

# China's deadly legacy: The coronavirus cover-up was one of the most grotesque deceptions by a totalitarian government ever - now Beijing will use the pandemic it sparked to help achieve its goal as No1 world superpower

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**PUBLISHED:** 23:26 BST, 17 April 2020 | **UPDATED:** 07:35 BST, 18 April 2020



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When tens of thousands worldwide are dead or dying and many thousands more are doomed, it's an odd thing to boast about.

But when the flagship Hermès store in the Chinese city of Guangzhou reopened after a two-month [coronavirus](#) lockdown last weekend, it took a staggering \$2.7 million — the highest one day earnings by a single boutique in [China](#), ever.

VIPs from Guangdong, China's wealthiest province, flocked there with their wives to partake in what has been termed 'revenge shopping': revenge against the deadly Covid-19 disease which prevented them from spending lavishly for so long.

A few days later and 600 miles away, Wuhan's biggest 'wet' market — similar to the city's Huanan seafood market which also sold live wild animals for human consumption and has been blamed for being the origin of the pandemic — re-opened too.



Researchers work in a lab of Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, 23 February 2017

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The message was the same and broadcast by state television for global consumption. After a sharp contraction in its economy China is open for business. World-leading business.

Meanwhile, the West, mostly still in lockdown, heads for economic ruin. We find ourselves in a desperately weakened state, just like a Covid-19 victim on a ventilator.

But have the Chinese authorities really brought their outbreak under control?

Should we believe their official death toll, which is relatively modest even after Wuhan revised its figures 50 per cent upwards yesterday?

And did the pandemic truly begin in that Huanan seafood market, rather than by accident or even design in the city's state-run Institute of Virology, as some — including Donald Trump this week — have implied?



Residents wearing face masks purchase seafood at a wet market on January 28, 2020 in Macau, China

Responding to the suggestion that weak safety protocols at the Institute meant it was an infected lab worker who'd gone to the seafood market that began the pandemic, the U.S. President said: 'More and more we're hearing the story.'

What is clear is that the Chinese Communist Party has practised — is still practising — one of the more grotesque deceptions by a totalitarian government.

By seeking to 'control the narrative' the authorities first created a fatal paralysis, then an information vacuum into which has been sucked all kinds of speculation.

In an attempt to piece together — as accurately as possible — the extraordinary story of the pandemic's emergence, the Mail has spoken this week to leading virologists, academics who specialise in China, economists and activists.

Today in the first of a three part series on the Coronavirus Crisis we can also reveal — via the world famous Pasteur Institute in Paris — the frightening new research, as yet officially unpublished, which suggests the new coronavirus could pass not only to domestic cats but to farm livestock, too; thus creating new reservoirs for the pathogen in the UK.

We can tell the story of previous deadly pathogen escapes from Chinese laboratories — and cover ups. We will examine the Chinese state's inexplicable actions in the early days of the outbreak and the competing claims of conspiracy theories which emerged as a result. And we will look at where China and the world goes from here.



Chinese President Xi Jinping visits Chuanshan port area of the Ningbo-Zhoushan Port, Zhejiang Province, China - 29 Mar 2020

### Should we be surprised by what has happened?

No, says Ma Jian, the author and human rights activist who is known as 'the Chinese Solzhenitsyn', after the famous Soviet era dissident.

Mr Jian, who was jailed in China and now lives in exile in London, spoke to the Mail last night about the West's long and lucrative cultivation of China. He said: 'It has been a disastrous experiment. Democracies cannot engage with totalitarian regimes blindly in this way, without suffering catastrophic consequences. The result is in the UK alone there have been more than 14,000 deaths. That is one truth which cannot be avoided.'

In 1977 a strange strain of flu started infecting people in Northern China. The symptoms — mostly not fatal — duplicated those of a flu type last seen two decades before and thought extinct.

The strain rapidly spread around the world. But it afflicted only people under 20. How could this be?

Genetic tests by virologists indicated this was indeed the same 'extinct' flu from the late 1950s. In its prime, the strain had been so widespread that anyone alive was likely to have been exposed to it and developed immunity.

### Where had it been for two decades? And why the comeback?

The virus had another quirk. It would only survive in a 'middling' temperature range — as though it had been bred to do this.

