level and

family-level[30] composed solely of newly identified RdRPs from Lake Nam Co.

RNA virus genome annotation and distribution

All contigs containing the identified RdRP of Lake Nam Co were considered as RNA

viral contigs. To ensure that the contigs represent indeed viral genomes and not

assembly errors, we used metagenomic sequencing reads from the same environment

to map to these contigs. Contigs that that had more than 10 reads mapped from DNA

sequencing data were excluded[14]. After redundancy reduction of nucleotide sequences

with a threshold of 0.95 using CD-HIT v4.8.1[60], these genomes were annotated using

tools such as Cenote-Taker v3.0.0[75], eggNOG-mapper v2.1.12[76], and dbCAN3

v4.0.0[77], along with annotation using DRAM v1.2.0[78] after preprocessing with

Virsorter2 v2.2.4[79]. The dbAPIS database was also utilized for the annotation of

Anti-prokaryotic Immune System (APIS) proteins in these RNA viruses[38].

The non-rRNA reads of all 20 samples were mapped to the identified genomes using

Bowtie2 v 2.4.3[53] before the abundance and diversity of RNA viruses in Lake Nam

Co were determined by MetaPop v 1.0.0 [80].

Comparison of physicochemical property indices of RdRPs and capsid proteins in RNA viruses from different environments

RdRPs and capsid proteins of Yangshan estuary environment[74] and terrestrial environment across China[75], together with the RdRPs and capsid proteins annotated in Lake Nam Co were collected. The physicochemical properties indices, including hydrophobicity, polarity, relative mutability, transmembrane tendency, and refractivity were calculated refer to ProtScale website (https://web.expasy.org/protscale/)[76]. A linear weighted model (window size of 9) was applied to calculate scores at different positions in the protein sequences for each of the physicochemical properties. The variation of individual protein indicators across positions were depicted by line plots, while the comparison of all physicochemical properties indices between different locations were depicted by violin plots drawing by R v 4.2.0.

Comparison of RNA secondary structures between RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co and global data

Classes containing over 10 RNA virus sequences in Lake Nam Co were selected, and 100 viral contigs from these classes were randomly extracted from the RVMT database[13] for comparison. RNA secondary structure features (**Figure S35**) of these classes, including hairpins, stems, interior loops, multiloops, unpaired ratios, and minimum free energy (MFE), were analyzed and visualized refer to the script published urreeby Uri Neri's laboratory (https://github.com/UriNeri/RNAfold_virus/tree/main).

RNA Virus-Host relationship

Leveraging iPhop v1.3.3[817] for viral host prediction, in addition with host information of closely related viruses identified through sequence alignments, and annotated viral sequences with host genes, we identified the potential hosts for Lake Nam Co RNA viruses. Kaiju v 1.10.0 was employed to predict the taxonomic classification of all

contigs from Lake Nam Co. Amino acid usage frequency (AAUF) and the di-/tetra-nucleotide usage frequency (D/TUF) of the contigs exceeding 10,000 nucleotides along with the identified RNA viral contigs identified were then predicted and visualized utilizing scripts published in previous research[82].

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Data availability

The transcriptome and microbial community data have been uploaded to the National Center for Biotechnology Information under accession number PRJNA1089960.

Author contributions

Z.Q., D.X., and L.Y. initiated and designed the study. W.L., L.K., X.J., and L.P. carried out field sampling. W.L. performed total RNA extraction. W.L., Z.Q., D.X., and S.W. performed all analyses of metagenomes, metatranscriptomes, and RNA viral communities with the help of L.Z. and S.M.. W.L., Z.Q., D.X., and others led the writing of the manuscript, with result interpretations from J.N. and C.T.. C.T. and S.M. helped revise the paper. All authors contributed to editing the text and approved the final version.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

 Figure legends

Figure 1. Sampling locations and RNA virus detection process. The diagram outlines the

workflow from data collection and processing to the construction of the RdRP dataset for Lake

Nam Co. The methods used for retrieving RdRP sequences include BLASTp, HMM searches, and

the deep learning algorithm LucaProt. In total, 742 non-redundant complete RdRP sequences were

identified from 20 metatranscriptomes. Of these, 724 RdRPs were identified through both protein

structure-based clustering and sequence-alignment-based analyses, while the remaining 18 were

detected exclusively via structure-based clustering. The RdRP dataset consists of RNA viruses

from the five orthornaviran phyla and the *Birnaviridae* family, which is not assigned to the five

major phyla. The pie chart displays the distribution of RNA virus species across the five

orthornaviran phyla and *Birnaviridae*, based on combined sequence-alignment and protein

structure clustering analyses.

Figure 2. Classification and structural information of RdRP dataset in Lake Nam Co.

