

NSW CORONAVIRUS NEWS

Coronavirus NSW: Dossier lays out case against China bat virus program

[Sharri Markson](#), The Daily Telegraph

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China deliberately suppressed or destroyed evidence of the coronavirus outbreak in an “assault on international transparency” that cost tens of thousands of lives, according to a dossier prepared by concerned Western governments on the COVID-19 contagion.

The 15-page research document, obtained by The Saturday Telegraph, lays the foundation for the case of negligence being mounted against China.

It states that to the “endangerment of other countries” the Chinese government covered-up news of the virus by silencing or “disappearing” doctors who spoke out, destroying evidence of it in laboratories and refusing to provide live samples to international scientists who were working on a vaccine.



📷 The P4 laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province. Picture: Hector Retamal/AFP

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It can also be revealed the Australian government trained and funded a team of Chinese scientists who belong to a laboratory which went on to genetically modify deadly coronaviruses that could be transmitted from bats to humans and had no cure, and is now the subject of a probe into the origins of COVID-19.

As intelligence agencies investigate whether the virus inadvertently leaked from a Wuhan laboratory, the team and its research led by scientist Shi Zhengli feature in the dossier prepared by Western governments that points to several studies they conducted as areas of concern.

It cites their work discovering samples of coronavirus from a cave in the Yunnan province with striking genetic similarity to COVID-19, along with their research synthesising a bat-derived coronavirus that could not be treated.

Its major themes include the “deadly denial of human-to-human transmission”, the silencing or “disappearing” of doctors and scientists who spoke out, the destruction of evidence of the virus from genomic studies laboratories,

and “bleaching of wildlife market stalls”, along with the refusal to provide live virus samples to international scientists working on a vaccine.

Key figures of the Wuhan Institute of Virology team, who feature in the government dossier, were either trained or employed in the CSIRO’s Australian Animal Health Laboratory where they conducted foundational research on deadly pathogens in live bats, including SARS, as part of an ongoing partnership between the CSIRO and the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

This partnership continues to this day, according to the website of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, despite concerns the research is too risky.

Politicians in the Morrison government are speaking out about the national security and biosecurity concerns of this relationship as the controversial research into bat-related viruses now comes into sharp focus amid the investigation by the Five Eyes intelligence agencies of the United States, Australia, NZ, Canada and the UK.



📷 Prime Minister Scott Morrison is speaking out in the interests of national security and biosecurity. Picture: Mick Tsikas/AAP

RISKY BAT RESEARCH

In Wuhan, in China’s Hubei province, not far from the now infamous Wuhan wet market, Dr Shi and her team work in high-protective gear in level-three and level-four bio-containment laboratories studying deadly bat-derived coronaviruses.

At least one of the estimated 50 virus samples Dr Shi has in her laboratory is a 96 per cent genetic match to COVID-19. When Dr Shi heard the news about the outbreak of a new pneumonia-like virus, she spoke about the sleepless nights she suffered worrying whether it was her lab that was responsible for the outbreak.

As she told Scientific American magazine in an article published this week: “Could they have come from our lab?” Since her initial fears, Dr Shi has satisfied herself the genetic sequence of COVID-19 did not match any her lab was studying.

Yet, given the extent of the People’s Republic of China’s lies, obfuscations and angry refusal to allow any investigation into the origin of the outbreak, her laboratory is now being closely looked at by international intelligence agencies.

The Australian government’s position is that the virus most likely originated in the Wuhan wet market but that there is a remote possibility — a 5 per cent chance — it accidentally leaked from a laboratory.

The US’s position, according to reports this week, is that it is more likely the virus leaked from a laboratory but it could also have come from a wet market that trades and slaughters wild animals, where other diseases including the H5N1 avian flu and SARS originated.

CREATING MORE DEADLY VIRUSES

The Western governments’ research paper confirms this.

It notes a 2013 study conducted by a team of researchers, including Dr Shi, who collected a sample of horseshoe bat faeces from a cave in Yunnan province, China, which was later found to contain a virus 96.2 per cent identical to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that caused COVID-19.

The research dossier also references work done by the team to synthesise SARS-like coronaviruses, to analyse whether they could be transmissible from bats to mammals. This means they were altering parts of the virus to test whether it was transmissible to different species.

Their November 2015 study, done in conjunction with the University of North Carolina, concluded that the SARS-like virus could jump directly from bats to humans and there was no treatment that could help.