In fact it had been scientifically selected to flourish in lab temperatures. Gene testing further showed it hadn't mutated over 20 years in the way it would certainly have done if it had been replicating for generations in the wild.

All the evidence suggested the virus had been frozen and stored in a lab for years. Then it had been thawed, and somehow escaped to prey on a new generation that had no natural immunity, according to a report by the University of California, San Diego, in the journal PLoS One in 2010.

Fingers immediately pointed to Chinese virology labs as the source. Investigators suggested the virus may have escaped from a lab where researchers were working on a new vaccine in response to warnings about an expected pandemic of a form of swine flu.



VIPs from Guangdong, China's wealthiest province, flocked there with their wives to partake in what has been termed 'revenge shopping'. Pictured: Mall in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, China, April 16

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These facts are not well-known, because virology experts worldwide rarely spoke about it for years. Indeed, the leak had happened in the depths of the Cold War. Western scientists did not want to risk humiliating Communist China, for fear it would stop cooperating with global efforts to detect other dangerous virus outbreaks.

But this obscure story has chilling echoes today for experts who fear the current pandemic — SARS-CoV-2 is the scientific name of the new coronavirus which causes Covid-19 in humans — emerged not from Wuhan's Huanan market, but escaped from one of the city's two laboratories experimenting with bat coronaviruses.

### The SARS catastrophe

One of these laboratories — run by the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention — is very close to the Huanan market.

Certainly China has form with virus escapes from laboratories. Worse still, it has already experienced catastrophic accidents with SARS (Severe Acute respiratory Syndrome) viruses which first emerged in China in 2002. In April 2004, China reported a suspected case of SARS in a 20-year-old nurse in Beijing who'd cared for a female lab researcher. That researcher took a train home to be looked after by her mother, a doctor — who died from SARS pneumonia within a fortnight.

The lab researcher had worked at the Chinese National Institute of Virology in Beijing. So too had a young man who fell ill that month. Neither had worked with live SARS virus. Seven other people were infected before a mass quarantine stopped the outbreak.

World Health Organisation (WHO) investigators later reported 'serious concerns' regarding the lab's security. Five senior officials at the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention were sacked. But the WHO wanted more, and called for future Chinese work on SARS-related viruses to be conducted using high level virus-containment measures called Biosafety Level 3 (BSL 3).

However, it is reported that the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention lab in Wuhan has also been conducting research into animal coronaviruses — with only a Level 2 certificate of biosafety.



**When the flagship Hermès store in the Chinese city of Guangzhou reopened after a two-month coronavirus lockdown last weekend, it took a staggering \$2.7 million**

The Wuhan Institute of Virology has the highest biosafety certification level — 4 — but has been accused of poor work protocols and being a source of the new virus by multiple sources.

Only last December, Chinese health authorities were promising in the national China Daily to boost their labs' biosafety — this time in the wake of an incident where the cattle-borne disease brucellosis had infected several lab technicians in Gansu province.

Fortunately, the infection could not spread from human to human.

Since the Covid-19 outbreak however, such official candidness has been replaced by censorship.

## Mystery disease and cover-ups

In late December — before the outbreak was publicised — doctors at Wuhan Central Hospital who posted a message alerting colleagues to the mystery new disease were accused by security forces of 'making false comments' and forced to sign statements agreeing not to discuss the disease.

Earlier this month, Chinese authorities began to crack down on publication of academic research about the origins of the novel coronavirus.

Two leading Chinese universities published web notices requiring academic papers dealing with Covid-19 to be scrutinised first by the Ministry of Science and Technology.

Research on the origins of the virus is particularly sensitive and subject to checks by government officials, according to the notices posted by Fudan University and the China University of Geosciences (Wuhan).

Jane Duckett, a professor at Glasgow University's Scottish Centre for China Research, told the Mail: 'It is a typical response by the Chinese authorities to try to control the narrative on any story they might think threatens them.' Professor Duckett, who focuses on Chinese policy and health, adds: 'With coronavirus, this may be for example because they know that their initial response to the outbreak was not good enough and would cause dissatisfaction among the Chinese people.'

'We have seen the same before with the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province where some 80,000 people died.'

'The authorities did not want people protesting at how planning corruption had allowed buildings to be constructed that collapsed during the quake.'