(A) Phylogenetic trees of 724 sequence-alignment-based identified RdRPs. From I to V, they

represent phyla *Lenarviricota*, *Pisuviricota*, *Kitrinoviricota*, *Duplornaviricota*, and

Negarnaviricota, respectively. RdRPs found in Lake Nam Co are highlighted in red, while the

reference sequences are shown in black. (B) Schematic representation of 18

sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs that detected solely via protein structure-based

clustering. The "thumb", "palm", and "fingers" regions of RdRP are colored in pink, yellow, and

blue, respectively. Within the "palm" region, catalytic center motifs A, B, and C are colored in

purple, green, and orange, respectively.

Figure 3. Schematic representation of catalytic core in the sequence-alignment-based

unidentified RdRP structures.

(A) Unique structures of the "palm" region of sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs that

could be identified at the phyla level based on protein structural clustering. (B) Structures of the

"palm" region of RdRPs that remain unidentified at the phyla level through either

sequence-alignment-based or protein structural-based clustering analyses. Motifs from

sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs are colored in red, motifs from the RVMT

reference structure are colored in dark blue, and motifs representing sequence-alignment-based

identified RdRPs in Lake Nam Co are colored in light blue. The yellow dashed circle indicates

unique structural regions of sequence-alignment-based unidentified RdRPs from Lake Nam Co.

Figure 4. RdRP structure-based clustering, motif arrangements and structural features.

(A) Structure-based clustering results of the RdRP dataset in Lake Nam Co and references. **(B)**

Composition and arrangement of RdRP motifs at the phylum level in Lake Nam Co, with the

motifs of *f.0167*_Nam_Co from *Kitrinoviricota* exhibiting a permuted arrangement shown at the

bottom. **(**C) Schematic representation of the RdRP structure of *f.0167* from *Kitrinoviricota*, with

overlaid structures from Lake Nam Co (I) and the RVMT database (II), annotated with the number of

overlaid sequences. The "thumb," "palm," and "fingers" regions of RdRP are colored in pink, yellow,

and blue, respectively. Within the "palm" region, catalytic center motifs A, B, and C are colored in

purple, green, and orange, respectively. Motifs in the enlarged details are displayed in stick mode.

Figure 5. Features of genomes and proteins of RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co.

(A) The RNA virus genomes containing viral and host genes in Lake Nam Co. Genes encoding

RdRPs are colored in red, genes encoding capsid or coat proteins are colored in blue, other viral

genes were colored in green, host genes were colored in yellow. (B) Comparison of refractivity

indices of RNA virus proteins from Lake Nam Co with those from terrestrial and estuarine

environments. RdRPs and capsid proteins of RNA viruses from different locations are shown in

gradient blue and green, respectively. The capsid proteins of Lake Nam Co RNA viruses and those

from estuarine environments show no significant difference in refractivity, but they do differ

significantly from terrestrial environments. The RdRPs of Lake Nam Co RNA viruses show

significant refractivity differences from both estuarine and terrestrial environments. (C) The

distribution of normalized minimum free energy (MFE) of RNA secondary structures with respect

to viral classes. MFE distributions of RNA viruses from different classes in Lake Nam Co (colored

in gradient purple) and from the RVMT database (colored in gradient blue-green) show consistent

trends across classes. (D) Comparison of normalized MFE of RNA secondary structures between Lake

Nam Co and the RVMT database at the level of viral classes. MFE of RNA viruses from the same class

in Lake Nam Co (colored in purple) and the RVMT database (colored in green) show significant

differences between nine classes.

Figure 6. Host prediction for RNA viruses in Lake Nam Co.

(A) Virus-host classification of RNA viruses with specific hosts. Most of the determined hosts are

prokaryotes (72 hosts), and nine and one eukaryotic and archaeal hosts, respectively, were

identified. (B) UMAP visualization of tetra-nucleotide usage frequency (TUF) of RNA viruses and

microbes in Lake Nam Co at the super-kingdom level. Possible hosts with similar tetra-nucleotide

usage frequency to RNA viruses cluster together in UMAP visualization. Most of RNA viruses

cluster with prokaryotes (purple dots), while a limited portion of RNA viruses cluster with

eukaryotes (blue dots). (C) UMAP visualization of TUF of RNA viruses and microbes in Lake

Nam Co at the phylum level. Possible hosts with similar tetra-nucleotide usage frequency to RNA

viruses cluster together in UMAP visualization. RNA viruses infecting bacteria primarily comprise

Bacteroidota, *Cyanobacteriota*, *Chloroflexota*, and *Actinomycetota*.

