

Complete genome and sequence and phylogenetic analyses of the first bovine norovirus strain identified in northern China

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Abstract

Bovine norovirus (BNoV) is a recently identified calicivirus in the genus *Norovirus*, which can cause enteric disease with clinical signs including vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration, and mortality in neonatal calves. BNoV has been reported in different countries all over the world. We collected 39 fecal, blood, and tissue samples from calves with diarrhea from Hebei in northern China in 2019. The presence of BNoV was determined by PCR only two samples (5.1%) were positive. The complete genome of the newly identified strain Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 was successfully sequenced (GenBank accession number: MN480761). Based on the existing gene sequences in the GenBank database, evolutionary trees were constructed. Sequence analysis showed that the nucleotide sequence homology of the Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 genome with BNoV genomes in GenBank was 84.0–92.4%. Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 has a GIII.2 genotype, and further analysis of its VP1 gene revealed four amino acid substitutions, i.e., 225C, 246T, 624T, and 945T. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time the complete genome of a BNoV isolate from northern China has been sequenced.

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Summary

Bovine norovirus (BNoV) is a recently identified calicivirus in the genus *Norovirus*, which can cause enteric disease with clinical signs including vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration, and mortality in neonatal calves. BNoV has been reported in different countries all over the world. We collected 39 fecal, blood, and tissue

samples from calves with diarrhea from Hebei in northern China in 2019. The presence of BNoV was determined by PCR only two samples (5.1%) were positive. The complete genome of the newly identified strain Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 was successfully sequenced (GenBank accession number: MN480761). Based on the existing gene sequences in the GenBank database, evolutionary trees were constructed.

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Keywords: Bovine norovirus, calf diarrhea, complete genome, genomic sequence, phylogenetic analysis

Introduction

Noroviruses (NoVs) are important pathogens causing gastroenteritis in children and young animals. Infection with NoV in children and young animals can cause intestinal lesions and post-infectious diarrhea (Smiley, Chang, Hayes, Vinje, & Saif, 2002; Bridger, Hall, & Brown, 1984; Woode & Bridger, 1978). In humans, NoV is one of the most important etiological agents of gastroenteritis; however, little is known about NoV causing diarrhea in cattle.

NoVs are small non-enveloped, positive-sense single-stranded RNA viruses. According to the diversity of the *VP1* amino acid (aa) sequence, NoVs are divided into seven genogroups (GI to GVII). Bovine NoVs (BNoVs) belong to GIII and are further divided into two different genotypes, i.e., genotype 1 (Bo/Jena/1980/DE) and genotype 2 (Bo/newbury2/1976/UK), which were first identified in Germany (Otto et al., 2011) and the UK (Jung, Scheuer, Zhang, Wang, & Saif, 2014). The BNoV genome, which has a size of 7.5–7.7 kb, contains three open reading frames (ORFs). Starting from the 5' end of the genome, ORF1 encodes a non-structural protein, including an enzyme responsible for transcription, viral genome replication, and accurate initiation of RNA synthesis by RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp). RdRp prevents the virus from losing its genetic information (Deval, Jin, Chuang, & Kao, 2017; Lee, Chung, & Kim, 2017). ORF2 encodes the major capsid protein *VP1*. It is involved in receptor recognition and host specificity (Chen et al., 2004). Viral evasion of antibody neutralization results in frequent variations in the *VP1* aa sequences, which are also associated with the emergence of new epidemic strains (Lochridge & Hardy, 2007; Lindesmith et al., 2013). ORF3 encodes the minor capsid protein *VP2*, a hypervariable protein that may play a role in maintaining the stability of NoV particles (Lin, Fengling, Lianzhu, Yuxiu, & Yanhua, 2014).

