



Proceeding Paper

# Exploring the Sit-and-Wait Potential of the Bacterial Pathogen *Shigella flexneri*: A Comparative Genomic Study <sup>†</sup>

Bin Gu <sup>1</sup>, Jun-Jiao Wang <sup>1</sup>, Xin-Lei Huang <sup>2</sup>, Quan Yuan <sup>1</sup>, Khashayar Shahin <sup>3</sup>, Huan Yang <sup>4,\*</sup>, Fen Li <sup>5,\*</sup>  
and Liang Wang <sup>1,6,7,8,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Medical Informatics and Engineering, Xuzhou Medical University, Xuzhou 221000, China; 18013699325@163.com (B.G.); 1454939318@qq.com (J.-J.W.); yuanquan\_xz@163.com (Q.Y.)

<sup>2</sup> School of Life Sciences, Xuzhou Medical University, Xuzhou 221000, China; 2147770796@qq.com

<sup>3</sup> Institut Pasteur of Shanghai, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai 200031, China; kh.shahin@ips.ac.cn

<sup>4</sup> Department of Laboratory Medicine, Medical Technology School, Xuzhou Medical University, Xuzhou 221000, China

<sup>5</sup> Department of Laboratory Medicine, The Fifth People's Hospital of Huai'an, Huai'an, China

<sup>6</sup> Guangdong Provincial People's Hospital, Southern Medical University, Guangzhou 510080, China;

<sup>7</sup> Center for Precision Health, School of Medical and Health Sciences, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

<sup>8</sup> Division of Microbiology and Immunology, School of Biomedical Sciences, University of Western Australia, Perth 6009, Australia

\* Correspondence: yanghuan2015@tmu.edu.cn (H.Y.); 3063892835@qq.com (F.L.); healthscience@foxmail.com (L.W.); Tel: +86-13921750542 (L.W.)

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**Abstract:** The sit-and-wait hypothesis predicts that bacterial durability in the external environment is positively correlated with the evolution of bacterial virulence. Many bacterial pathogens have been recognized as potential sit-and-wait pathogens due to their long-term environmental survival (high durability) and high host mortality (high virulence) such as *Acinetobacter baumannii*, *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, and *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, etc. *Shigella flexneri* is a leading etiologic agent of diarrhea in China with long-term environmental survival capacity, high infection rates, and severe clinical consequences, which has multiple transmission routes like contaminated food (food-borne route), insanitary water (water-borne route) and direct person-to-person contacts, etc. These features make *Shigella flexneri* an ideal candidate of sit-and-wait bacterial pathogens. However, there is currently a lack of evidence to support the claim. In this study, we examine the potential of *S. flexneri* as a sit-and-wait pathogen via comparative genomic analysis, which reveals the unique features of *Shigella flexneri* in abiotic stress resistance, energy metabolism, and virulence factors, and confirms that *S. flexneri* is a highly potential sit-and-wait bacterial pathogen.

**Keywords:** *Shigella flexneri*; bacterial transmission; sit-and-wait hypothesis; stress resistance; energy metabolism; virulence factors

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## 1. Introduction

*Shigella* spp. belong to the family *Enterobacteriaceae* and a total of four bacterial pathogens are included within the group., that is, *S. boydii*, *S. dysenteriae*, *S. flexneri*, and *S. sonnei*., which originated from *Escherichia coli* via convergent evolution through the acquisition of mobile virulence elements and loss of functional genes [1]. *Shigella* spp. cause the infectious disease termed as Shigellosis, which leads to the sickness of thousands of millions of people each year all over the world [2]. Among those infected, there will be more than a million deaths with a large portion of them under the age of 5 years old [3]. Therefore, it is important to prevent and control the infection of *Shigella* spp. in order to save

