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SPECIAL REPORT

COVID-19 Origins: Investigating a "Complex and Grave Situation" Inside a Wuhan Lab

The Wuhan Institute of Virology, the cutting-edge biotech facility at the center of working suspicions about the pandemic's roots, has for years maintained that previously known samples of coronavirus discovered by its chief research scientist Zhengli Shi could not have caused the outbreak. Yet documents obtained by the Intercept show that the institute's scientists were warning of a "complex and grave situation" in its collection.

BY SAMUEL BROCK AND JEFF ROSE

MAY 2021

Reporter Jeff Rose (left) and Wuhan Institute of Virology Director Yuan Zhiming in Wuhan's Zhongnan Park, 2019.

"A Secret Language of Chinese Officialdom"

Shi's team has been at least partly off the hangtown—one that most users into live when that to the Wuhan Institute of Virology's chief research scientist Zhengli Shi,

"The CCP's Version of 'Cover Your Ass'"

By the fall of 2019, trouble was brewing at the WIV, according to documents leaked to Yu Yang Bird.

In September to late, the CCP's Xi Jinping Third Group convened the Beijing leaders of the WIV's parent organization, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), to conduct a two-month political inspection. The inspection was part of a broader media sweep of 31 state-supported institutions, according to the inspection results. The inspection team noted that the "Institute of Virology in Wuhan, Hubei Province, has been in a state of chaos, with poor management, low morale, and discipline in our personnel." They were also on the hunter in instances of unauthorized faculty to the CCP's Central Committee.

But the deceptive inferiority remained as long as ever. In that month of the WIV dispatches he analyzed, "We had an epic fish and those documents do. Or just about produce, produce, produce, like an actor preparing to take the stage before they're ready."

The questions were apt. Two and a half months earlier, according to the interim report, procurement officials at the WIV posted a call for bids on a government website seeking a costly air incinerator. The post was dated November 19, 2019, the very day that the visiting CAS safety official arrived to address a "complex and grave" situation there.

Prior to the wider adoption of HEPA filters in the 1950s, air incinerators were used to "superheat air coming from one place and going to another, in order to render them free of any microbial agent," said Bob Hawley, the former safety chief at the Army's Medical Research Institute of Infectious Disease. "If somehow the HEPA filter system failed, because there was a tear or breach...then your quick fix would be to bring in an air incinerator."

LeDuc says he never heard back from Yuan.

Toy Reid, who is now in Jakarta resuming his work for the State Department, says that WIV scientists are not "free agents" who can candidly share what occurred in their laboratories. "The WIV is under the thumb of the party state," he says. "Just because you can't see the political pressures they're under doesn't mean they're not under them. American scientists have been slow to realize that."

The Nonprofit at the Center of the COVID Lab-Leak Controversy →

Without the cooperation of China's government, we can't know exactly what did or didn't happen at the WIV, or what precise set of circumstances unleashed SARS-CoV-2. But the dispatches that Reid unearthed, when overlaid with additional evidence the Senate team compiled, point to a catastrophe in the making: political pressure to excel, inadequate resources to safeguard risky work, and an effort to skirt blame once a crisis hit.

As Reid sees it, the international community must continue to demand answers."If you just throw your hands in the air and say, 'We'll never know because it's China,' and just move on—if you take that defeatist approach to things—you can't prepare yourself to prevent something like this from happening in the future."

Clarification, October 28, 2022: *This story has been updated to clarify that Michael Worobey, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona, said two recent papers by him and his colleagues established "that a natural zoonotic origin is the only plausible scenario for the origin of the pandemic."*

Investigating COVID Origins

VF contributing editor and award-winning journalist Katherine Eban covers medical and scientific mayhem. Read the full series of her in-depth COVID reporting.

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Katherine Eban is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*, covering medical and scientific mayhem. An award-winning investigative journalist, she is the best-selling author of *Battle of Lies: The Inside Story of the Generic Drug Boom*. You can follow her on Twitter.

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Chasing scientific renown, grant dollars, and approval from Dr. Anthony Fauci, Peter Daszak transformed the environmental nonprofit EcoHealth Alliance into a government-funded sponsor of risky, cutting-edge virus research in both the U.S. and Wuhan, China. Drawing on more than 100,000 leaked documents, a *V.F.* investigation shows how an organization dedicated to preventing the next pandemic found itself suspected of helping start one.

BY KATHERINE EBAN

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