A

I

Class
- *Amabiliviricetes*
- *Howeltoviricetes*
- *Leviviricetes*
- *Miaviricetes*
- *c.0069.base-Howelto*
- *c.0071.base-Howelto*
- *c.0067.base-Howelto*
- *c.0068.base-Howelto*
- *c.0061.base-Levi*
- *c.0066.base-Howelto*

Order
- *Wolframvirales*
- *Cryppavirales*
- *Norzivirales*
- *Ourlivirales*
- *o.0090*
- *Timlovirales*
- *o.0092*
- *o.0088*
- *o.0089*
- *o.0082*
- *o.0087*

II

Class
- *c.0013*
- *Duplopiviricetes*
- *Pisoniviricetes*
- *c.0003.base-Pisoni*
- *c.0005.base-Stelpa*
- *Stelpaviricetes*
- *c.0012*
- *Flasuviricetes*

Order
- *o.0025.base-Sobeli*
- *Durnavirales*
- *Picornavirales*
- *o.0003*
- *o.0012*
- *Stellavirales*
- *Sobelivirales*
- *Amarillovirales*
- *Patatavirales*

III

Class
- *c.0034*
- *Tolucaviricetes*
- *Alsuviricetes*
- *c.0021.base-Toluca*
- *c.0025*
- *c.0032*
- *c.0028*
- *Magsaviricetes*
- *c.0031*
- *c.0024*

Order
- *o.0045*
- *Tolivirales*
- *Martellivirales*
- *Hepelivirales*
- *o.0032*
- *o.0036*
- *o.0055*
- *o.0043*
- *o.0039*
- *Nodamuvirales*
- *o.0042*
- *o.0035*

IV

Class
- *Chrymotiviricetes*
- *Resentoviricetes*

Order
- *Ghabrivirales*
- *Reovirales*

V

Class
- *Ellioviricetes*
- *Milneviricetes*
- *Monjiviricetes*
- *c.0054.base-Yunchang*

Order
- *Bunyavirales*
- *Serpentovirales*
- *Mononegavirales*
- *o.0072*

Bootstrap values
- ● >90%
- ○ 70-90%

Type
- ■ novel
- ■ reference

Tree scale 1

B

- *Pisuviricota*
- *Birnaviridae*
- *Lenarviricota*
- *Kitrinoviricota*
- *Duplornaviricota*
- *Negarnaviricota*
- *Unknow taxa*

A

I — Nam Co_*Lenarviricota*_RdRP_001

II — Nam Co_*Pisuviricota*_RdRP_004

III — Nam Co_*Pisuviricota*_RdRP_007

IV — Nam Co_*Birnaviridae*_RdRP_001

B

I

Nam Co_unknown_RdRP_001

Kitrinoviricota

RMSD 2.228

RMSD 2.694

Pisuviricota

II

Nam Co_unknown_RdRP_002

Kitrinoviricota

RMSD 3.259

RMSD 2.694

Lenarviricota

III

Nam Co_unknown_RdRP_003

Kitrinoviricota

RMSD 4.345

RMSD 4.063

Lenarviricota

* *P* < 0.05, ** *P* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001, **** *P* < 0.0001

A

| Search method | Superkingdom of Host | Phylum of Host | Family of Host | Phylum of Virus | Class of Virus |

Host genes (3)
iPhop (18)
Related viruses (62)

Bacteria (72)
Eukaryota (10)
Archaea (1)

Actinomycetota (2)
Bacillota (3)
Bacteroidota (9)
Pseudomonadota (5)
Oomycota (1)
Arthropoda (2)
Chordata (1)
Streptophyta (6)
Methanobacteriota (1)

Ilumatobacteraceae (1)
Mycobacteriaceae (1)
Desulfitobacteraceae (1)
UBA660 (1)
CAG-826 (1)
Marinifilaceae (1)
Bacteroidaceae (2)
Flavobacteriaceae (4)
Paludibacteraceae (2)
Midichloriaceae (1)
Comamonadaceae (1)
GCA-002716945 (1)
Gallionellaceae (1)
Pseudomonadaceae (1)
Saprolegniaceae (1)
Aphididae (1)
Gerroidea (1)
Hominidae (1)
Cucurbitaceae (1)
Fabaceae (1)
Poaceae (1)
Solanaceae (3)
Methanothermobacteraceae (1)

Duplornaviricota (8)
Kitrinoviricota (7)
Lenarviricota (54)
Negarnaviricota (2)
Pisuviricota (12)

Chrymotiviricetes (8)
Alsuviricetes (6)
c.0034 (1)
Leviviricetes (51)
Howeltoviricetes (2)
Amabiliviricetes (1)
Monjiviricetes (1)
unsure (1)
Duplopiviricetes (6)
c.0013 (1)
Pisoniviricetes (4)
Stelpaviricetes (1)

B

RNAv
Bacteria
Eukaryota
Archaea

UMAP

C

RNAv
Bac-Bacteroidota
Bac-Cyanobacteriota
Bac-Chloroflexota
Bac-Actinomycetota
Euk-Ciliophora
Euk-Bacillariophyta
Bac-Other
Euk-Other

UMAP