The study acknowledges the incredible danger of the work they were conducting.

“The potential to prepare for and mitigate future outbreaks must be weighed against the risk of creating more dangerous pathogens,” they wrote.

You have to be a scientist to understand it, but below is the line that the governments’ research paper references from the study.

“To examine the emergence potential (that is, the potential to infect humans) of circulating bat CoVs, we built a chimeric virus encoding a novel, zoonotic CoV spike protein — from the RsSHCO14-CoV sequence that was isolated

from Chinese horseshoe bats — in the context of the SARS-CoV mouse-adapted backbone,” the study states.

One of Dr Shi’s co-authors on that paper, Professor Ralph Baric from North Carolina University, said in an interview with Science Daily at the time: “This virus is highly pathogenic and treatments developed against the original SARS virus in 2002 and the ZMapp drugs used to fight ebola fail to neutralise and control this particular virus.”



📷 President Xi Jinping waves to a coronavirus patient and medical staff via a video link at the Huoshenshan hospital in Wuhan on March 10. Picture: Xie Huanchi/XINHUA/AFP

A few years later, in March 2019, Dr Shi and her team, including Peng Zhou, who worked in Australia for five years, published a review titled Bat Coronaviruses in China in the medical journal Viruses, where they wrote that they “aim to predict virus hot spots and their cross-species transmission potential”, describing it as a matter of “urgency to study bat coronaviruses in China to understand their potential of causing another outbreak. Their review stated: “It is highly likely that future SARS or MERS like coronavirus outbreaks will originate from bats, and there is an increased probability that this will occur in China.”

It examined which proteins were “important for interspecies transmission”.

Despite intelligence probes into whether her laboratory may have been responsible for the outbreak, Dr Shi is not hitting pause on her research, which she argues is more important than ever in preventing a pandemic. She plans to head a national project to systemically sample viruses in bat caves, with estimates that there are more than 5000 coronavirus strains “waiting to be discovered in bats globally”.

“Bat-borne coronaviruses will cause more outbreaks,” she told Scientific American. “We must find them before they find us.”

AUSTRALIA’S INVOLVEMENT

Dr Shi, the director of the Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases at the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ Wuhan Institute of Virology, spent time in Australia as a visiting scientist for three months from February 22 to May 21, 2006, where she worked at the CSIRO’s top-level Australian Animal Health Laboratory, which has recently been - renamed.

The CSIRO would not comment on what work she undertook during her time here, but an archived and translated biography on the Wuhan Institute of Virology website states that she was working with the SARS virus.

“The SARS virus antibodies and genes were tested in the State Key Laboratory of Virology in Wuhan and the Animal Health Research Laboratory in Geelong, Australia,” it states.

The Telegraph has obtained two photographs of her working at the CSIRO laboratories, including in the level-four lab, in 2006.



📷 Shi Zhengli, director of the Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Wuhan Institute of Virology, who working in Australia in 2006.

Dr Shi's protégé, Peng Zhou — now the head of the Bat Virus Infection and Immunity Project at the Wuhan Institute of Virology — spent three years at the bio-containment facility Australian Animal Health Laboratory between 2011 and 2014. He was sent by China to complete his doctorate at the CSIRO from 2009-2010.

During this time, Dr Zhou arranged for wild-caught bats to be transported alive by air from Queensland to the lab in Victoria where they were euthanised for dissection and studied for deadly viruses.

Dr Linfa Wang, while an Honorary Professor of the Wuhan Institute of Virology between 2005 and 2011, also worked in the CSIRO Office of the Chief Executive Science Leader in Virology between 2008 and 2011.

Federal Liberal Senator Sarah Henderson said it was “very concerning” that Chinese scientists had been conducting research into bat viruses at the CSIRO in Geelong, Victoria, in jointly funded projects between the Australian and Chinese governments.

“We need to exercise extreme care with any research projects involving foreign nationals which may compromise our national security or biosecurity,” she said.

While the US has cut all funding to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the CSIRO would not respond to questions about whether it is still collaborating with it, saying only that it collaborates with research organisations from around the world to prevent diseases.

“As with all partners, CSIRO undertakes due diligence and takes security very seriously,” a spokesman said. “CSIRO undertakes all research in accordance with strict biosecurity and legislative requirements.”

IS THE RESEARCH WORTH THE RISK?

