



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**17 OCTOBER 2019**

### **SEQUENCING ANALYSIS OF MULTI-ETHNIC ASIAN POPULATIONS**

*Comprehensive genomic information of largely understudied Asian populations will expand understanding on the biology of diseases*

**SINGAPORE** – A new genetic databank has been established containing the completed whole-genome sequencing (WGS) data of close to 5,000 Singaporeans. Worldwide, WGS is increasingly used in research and healthcare to identify genetic variations using cutting-edge technologies that allow large numbers of individuals to be sequenced rapidly – This new study is the world's largest WGS analysis of Asian populations, particularly of Indian and Malay populations in the world, and provides valuable insights on the unique genetic diversity of Asian populations that could enable more accurate diagnosis of genetic diseases, empower the research of chronic diseases and guide prevention and targeted therapies. The study was published in *Cell* on 17 October 2019.

Genetic variation is known to contribute to an individual's susceptibility to disease and response to treatments. Populations from different parts of the world show significant genetic diversity that is a consequence of their population histories. Asian populations are not extensively studied and their genetic make-up is poorly understood. These have hindered efforts to discover disease-associated genes that impact on the health of individuals from these populations.

Singapore provides an excellent representation of Asia. It consists of three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay, and Indian), which capture 80 per cent of Asia's diversity. Hence, Singapore investigators performed WGS on close to 5,000 Singaporeans (2,780 Chinese, 903 Malays, and 1,127 Indians) over two years to establish a genetic reference on the local population for subsequent studies.

This study was a collaboration among scientists and clinicians from A\*STAR's Genome Institute of Singapore (GIS), National University Health System (NUHS), Singapore Eye Research Institute (SERI), Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), National Neuroscience Institute (NNI), Khoo Teck Puat Hospital

(KTPH), National University Hospital (NUH), SingHealth Duke-NUS Institute of Precision Medicine (PRISM), National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

### **Study findings**

The study revealed a noticeable degree of genetic intermingling among the three ethnic groups, of which Chinese and Malays are more closely related. It suggests that Malays split from Chinese about 24,800 years ago and experienced significant gene inflow with East Asians about 1,700 years ago, coinciding with the Austronesian expansion, a hypothesized historical migration of peoples from Taiwan/East Asia to Southeast Asia and further to remote Pacific and Oceania islands.

In addition, the team identified 98.3 million genetic variants across the Singapore genomes. Of these more than half have not been previously reported in public databases, which to date have focused on Western and European populations. It also identified 20 candidate loci for natural selection where genome sequences were altered as a result of survival and adaptation to local environments during human evolution. 14 loci were found to be associated with human traits and diseases. This may explain why certain diseases and human traits, such as ALDH2 deficiency (Asian Flush), are more or less common in Asians. These results show the relevance and utility of performing genetic studies across diverse populations in Asia.

Professor Liu Jianjun, B3( )-2 in Asia.



Regenerative Biology, Cancer Stem Cell Biology, Computational and Systems Biology, and Translational Research.

The genomics infrastructure at the GIS is utilised to train new scientific talent,

## Annex A

### IMAGES



Singapore's three major ethnic groups – Indian, Chinese, and Malay.  
(Illustration by Gloria Fuentes - The Visual Thinker LLP)



13. SingHealth Duke-NUS Institute of Precision Medicine, Singapore 169856, Singapore
14. Cardiovascular and Metabolic Disorders Program, Duke-NUS Medical School, Singapore 169857, Singapore
15. Cancer and Stem Biology Program, Duke-NUS Medical School, Singapore 169857, Singapore
16. Cancer Science Institute of Singapore, National University of Singapore, Singapore 117599, Singapore
17. Genome Institute of Singapore, Agency for Science, Technology and Research, Singapore 138672, Singapore
18. Department of Surgery, National University Health System, Singapore 119228, Singapore
19. Clinical Research Unit, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, Singapore 768828, Singapore
20. Department

- 35. Stem Cell and Regenerative Biology, Genome Institute of Singapore, Agency for Science, Technology and Research, Singapore 138672
- 36. Department of Biological Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore 117558, Singapore
- 37. School of Biological Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore 637551, Singapore
- 38. Affiliations of additional authors of the SG10K Consortium were listed in the Supplemental Note
- 39. These authors contributed equally
- 40. Lead Contact

Correspondence: Liu Jianjun ([liuj3@gis.a-star.edu.sg](mailto:liuj3@gis.a-star.edu.sg))

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