Previous studies have reported the detection of BNoV in many countries including the UK (Woode & Bridger, 1978; Bridger, Hall, & Brown, 1984), Germany (Gunther, Otto, & Heilmann, 1984), the Netherlands (van der Poel et al., 2003; van Der Poel et al., 2000), the USA (Cho et al., 2013; Wise et al., 2004), New Zealand (Wolf et al., 2007), South Korea (Park et al., 2007), Norway (Jor, Myrmel, & Jonassen, 2010), France (Kaplon, Guenau, Asdrubal, Pothier, & Ambert-Balay, 2011), Turkey (Kaplon, Guenau, Asdrubal, Pothier, & Ambert-Balay, 2011), and Tunisia (Hassine-Zaafrane et al., 2012). According to previous reports, BNoV was first detected in Southern China in 2018 (Wang, Yue, & Tang, 2019), and it was detected in central China in 2019 (Shi, Wang, Xu, Zhang, & Lan, 2019).

BNoV has become a threat to the global cattle industry, and it may bring huge economic losses to the cattle industry in China. Although BNoV is prevalent globally, the study of its pathogenicity, epidemiology, and molecular biology is only in the preliminary stage. Up to now, GenBank contained only seven complete BNoV genome sequences; two are GIII.1 strains (GenBank accession numbers: MK159169 and AJ011099) and five are GIII.2 strains (GenBank accession numbers: JX145650, AY126474, AF097917, MN122335.1, and EU794907). In China, only two BNoV genomes have been completely sequenced, i.e., one from southern China and one from central China. There are not enough data to establish the genetic relationship and evolutionary rate of BNoVs in China. At present, the virus has not been successfully isolated, hindering the development of an effective vaccine. We studied the molecular profile of the virus and analyzed its genetic variation, in order to provide a reference for the prevention and control of viral spread in China.

We identified a BNoV strain, named Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019, from Hebei, in northern China, and conducted phylogenetic analysis of the entire genome and the *VP1* region. BNoV may be highly prevalent in China, but there are few epidemiological data on the prevalence of the virus. This study lays a foundation for the further exploration of the molecular biological characteristics of BNoV and the prevalence of BNoV in China.

Materials and methods

Sample information

Between April 2019 and September 2019, we collected and analyzed 39 samples from five different farms with calf diarrhea in Hebei, China, including 30 diarrheal fecal samples, 5 blood samples and 4 tissue samples (lung, liver, kidney, heart). Samples were screened for BNoV by nested PCR.

Nucleotide extraction and PCR detection of BNoV

Total RNA was extracted by TRIzol reagent following the manufacturer’s instructions (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA). Reverse transcription was performed using the PrimeScript™1st strand cDNA Synthesis Kit (TaKaRa Biotechnology, Dalian, China) with an oligo dT primer. Nested PCR primers (F, AGT-TAYTTTTCCCTTYTAYGGBGA; R, AGTGTCTCTGTCAGTCATCTTCAT (Smiley, Hoet, Traven, Tsunemitsu, & Saif, 2003); and nF, GTCGACGGYCTKGTSTTCCT; nR, CACAGCGACAAATCATGAAA (Park et al., 2006)) targeting the *RdRp* gene were used with the following reaction conditions: 94°C for 5 min, followed by 35 cycles at 94°C for 30 s, 54°C for 30 s and 72°C for 40 s, with a final extension at 72°C for 10 min. The reaction generated a 326 bp PCR product. In addition, three other diarrhea-related enteric viruses, i.e., bovine viral diarrhea virus, bovine rotavirus, and bovine coronavirus, were detected using previously reported molecular methods for the evaluation of possible co-infection with BNoV.

Sequencing and phylogenetic analysis of the complete genome of the Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 strain

Based on the GenBank sequences, we designed six pairs of specific primers using Primer Premier 5 software. The reference sequences were AY126472.2, JX145650.1, EU794907, AF097917.5, MK159169.1 and NC_-029645.1. The complete BNoV genome of the strain Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 was amplified using six sequence-specific primer pairs.