The US withdrew funding from controversial experiments that make pathogens more potent or likely to spread dangerous viruses in October 2014, concerned it could lead to a global pandemic.

The pause on funding for 21 “gain of function” studies was then lifted in December 2017.

Despite the concerns, the CSIRO continued to partner and fund research with the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The CSIRO refused to respond to questions from The Saturday Telegraph about how much money went into joint research collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Science and its Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The Wuhan Institute still lists the CSIRO as a partner while the US has cut ties since the coronavirus outbreak.

The argument is whether it is worth developing these viruses to anticipate and prevent a pandemic when a leak of the virus could also cause one. Debate in the scientific community is heated.

There have also been serious concerns about a lack of adequate safety practices at the Wuhan Institute of Virology when dealing with deadly viruses.

A “Sensitive but Unclassified” cable, dated January 19, 2018, obtained by The Washington Post, revealed that US embassy scientists and diplomats in Beijing visited the laboratory and sent warnings back to Washington about inadequate safety practices and management weaknesses as it conducted research on coronaviruses from bats.

“During interactions with scientists at the WIV laboratory, they noted the new lab has a serious shortage of - appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory,” the cable stated.



 Australian Animal Health Laboratory, in East Geelong, is part of the CSIRO. Picture: Andy Rogers

UNLIKELY CLAIMS VIRUS CREATED IN LAB

Scientific consensus is that the virus came from a wetmarket. But the US's top spy agency confirmed on the record for the first time yesterday that the US intelligence committee is investigating whether COVID-19 was the result of an accident at a Wuhan laboratory.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence acting director Richard Grenell said the virus was not created in a laboratory.

“The entire Intelligence Community has been consistently providing critical support to US policymakers and those responding to the COVID-19 virus, which originated in China,” he said.

“The Intelligence Community also concurs with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not man-made or genetically modified. As we do in all crises, the Community's experts respond by surging resources and producing critical intelligence on issues vital to US national security. The IC will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan.”

Despite Mr Grenell's statement and scientific consensus that the virus was not created in a laboratory, based on its genome sequence the governments' research paper obtained by The Telegraph notes a study that claims it was created.

South China University of Technology researchers published a study on February 6 that concluded “the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan. Safety level may need to be reinforced in high-risk biohazards laboratories”.

“The paper is soon withdrawn because it ‘was not supported by direct proofs’, according to author Botao Xiano,” the dossier noted, continuing to point out that: “No scientists have confirmed or refuted the paper's findings’, scholar Yanzhong Huang wrote on March 5.”

The Saturday Telegraph does not claim that the South China University of Technology study is credible, only that it has been included in this government research paper produced as part of the case against China.

CHINA'S COVER-UP OF EARLY SAMPLES

The paper obtained by The Saturday Telegraph speaks about “the suppression and destruction of evidence” and points to “virus samples ordered destroyed at genomics labs, wildlife market stalls bleached, the genome sequence not shared publicly, the Shanghai lab closure for ‘rectification’, academic articles subjected to prior review by the Ministry of Science and Technology and data on asymptomatic ‘silent carriers’ kept secret”.

It paints a picture of how the Chinese government deliberately covered up the coronavirus by silencing doctors who spoke out, destroying evidence from the Wuhan laboratory and refusing to provide live virus samples to international scientists working on a vaccine.

The US, along with other countries, has repeatedly demanded a live virus sample from the first batch of coronavirus cases. This is understood to have not been forthcoming despite its vital importance in developing a vaccine while potentially providing an indication of where the virus originated.

THE LAB WORKER WHO DISAPPEARED

Out of all the doctors, activists, journalists and scientists who have reportedly disappeared after speaking out about the coronavirus or criticising the response of Chinese authorities, no case is more intriguing and worrying than that of Huang Yan Ling.

A researcher at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the South China Morning Post reported rumours swirling on Chinese social media that she was the first to be diagnosed with the disease and was “patient zero”.

Then came her reported disappearance, with her biography and image deleted from the Wuhan Institute of Virology’s website.

On February 16 the institute denied she was patient zero and said she was alive and well, but there has been no proof of life since then, fanning speculation.



📷 US President Donald Trump has been urging China to be transparent about how the virus spread.
Picture: Mandel Ngan/AFP

DESTRUCTION OF EVIDENCE

On December 31, Chinese authorities started censoring news of the virus from search engines, deleting terms including “SARS variation, “Wuhan Seafood market” and “Wuhan Unknown Pneumonia.”

