



PRC manipulation of research to raise doubt on COVID-19 origin

The PRC has sought to raise doubt about the origin of the virus that emerged from Wuhan, China since the virus began to spread beyond its borders. Beijing's attempts to sow disinformation to falsely suggest the virus originated in the United States or with the U.S. military have largely failed. However, Beijing continues to leverage its information network to promote false narratives that suggest the virus did not originate in Wuhan. PRC state-controlled propaganda media have extensive global reach and operate more than 300 bureaus around the world.

The United States is committed to transparent, open cooperation and sharing scientific data in a timely manner and will continue to contribute to the body of global knowledge about COVID-19. Understanding the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, will provide crucial information on how, when, and where the virus was transmitted to humans, which could provide information to prevent new pandemics.

Propaganda is most effective when wrapped in fact-based narratives, making it hard for audiences to separate out the false narrative from the rest of the seemingly accurate reporting. As the world awaits a COVID-19 vaccine, the GEC is monitoring as the PRC actively leverages its propaganda network to promote its vaccine candidates, again wrapping propaganda in fact-based coverage. This propaganda reporting nests within broader disinformation efforts to sow doubt and confusion about the virus and potential vaccines.

Below are examples of PRC distortions of scientific research to sow doubt that the virus originated in Wuhan.

EXAMPLE: 01

“Countries likely had virus earlier, CDC finds”

China Daily, December 02, 2020

Propaganda: According to *China Daily*, the Centers for Disease Control found evidence of infections in people across nine states in the U.S. as early as mid-December 2019. The article indicates that the PRC reported cases of what people then called, “pneumonia of unknown cause,” on December 27, 2019, and that the

WHO received a first report of clusters on January 3, 2020. The report suggests the new U.S. government study, along with other international scientific research from Europe, demonstrates a strong case for why the virus did not originate in Wuhan.

Truth: In the study cited by *China Daily*, researchers used retrospective SARS-CoV-2 serological testing of routine blood donations collected in nine U.S. states from December 13, 2019-January 17, 2020. Findings could suggest that the virus was present in the United States earlier than the first official diagnosis on January 20, 2020 but do not demonstrate this because it is possible that the antibodies detected in these studies were instead made in response to infection with another more common and widely present coronavirus. The study itself does not address whether COVID-19 originated outside of China. An important piece of information manipulation is how *China Daily* places the first diagnosis in China as being December 27, 2019. The study, “Clinical Features Patients Infected with 2019 Novel Coronavirus in

Wuhan, China,” published in *The Lancet* by PRC researchers, identified a patient with confirmed SARS-CoV-2 hospitalized in Wuhan with symptom onset as early as December 1, 2019. Additionally, the CDC study makes clear there is still much to learn, and these types of analysis are critical to understanding how SARS-CoV-2 spreads and how we can prevent future pandemics, including gaining a clear understanding of the origins of the virus. The CDC study is an example of how the United States values transparency and sharing of scientific data, and we urge all countries, including China, to be transparent and undertake similar retrospective analysis to better understand this pandemic and prepare for future outbreaks.

EXAMPLE: 02

“More Evidence Supports Multiple Virus Origins”

Global Times, November 29, 2020

Propaganda: According to the *Global Times*, a study conducted by the Institute of Neuroscience under the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), the Shanghai-based Fudan University, along with the University of Texas at Houston, suggests the Indian subcontinent might be the origin of the first COVID-19 trans-

mission. The article claims that the study, “The Early Cryptic Transmission and Evolution of SARS-CoV-2 in Human Hosts,” suggests SARS-CoV-2 likely originated in India in the summer of 2019 and suggests the research was soon to be published in *The Lancet* family of journals.

Truth: *Global Times* has since clarified that the study is in pre-publication and has not been peer reviewed, shifting its narrative that this study is just one of many that suggests the virus originated outside of China. Before the study was removed, State Department experts noted weaknesses in the methods and analy-

sis that would preclude any sort of interpretation of origin. It is worth noting that the study and media coverage come at a time of heightened geopolitical tensions between India and China.