Reactions were performed in a total volume of 20 μ L (2 μ L of cDNA, 2 μ L of 10 \times PCR Buffer, 3 μ L of 2.5 mM dNTP, 1 μ L of each primer, 0.5 μ L of Taq polymerase, and 10 μ L of ddH₂O). The whole genome of BNoV strain Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 was amplified by RT-PCR (oligonucleotide primers are presented in Table 1). All PCR products were purified with the PCR Purification Miniprep Kit (BIOMIGA, Shanghai, China) following the manufacturer’s instructions. The PCR products were cloned into the pMD19-T cloning vector (TaKaRa Biotechnology, Dalian, China). The positive recombinant plasmids were verified by restriction enzyme digestion and sequenced by Sangon Biotech (Beijing, China). The raw genomic sequence fragments were imported to SeqMan in DNASTar (DNASTar, Inc., Madison, WI, USA) for assembly and annotation. The complete BNoV genome sequence has been deposited in GenBank (accession number: MN480761). Sequencing and phylogenetic analysis of the complete genome of the Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 strain was performed using the Clustal W program in DNA Star software. Then, 10,000 bootstrap replication was performed using MEGA 7 software, and the phylogenetic tree was constructed by the neighbor-joining method.

Primer	Sequence (5'-3')	Product size(bp)	Annealing temperature (°C)
BNoV1F	TGAATGAAGACTTTGACG	1465	52
BNoV1R	CGCACCCGATTAGACAT		
BNoV2F	CCTCGGKCARTATGGDA	1304	53
BNoV2R	CTTGGATGGCAGTGGTH		
BNoV3F	TGTGACCACTGCCATCCA	1638	52
BNoV3R	GCCACCAGCTCATCCTT		
BNoV4F	TCCCTGGACAAAACCTACC	1151	49

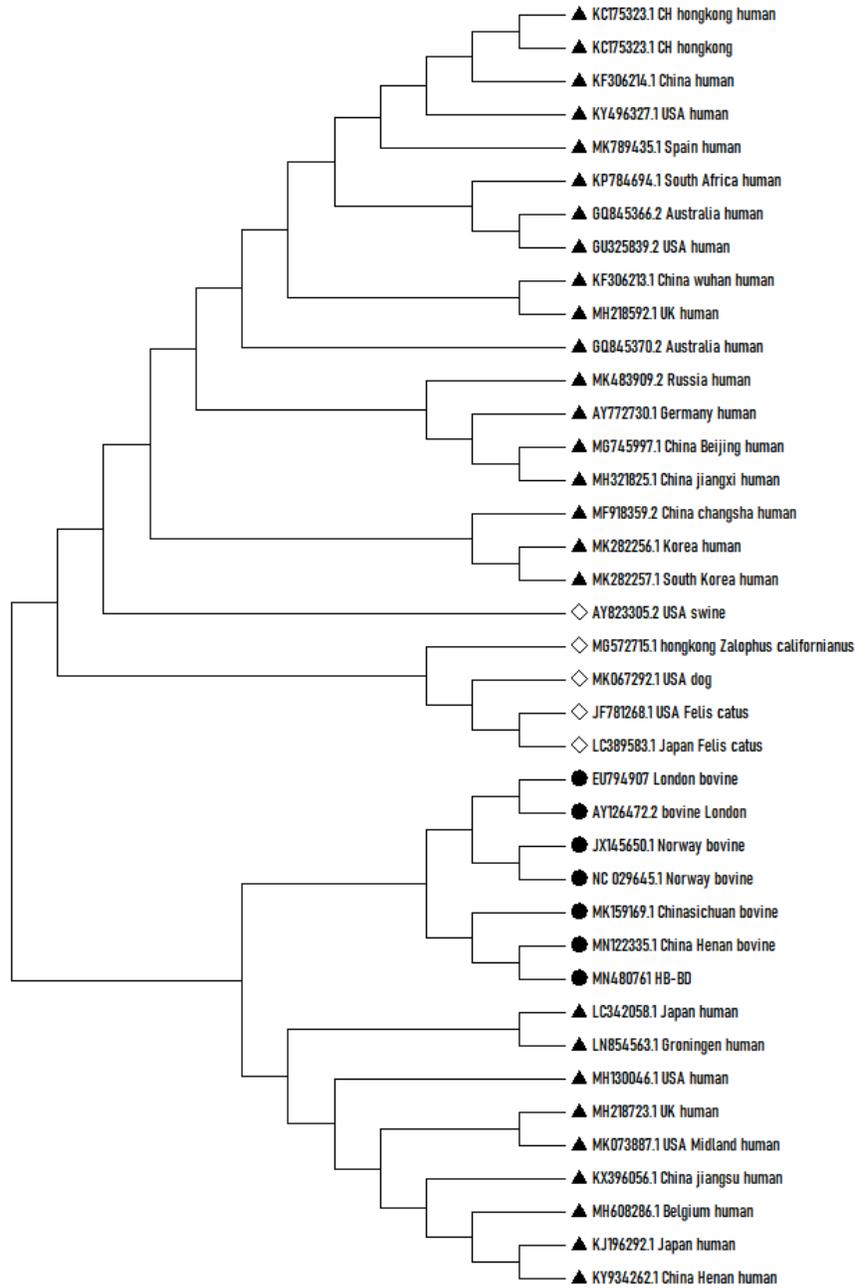
Primer	Sequence (5'-3')	Product size(bp)	Annealing temperature (°C)
BNoV4R	CCTTCCCACAGTGACAGAT		
BNoV5F	GAYGAYCCGARYGARAC	1563	49
BNoV5R	GAAACGAAATGGGTAATC		
BNoV6F	GATTACCCATTTBGTYTTC	924	42
BNoV6R	AACACTGCTCACTATTTTC		