On January 1 without any investigation into where the virus originated from, the Wuhan seafood market was closed and disinfected.

It has been reported in the New York Times that individual animals and cages were not swabbed “eliminating evidence of what animal might have been the source of the coronavirus and which people had become infected but survived”. The Hubei health commission ordered genomics companies to stop testing for the new virus and to destroy all samples. A day later, on January 3, China’s leading health authority, the National Health Commission, ordered Wuhan pneumonia samples be moved to designated testing facilities or destroyed, while instructing a no-publication order related to the unknown disease.

Doctors who bravely spoke out about the new virus were detained and condemned. Their detentions were splashed across the Chinese-state media with a call from Wuhan Police for “all citizens to not fabricate rumours, not spread rumours, not believe rumours.”

A tweet from the Global Times on January 2 states: “Police in Central China’s Wuhan arrested 8 people spreading rumours about local outbreak of unidentifiable #pneumonia. Previous online posts said it was SARS.” This had the intended effect of silencing other doctors who may have been inclined to speak out.

So the truth about the outbreak in China has remained shrouded in secrecy, with President Xi Jinping aggressively rejecting global calls for an inquiry.

The dossier is damning of China’s constant denials about the outbreak.

“Despite evidence of human-human transmission from early December, PRC authorities deny it until January 20,” it states.

“The World Health Organisation does the same. Yet officials in Taiwan raised concerns as early as December 31, as did experts in Hong Kong on January 4.”

The paper exposes the hypocrisy of China’s self-imposed travel bans while condemning those of Australia and the United States, declaring: “Millions of people leave Wuhan after the outbreak and before Beijing locks down the city on January 23.” “Thousands fly overseas. Throughout February, Beijing presses the US, Italy, India, Australia, Southeast Asian neighbours and others not to protect themselves via travel restrictions, even as the PRC imposes severe restrictions at home.” In the paper, the Western governments are pushing back at what they call an “assault on international transparency”.

“As EU diplomats prepare a report on the pandemic, PRC successfully presses Brussels to strike language on PRC disinformation,” it states.

“As Australia calls for an independent inquiry into the pandemic, PRC threatens to cut off trade with Australia. PRC has likewise responded furiously to US calls for transparency.”

Chair of Australia’s Joint Parliamentary Committee on Intelligence and Security Andrew Hastie said after the cover-up and disinformation campaign from China, the world needed transparency and an inquiry.

“So many Australians have been damaged by the mismanagement of COVID-19 by the Chinese government, and if we truly are as close as Beijing suggests we are then we need answers about how this all started,” he said.

KEY DATES IN COVID COVER-UP

NOVEMBER 9, 2015

Wuhan Institute of Virology publish a study revealing they created a new virus in the lab from SARS-CoV.

DECEMBER 6, 2019

Five days after a man linked to Wuhan’s seafood market presented pneumonia-like symptoms, his wife contracts it, suggesting human to human transmission.

DECEMBER 27

China’s health authorities told a novel disease, then affecting some 180 patients, was caused by a new coronavirus.

DECEMBER 26-30

Evidence of new virus emerges from Wuhan patient data.

DECEMBER 31

Chinese internet authorities begin censoring terms from social media such as Wuhan Unknown Pneumonia.

JANUARY 1, 2020

Eight Wuhan doctors who warned about new virus are detained and condemned.

JANUARY 3

China’s top health authority issues a gag order.

JANUARY 5

Wuhan Municipal Health Commission stops releasing daily updates on new cases. Continues until January 18.

JANUARY 10

PRC official Wang Guangfa says outbreak “under control” and mostly a “mild condition”.

JANUARY 12

Professor Zhang Yongzhen’s lab in Shanghai is closed by authorities for “rectification”, one day after it shares genomic sequence data with the world for the first time.

JANUARY 14

PRC National Health Commission chief Ma Xiaowei privately warns colleagues the virus is likely to develop into a major public health event.

JANUARY 24

Officials in Beijing prevent the Wuhan Institute of Virology from sharing sample isolates with the University of Texas.

FEBRUARY 6

China’s internet watchdog tightens controls on social media platforms.

FEBRUARY 9

Citizen-journalist and local businessman Fang Bin disappears.

APRIL 17

Wuhan belatedly raises its official fatalities by 1290.