lives and reduce medical expenses. From the perspective of bacterial diagnosis, it is very difficult and complex to discriminate *Shigella* spp. from *E. coli* due to their similarities, and it is even harder to differentiate the four species within the *Shigella* genus; therefore, novel methods and techniques are needed to improve the efficacy of *Shigella* diagnosis and differentiation, facilitating better control of the pathogen [4,5]. In addition, due to the phenotypical and genotypical similarities in *Shigella* spp., there is currently no availability of *Shigella* vaccine while the treatment of *Shigella* infection mainly relies on antibiotics [2,6]. However, due to the increased resistance to antibiotics, *Shigella* infections gradually become a challenging issue in clinical settings. Epidemiological studies revealed that, among the four *Shigella* species, *S. flexneri* is frequently encountered in developing countries while *S. sonnei* is more dominant in developed countries [7]. Although, with the increase of China's comprehensive national economic strength year by year, studies have shown that the infection rate of *S. sonnei* in China has an increasing trend, a number of national, provincial and municipal epidemiological surveys have confirmed that *S. flexneri* is still the dominant type of *Shigella* infection in China [8], which will be the focus of the study. The sit-and-wait hypothesis predicts that bacterial durability in the external environment is positively correlated with the evolution of bacterial virulence [9]. Many bacterial pathogens have been recognized as potential sit-and-wait pathogens due to their long-term environmental survival (high durability) and high host mortality (high virulence) such as *Acinetobacter baumannii*, *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, and *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, etc. [10]. *Shigella flexneri* is a leading etiologic agent of diarrhea with high infection rates, severe consequences, and long-term environmental survival, which has multiple transmission routes like contaminated food (food-borne route), insanitary water (water-borne route) and direct person-to-person contacts, etc [11]. These features make *Shigella flexneri* an ideal candidate of sit-and-wait bacterial pathogens. However, there is currently a lack of evidence to support the claim. In this study, we used comparative genomic analysis to investigate the sit-and-wait potential of *Shigella flexneri*, focusing on abiotic resistance, energy metabolism, and virulence factors of the bacterial pathogen. Through our computational analysis, we confirmed that *Shigella flexneri* is a sit-and-wait bacterial pathogen, which holds the potential to evolve towards higher virulence. Therefore, more attention should be given to the bacterial pathogen in terms of its transmission control and clinical treatment.

## 2. Methods

A total of 90 *Shigella* spp. genomes, together with 23 extra bacterial genomes (8 sit-and-wait bacteria, 5 obligate intracellular pathogen, 5 vector-borne bacterial pathogen, and 5 free-living bacteria) were freely downloaded from the public database Bacterial and Viral Bioinformatics Resource Center (BV-BRC), an information system designed to support research on bacterial and viral infectious diseases [12]. For the 90 *Shigella* spp., 34 genomes were *S. sonnei*, 11 genomes were *S. boydii*, 38 genomes were *S. flexneri*, and 7 genomes were *S. dysenteriae*. All the genomes were annotated via the rapid prokaryotic genome annotation tool PROKKA [13]. The protein FASTA file of the translated CDS sequences in the suffix of *faa* for each annotated genome was collected for further analysis. Proteins related to abiotic stress and energy mechanism were collected from Gene Ontology (GO) via key word searching [14]. Virulence factors were sourced from The Virulence Factor Database (VFDB) [15]. DIAMOND with blastp command (--query-coverage 90, -e 1e-10) was used to search the homologous protein sequences in each bacterial genome for counting the number of abiotic stress genes, energy mechanism genes, and virulence factors, which was then compared in different categories [16]. Orthogonal Partial Least Squares-Discriminant Analysis (OPLS-DA) was conducted for clustering analysis. All the data were visualized using GraphPad Prism (version 8.0.1). Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test was performed for multi-variant statistical analysis. Means denoted by a different letter indicated significant differences between groups ( $p$ -value < 0.05).

### 3. Results and Discussion

Through the identification of homologous sequences, it was found that the number of genes related with abiotic stress resistance and energy metabolism in *S. flexneri* was significantly higher ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ) than that in the previously defined bacterial groups, that is, sit-and-wait pathogen, obligate-intracellular Bacteria, vector-borne pathogen, and free-living bacteria. As for virulence factors, the number was significantly higher ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ) in *S. flexneri* when compared with that in obligate-intracellular bacteria, vector-borne pathogen, and free-living bacteria. However, there was no significance identified between *S. flexneri* and sit-and-wait pathogens ( $p$ -value  $> 0.05$ ), which confirmed that *S. flexneri* had similar distribution patterns as sit-and-wait pathogens in terms of the number of virulence factors. In addition, the OPLS-DA clustering analysis based on the gene distribution patterns of abiotic stress resistance, energy mechanism, and virulence factors showed that *S. flexneri* could be distinguished from the four bacterial categories, and *S. flexneri* had much closer relationship with sit-and-wait pathogen. Therefore, we concluded that *S. flexneri* had high potential to be a sit-and-wait bacterial pathogen.

### 4. Conclusions

Based on computational analysis of bacterial genomes, this study explored the distribution of genes related to abiotic stress, energy mechanism, and virulence factors in *Shigella* spp. with a focus on *S. flexneri* due to its predominant prevalence in China. Through the comparison of the number of genes belonging to the three categories with bacteria belong to previously-defined four groups, that is, sit-and-wait bacteria, obligate intracellular bacteria, vector-borne bacteria, and free-living bacteria, it was found that *Shigella flexneri* holds high sit-and-wait potential due to the significant presence of large number of genes related to abiotic stress, energy mechanism, and virulence factors. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the control of the bacterial pathogen from evolutionary perspective so as to restrict its pathogenicity increment and even reduce its pathogenicity in the long term.

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