Results and discussion

BNoV has been detected in many countries. This disease was first detected in China in 2018, and has been reported in central and southern China. Here, we detected a new BNoV strain, named Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 (GenBank accession number: MN480761), in Hebei, in northern China, and sequenced its whole genome. We collected 39 samples, two (5.1%) of which were BNoV positive. One sample was co-infected with bovine rotavirus. The BNoV detection rate was similar to those reported in Belgium (7.5%) (Mauroy et al., 2009), Argentina, (3.3 %) (Ferragut et al., 2016), and South Korea (2.8%) (Park et al., 2008), and much lower than those reported in the USA (72.1%) (Smiley, Hoet, Traven, Tsunemitsu, & Saif, 2003), Norway (49.6%) (Jor, Myrnel, & Jonassen, 2010b) and Iran (39.5%) (Pourasgari et al., 2018), and also lower than those reported in central China (25%) and south China (20.4%) (Shi, Wang, Xu, Zhang, & Lan, 2019; Wang, Yue, & Tang, 2019). Although it has been confirmed that BNoV is prevalent in China, few studies and epidemiological data are available on BNoV in China.

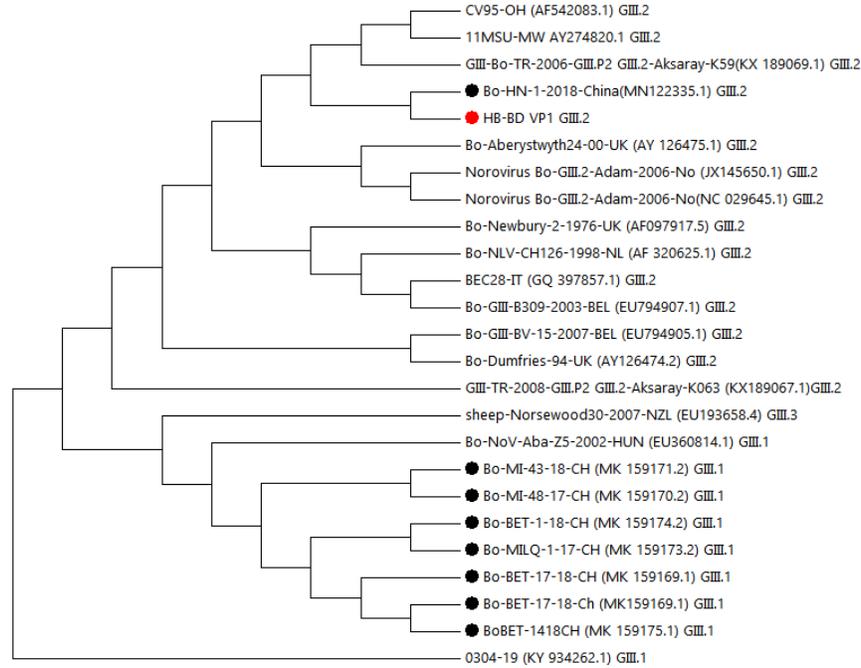
We sequenced and analyzed the Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 genome, and learned that its genome is 7320 nucleotides (nt) and includes three ORFs, a 21 nt 5' untranslated region, and a 49 nt 3' untranslated region. ORF1 is located from 22 nt to 5076 nt and encodes a 1685 aa non-structural protein. ORF2 is located from 5063 nt to 6631 nt and encodes the 523 aa *VP1* protein. ORF3 is located from 6621 nt to 7271 nt and encodes the 217 aa *VP2* protein. ORF1, ORF2, and ORF3 overlap each other by 14 nt and 11 nt. Based on the complete BNoV sequences available in the GenBank database, we compared the isolated strain Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 with seven isolates from other regions of the world. The sequence similarity between Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 and the other isolates ranged from 84.0–92.4%. The homology between the isolates and all complete sequences in the GenBank database ranged from 69.9% to 91.8% for *VP1* and from 67.9% to 91.2% for *VP2* (Table 2), indicating that BNoV genes are diverse and hence require further exploration.