EXAMPLE: 03

“No proof that COVID-19 originated in Wuhan: Peter Forster”

CGTN, April 12, 2020

Propaganda: PRC officials and state-controlled media suggested the findings of a Cambridge University study about the genetic history of the COVID-19 disease proved the novel coronavirus originated in the United States. Several state-controlled media outlets posted manipulated versions of these findings on Twitter

and their news websites. Later, the Chinese Ambassador to Thailand cited this study on the embassy’s official Facebook page. Moreover, a Twitter account network amplified this message to global audiences.

Truth: These PRC officials and state-controlled media falsified the findings of this study to claim its authors proved the novel coronavirus originated in the United States. Instead, the study demonstrated the power of certain genetic mapping tools to trace the spread of various viral mutations in China, Europe, and the United States; it did not provide comment on the SARS-

CoV-2 origin. The GEC engaged Cambridge University on this topic and the university noted its disappointment with how an interview with one researcher resulted in inaccurate reporting to support CCP false narratives that COVID-19 emerged from outside of China.

EXAMPLE: 04

“The pathogen could have come into China through imported frozen seafood or meat products and their packaging”

Wu Zunyou, China CDC’s chief epidemiologist on *People’s Daily*

Propaganda: On November 25, 2020, *People’s Daily*, the official Chinese Communist party newspaper, tweeted that, “All available evidence suggests that COVID-19 did not start in central China’s Wuhan, but may have entered into China through imported frozen food products and their packaging.”

Subsequently, the *People’s Daily* account furthered this narrative in a November 30, 2020, tweet stating that, “China’s General Administration of Customs has suspended import declaration of an Argentinian beef producer after COVID-19 was detected on its packaging of imported frozen beef products.”

Truth: A Reuters article indicates that Chinese claims citing frozen food packaging as a risk of spreading COVID-19 are unique amongst the global trade community. “[China] has stepped up inspections and made a spate of announcements that the virus was found on chilled food packaging, prompting rejections of goods and complaints from exporters.” These Chinese claims directly contradict the World Health Organization web-

site which states, “Coronaviruses need a live animal or human host to multiply and survive and cannot multiply on the surface of food packages. It is not necessary to disinfect food packaging materials, but hands should be properly washed after handling food packages and before eating.” In fact, fomite (contact) transmission of the virus appears to be extremely rare and is NOT a major route of transmission.

EXAMPLE: 05

“Virus found spreading in Italy in 2019”

China Daily, November 18, 2020

Propaganda: As the World Health Organization assembles international experts to study the origin of the novel coronavirus by first focusing on China, a study shows that the virus had existed in Italy months before it was first detected in China. The study by the Milan-based National Cancer Institute, published last week in its scientific magazine *Tumori Journal*, shows that 11.6 percent of 959 blood samples from healthy volunteers enrolled in

a lung cancer screening trial between September 2019 and March 2020 had developed antibodies consistent with exposure to the novel coronavirus well before February. In a second study by University of Siena for the same research, four cases were positive for the antibodies in the first week of October. This research presumably means that they were infected in September, according to Giovanni Apolone, a co-author of the study.

Truth: Speaking at a news conference in Milan, Giovanni Apolone, scientific director of National Cancer Institute (INT) and a co-author of the study, stressed that the findings of the study, “simply document that the epidemic in China was not detected in time.” The antibody test used in the study was designed in-house and never validated by other researchers. Outside researchers have also urged that further analysis is needed given that different antibody tests are necessary to confirm that the findings do not stem from antibodies triggered by another virus,

a risk highlighted by other recent reports that have shown that seasonal coronaviruses can elicit cross-neutralizing antibodies. In other words, even if the findings of the study are accurate, it is premature to assume that exposure to SARS-CoV-2 triggered the production of the antibodies detected. More research is needed to determine to which virus the subjects of the study were exposed. The WHO said on November 16, that they are reviewing the results of the study and contacting the authors to arrange for further analysis of the samples.