## Pasteur report bombshell: Cattle, sheep and even cats can catch it

The novel strain of coronavirus responsible for the current pandemic may have evolved to infect domestic cats and many species of farm animal — potentially creating a vast haven from which it may repeatedly invade humans, new research has found.

A scientific report, submitted to a journal run by the world-renowned Pasteur Institute, in Paris, has been seen by the Mail prior to publication.

Researchers at the University of Hunan have studied the lung structures of 251 different animals to determine which could be infected with Covid-19 through contact with either bats or humans.

Their findings suggest that, beyond infecting bats, pangolins and humans, the virus has evolved the ability to infect at least ten other creatures.

The danger list includes cats, cows, goats, pigs, sheep, buffalo and pigeons.

In similar fashion, the authorities muzzled media coverage of a high-speed train crash in 2011 that killed at least 38 people and injured 192. Footage emerged of bulldozers shovelling dirt over carriages in an apparent attempt to hide them.

Scandals over train crashes and earthquakes take big lies to cover up. Now we must consider an almost unthinkable question: is the Chinese government also lying about how the world's biggest pandemic began? It's little wonder then that conspiracy theories have come to the fore, which brings us to a leading scientist known as 'Bat Woman'.

### **The rise and rise of 'Bat Woman'**

It had seemed that 2017 was an *annus mirabilis* for Dr Shi Zengli and her team at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

After 13 years of research they had found the genetic source of the SARS coronavirus which killed 750 people worldwide between 2002-2004.

Among the samples taken in 2013 in the caves of Yunnan province, one was labelled RaTG13. It came from a variety of horseshoe bat.

Bats have an extraordinary resistance to disease and can act as living reservoirs to viruses which cannot kill them — but which may be lethal to other mammals, including humans.

Scientists had suspected that civet cats — sold for human consumption in Chinese wet markets — were the source of the SARS virus. But the civets proved only to be an intermediary for the fatal transfer to humans from bats.

Similarly, the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) coronavirus outbreak of 2012 which killed 850 people, transferred from bats via camels to humans.

In 1994, the Hendra coronavirus infection also jumped species from horses to humans. Malaysia's 1998 Nipah virus outbreak — from pigs to humans — also originated in pathogens from bats.

This raises the possibility that, having jumped from humans into these mammals, the virus might mutate into new, even more lethal forms that could then emerge to infect people again.

The study team is led by Xing-Yi Ge, a virologist who previously worked at the Wuhan Institute of Virology's Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases.

The virologists' report is due to be published in the journal *Microbes And Infection*.

It warns that 'interspecies transmission is believed to be a major cause of coronavirus epidemic'.

The report adds that this happened in the 2003 Sars epidemic, when the virus moved from bats into humans via infected civet cats and raccoons.

To create their species risk-list, the scientists studied the structure of a protein receptor on animal cells called ACE2 — the same receptor through which Covid-19 enters human cells and takes over the cell's machinery to make copies of itself that infect other cells.

The new research indicates that dogs, unlike cats, should not be susceptible to Covid-19 because they do not have the same vulnerable entry point in cells.

Covid-19 originated in horseshoe bats, but the new study says bats are unlikely to have passed it to humans through direct contact because that is so rare.

There are two main theories to explain how Covid-19 entered humans: that it was passed on via an intermediary animal, such as a pangolin sold at Wuhan's food market, or that a sample of the horseshoe bat virus escaped from one of two laboratories in Wuhan that were studying the creatures.

The ability of Covid-19 to infect animals that share space with people may create a



The brilliant Ms Zengli had other research interests and was experimenting in synthetic viruses which could pass from animals to humans.

Recent research has suggested the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (which causes Covid-19) can pass directly from bats to humans which posed the question: had she gone too far in playing God, deliberately or otherwise?

Enter the CIA and MI6. This week, following the leak of 2018 American diplomatic cables expressing concerns about the allegedly reckless way the Wuhan Institute of Virology was being run, the intelligence services became involved in solving the mystery of Covid-19's emergence.

Their intervention is a potential game changer in understanding why we are in lockdown; why so many of our grandparents' generation is dying; why our economy is tanking.