Strain	GenBank accession no	Geographic location	genotype	% Identity		
				Complete Genome	% Identity VP1	% Identity VP2
Bo/Newbury2/1976/UK	AF0917.5	United Kingdom	GIII.2	84.3	86.9	84.6
Bo/Dumfries/94/UK	U126474.2	United Kingdom	GIII.2	84.3	85.8	85.3
Bo/GIII/B309/2003/BEL	EF07	Belgium	GIII.2	84.0	84.3	84.8
Bo/GIII.2/Adam/2004/NOR	DC045650.1	Norway	GIII.2	85.9	85.9	86.2
Bo/BET-17/18/CH	MK159169.1	China Sichuan	GIII.1	80.1	69.9	67.9
Bo/HN-1/2018/China	MN122335.1	China Henan	GIII.2	92.4	91.8	91.2
Bo/GIII.2/Adam/2004/NOR	DC045650.1	Norway	GIII.2	85.9	85.9	86.2



Phylogenetic trees of different hosts and genotypes were constructed based on the complete Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 genome sequence and the complete genomes in the GenBank database (Figure 1). Figure 1a shows that bovine isolates and human isolates are far related, so there is no potential risk of cross-infection at present. However, BNoV (GIII) serum antibodies have been detected in humans (Widdowson et al., 2005) and human NoV sequences have been detected in bovine fecal samples (Menon et al., 2013), and interspecific transmission may occur in the future. Figure 1b shows that all BNoV isolates belonged to the GIII genotype. The Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 strain is more closely related to the other two Chinese strains than to those from other countries, and is hence clustered in the Chinese BNoV branch in the phylogenetic tree. The isolated strain

was more closely related to the Bo/HN-1/2018/China strain from Henan (central China) (GenBank accession number: MN122335.1) than to the Bo/BET-17/18/CH strain from Sichuan (southern China) (GenBank accession number: MK159169.1). This suggests that there may be a different evolutionary process underlying the spread of BNoV in China. Unfortunately, few data are available on the genetic evolution and prevalence of BNoV in China.



The BNoV *RdRp* gene contains highly conserved regions. *VP1* is the major structural component of caliciviruses and is involved in receptor recognition, host specificity, strain antigenic diversity, and immunogenicity (Chen et al., 2004). *VP2* is highly variable and can contain different types of mutations (Bok et al., 2009; Seah, Gunesekere, Marshall, & Wright, 1999). *VP2* interacts with *VP1* and, in turn, enhances the expression of capsid proteins (Vongpunsawad, Venkataram, & Estes, 2013). Due to the slightly different topologies between ORF2 and ORF3, different BNoV *VP2* gene may have resulted from distinct evolutionary strategies (Kamel et al., 2009). Phylogenetic trees were constructed based on the BNoV *VP1* and *RdRp* genes (Figure 2). The strain isolated in the present study and CH-HNSC-2018 were clustered in one branch, while strains isolated from Sichuan, southern China, were clustered in another branch, indicating that the BNoV strains in China are diverse. Different strains with different genotypes exist in China, making the prevention and control of viral spread difficult (Figure 2a). The sequence and phylogenetic analyses showed that Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 belongs to GIII.2 BNoV (Figure 2b).

The *VP1* protein includes a shell (S) domain, which is highly conserved among different NoVs, and a protruding (P) domain, with N-terminal P1 and C-terminal P1 and P2 parts (Chen et al., 2013). The highly variable region of the sequence (residues 279–406) forms the externally located P2 subdomain, whereas the central subdomain P1 (residues 226–278 and the C-terminal 124 residues) is located between the S and P2 domains (Venkataram, Hardy, & Estes, 2000). Comparing with previous studies, in both China and other countries, we found four new aa substitutions in *VP1*, i.e., 225C, 246T, 624T, and 945T. The 225C residue is located in the conserved region and 246T is located in the P1 subdomain in the highly variable region. This may be an adaptation that is unique to BNoV circulating in cattle farms in Hebei, China. Whether these mutations in Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 lead to changes in virulence, pathogenicity, and antigenicity remains to be explored.

In conclusion, in this study we isolated the Bo/CH/HB/BD/2019 strain from Hebei, sequenced its genome, and identified its genes. We analyzed its sequence homology with other BNoV strains and constructed phylogenetic trees to analyze its genetic evolution. Our results provide a reference for the development of a BNoV vaccine to prevent and control viral spread. Nevertheless, more data are still required, so in the future it will be necessary to further monitor and research BNoV and its subtypes.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical statement

The authors confirm that the ethical policies of the journal, as noted on the journal's author guidelines page, have been adhered to and the appropriate ethical review committee approval has been received. The US National Research Council's guidelines for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals were followed.

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this article.

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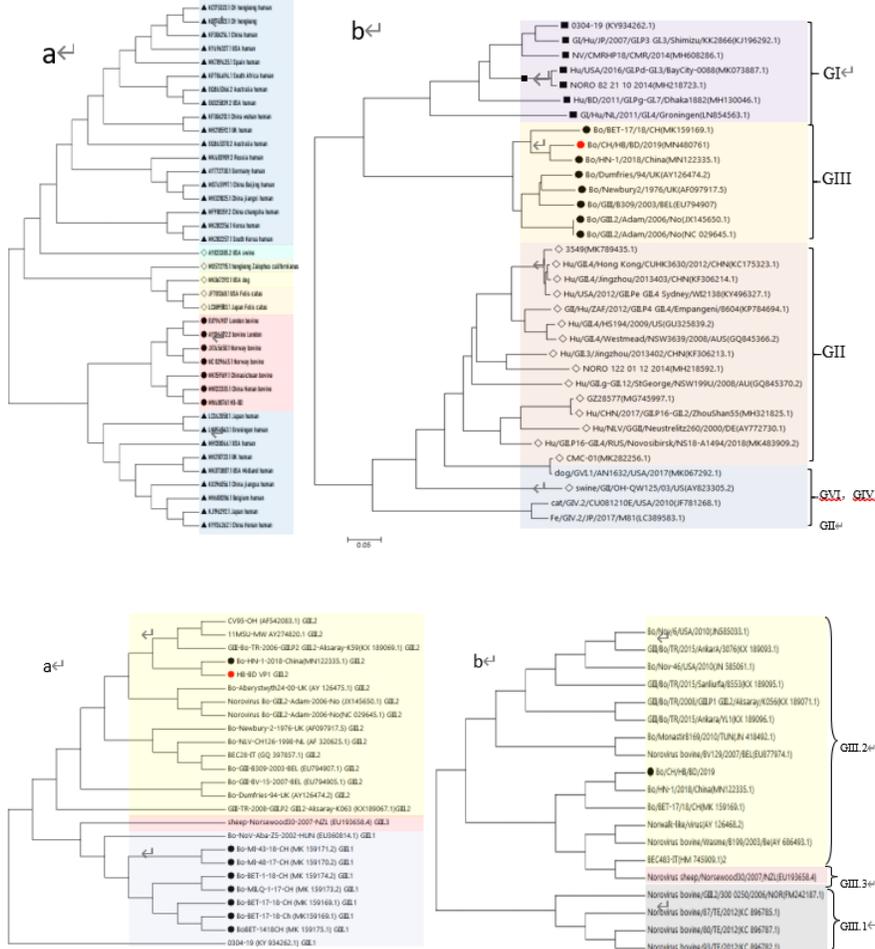
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