To date, the Chinese Communist Party's leadership has been unwilling to provide the explanatory narrative. And so the conspiracy theories and educated guesses have proliferated.

### **So who was Patient Zero?**

In late January, after Wuhan's belated lockdown, Twitter banned libertarian website Zero Hedge for 'doxing' — publishing private information with malicious intent.

The site had tweeted in a piece headlined 'Is This The Man Behind The Global Coronavirus Pandemic?' a picture of a scientist at Wuhan's Institute of Virology.

There followed a flurry of similar accusations on Chinese social media that the cause of the outbreak was the Wuhan Institute of Virology and its poor practices.

On February 7 Ms Zengli said the claims were the work of 'conspiracy theorists who don't believe in science'. By that time rumours were abroad that one of her recruits — in late 2019 there were at least two online advertisements for bat virus-related research

real, long-lasting threat.

One of Europe's foremost virology experts, Simon Wain-Hobson, of the Pasteur Institute, says the new Chinese study may have alarming implications.

He told the Mail: 'If they had recently isolated a novel coronavirus from a mammal in the list, then I'd gulp.' The study's author, Xing-Yi Ge, told the Mail the research is in its preliminary stages, adding: 'No living virus has yet been isolated from any of the animals on our list. However, some early studies have reported animals such as cats with positive blood tests for coronavirus.'

Indeed, one such victim has been a tiger at the Bronx Zoo in New York.

The peril of pandemics caused by viruses that have jumped from animals to humans looks set to grow, according to a report this month led by Bernard Bett, a senior scientist in Kenya.

He warns the danger is increasing due to population growth and increased urbanisation, with human settlement expanding into areas once occupied only by wild animals.

Increased proximity fuels the transfer of viruses.

'Already three quarters of emerging human infectious disease outbreaks originate from animals,' he warns.

Recent examples include HIV and Ebola, which both emerged in Africa.

Climate change is another factor, according to respiratory disease researchers at the University of Miami.

Variations in rainfall and temperature may cause food scarcities for animals such as bats, chimps, pangolins and deer, which can all carry dangerous infections.

A search for food is liable to bring such creatures into closer contact with humans,

jobs — had become 'Patient Zero': the first person to die of Covid-19.

The speculation about an individual called Huang Yanling was enough to cause the Institute to issue a denial on February 16.

'Recently there has been fake information about Huang Yanling, a graduate from our institute, claiming that she was patient zero in the novel coronavirus,' it said. 'Huang was a graduate student at the institute until 2015.'

**So there. But where is she now?**

**A plot by anti Beijing activists?**

Last month an internet documentary drew together and interpreted many of the accusatory threads. It was made by a media group linked with groups opposed to the Chinese leadership and called Tracking Down The Origin Of The Wuhan Coronavirus.

Certainly it made diligent use of the available material.

On January 24 one of the first studies of Covid-19 cases appeared in highly respected British medical journal, The Lancet. The co-authors were medics from hospitals in Wuhan and elsewhere in China. The paper took as its evidence samples from 41 Covid-19 victims in Wuhan who had contracted the virus by January 2.

The film seized upon the claim that the study's Patient Zero — the first man to suffer symptoms, which he did as early as December 1 — had no known direct interaction with the Huanan seafood market. Nor did 13 others of the 41.

It was also claimed no bats were sold at the market. The Huanan link was 'highly unlikely, if not impossible' the film suggested. The Chinese had been imposing a false criteria by concentrating on the market. The authorities had closed and cleansed the market, destroying potential evidence. It was a clear 'cover up'.

But of what? The results of a second scientific paper were also highlighted by the film. This report was published in Nature, another globally respected journal, in early February.

It drew attention to the genetic similarity found between the new — then as yet unnamed — Wuhan coronavirus and two coronaviruses previously found in bats in Zhoushan. The only Westerner among the report's 19 co-authors was British-born Professor Eddie Holmes of Sydney University.

'These data suggest that bats are a possible host for the viral reservoir of (the Wuhan virus),' said the Nature report. 'However, as a variety of animal species were for sale in the market when the disease was first reported, further studies are needed to determine the natural reservoir and any intermediate hosts.'

they say in the journal Annals of the American Thoracic Society.

Furthermore, if crops fail and livestock die due to increased flooding, droughts, heatwaves or pests, we may start hunting more animals for food.

One Ebola outbreak in 1996, for example, is believed to have been the result of villagers eating a chimpanzee.



The documentary stated that the two bat samples had been found by 'the People's Liberation Army' (in fact a scientific institute linked to the military).

### **The plot thickened.**

According to one ex U.S. Department of Defense scientist in the film — the Mail has discovered he also happened to be Executive Director of an organisation called the Global Alliance against Communist Propaganda — all the indications were that the new coronavirus was the result of 'reverse engineering' of the SARS virus.

Another expert argued 'it could not possibly be a natural mutation'.

The new coronavirus was not naturally occurring at all, they argued. It had been artificially 'manipulated' in a laboratory so that it could enter and destroy human cells.

And the person allegedly at the centre of this sinister manipulation was the Institute of Virology's famed 'bat woman', Shi Zengli.

British born Professor Simon Wain-Hobson of the Pasteur Institute in Paris was cited in the film as being 'deeply concerned' by her work. And why shouldn't he be, the lay viewer might ask? There was a sequence in the new virus's genetic make-up which, the film said, mimicked HIV, the virus which causes AIDS.

Was the Wuhan virus being developed in the Institute of Virology to create a 'bio-weapon?' Or a virus for which the Chinese had the only, highly lucrative, cure?

A second paper in Nature, submitted this February by Zengli and her team, was offered up by the film as further proof of malfeasance.

This new report revealed a faecal sample — RaTG13 — taken by Zengli's team in the bat cave in 2013 demonstrated 'an overall genome sequence identity of 96.2%' to the new coronavirus. It was its closest relative and formed 'a distinct lineage from other SARS-like viruses'.

Dr Zengli appeared to be waving a smoking gun.

She emphatically denies the cause of the virus was her laboratory work. She has admitted to Scientific American magazine that after reports of an outbreak she had been worried of an accidental escape of her material.

Then she had checked her lab samples against those taken from Covid-19 victims and been reassured they were not to blame.

### **What of other scientists mentioned in the film?**

Earlier this week Prof Wain-Hobson told the Mail the film 'suffers from a large number of problems, starting with things called facts. As far as we virologists can see this virus is natural,' he said. 'That means with the data we have that is available in the public domain. And that's it.'

Of the possibility of a lab escape Professor Wain-Hobson said: 'It is very possible that the Chinese haven't told World Health Organisation (WHO) and the West everything. And yes, they don't like the

U.S. and Trump. They want to be Number One on a small planet.

'But an engineered virus? There is nothing about this virus that indicates it's out of a lab. I say that with the info available and my appreciation of virus evolution.'

In a Twitter post Prof Holmes concurred: 'I think there are a number of really clear reasons to believe that this is not in any way a lab construct or a lab escape.'

### **Will CIA and MI6 crack Covid-19?**

That position is backed by senior U.S. scientists.

But then came a report this week in The Washington Post story based on those leaked diplomatic cables from 2018. The leak coincided, conveniently you may think, with President Trump's announcement that he was withdrawing financial support from the WHO which he felt was too cosy with Beijing.

After the story broke Prof Wain-Hobson told the Mail: 'Without knowing what was going on in the lab we cannot say more. As mentioned earlier, it doesn't look an engineered and others feel this way too, which is comforting. But this is because we're using the same data.'

Professor Holmes agreed with this view in a social media statement released on Thursday. 'There is no evidence that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 in humans, originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China,' he said.

'Coronaviruses like SARS-CoV-2 are commonly found in wildlife species and frequently jump to new hosts. This is also the most likely explanation for the origin of SARS-CoV-2.'

For its part China has even attempted to blame America. In October 2019 a team of U.S. athletes travelled to Wuhan for the World Military Games.

'It might be U.S. Army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! U.S. owe us an explanation!' a Chinese Foreign Minister said last month

Who can say definitively yet — if ever — whether infected bats were sold in the Huanan seafood market? Or other animals, such as pangolins, which might have served as carriers of the virus?

Credible voices in the Western scientific community maintain the evidence suggests the pandemic is a natural occurrence. But thanks to the inaction and secrecy of the Chinese authorities, Western intelligence services have now been tasked with determining the truth.