On the 5-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic

New York Times resurrects debunked Wuhan Lab Lie

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21 March 2025

In their commemoration of the five-year anniversary of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the *New York Times* has chosen to revive the thoroughly debunked Wuhan Lab conspiracy theory, which claims that Chinese scientists unleashed the SARS-CoV-2 virus upon the world, killing tens of millions of people.

In two opinion pieces published by the *Times*—one co-authored by virologists W. Ian Lipkin and Ralph Baric, the other by sociologist Zeynep Tufekci—the paper denigrates and casts doubt upon the latest groundbreaking coronavirus research by Dr. Shi Zhengli, the world-leading expert on bat coronaviruses who works at the Wuhan lab, revealing far more about their own geopolitical agenda than scientific inquiry.

Rather than engaging with the substantive findings of Shi's team—whose work at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) identified a novel bat coronavirus (HKU5-CoV-2) with zoonotic potential—the *Times*' contributors fixate on unsubstantiated bio-safety concerns.

The study, published in *Cell* on February 21, 2025, details how HKU5-CoV-2 binds to human ACE2 receptors, a trait shared with SARS-CoV-2 but distinct from other Merbecoviruses that typically use DPP4. While the research underscores the urgent need for global pandemic surveillance, the *Times* instead amplifies conspiratorial rhetoric about laboratory risks, effectively laundering Trump-era xenophobia through a veneer of scientific skepticism.

The fact that the *Times* editorial board has used the fifth anniversary of the pandemic to besmirch a critical scientific report that warns of the real and present dangers of pandemics is revealing. All the while, the Trump administration is savaging the institutions of science and public health, as H5N1 "bird flu" threatens to become the next pandemic. Moreover, that the *Times* has become the conduit for such debased attacks on essential scientific inquiry only confirms the smooth transition the Democrats have afforded Trump in his dictatorial pursuits.

The Cell study itself represents a methodological leap forward. By isolating HKU5-CoV-2 and testing its infectivity in human organoids, Shi's team demonstrated three critical findings:

• The virus's ACE2-binding capability emerged naturally through recombination events in bat populations.

• Its replication efficiency in human cells remains orders of magnitude lower than that of SARS-CoV-2.

• Antivirals effective against COVID-19 show comparable activity against HKU5-CoV-2.

These results directly counter lab-leak proponents' central claim—that SARS-CoV-2's spike protein "perfection" necessitated human engineering[18][19].

Tufekci's March 16 op-ed epitomizes bad-faith scientific criticism. The axis of her tirade was centered on the following:

> Sounds like the kind of research that should be conducted — if at all — with the very highest safety protocols, as W. Ian Lipkin and Ralph Baric discussed in a recent guest essay. But if you scroll all the way down to Page 19 of the journal article and squint, you learn that the scientists did all this under what they call "BSL-2 plus" conditions, a designation that isn't standardized and that Baric and Lipkin say is "insufficient for work with potentially dangerous respiratory viruses." If just one lab worker unwittingly inhaled the virus and got infected, there's no telling what the impact could be on Wuhan, a city of millions, or the world.
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> You'd think that by now we'd have learned it's not a good idea to test possible gas leaks by lighting a match. And you'd hope that prestigious scientific journals would have learned not to reward such risky research.
>
> Why haven't we learned our lesson? Maybe because it's hard to admit that this research is risky now and to take the requisite steps to keep us safe without also admitting it was always risky. And that perhaps we were misled on purpose.

Tufekci's assertion that researchers "squinted" to hide biosafety details collapses under scrutiny: the *Cell* paper explicitly states clearly that work adhered to China's national BSL-2 standards with enhanced negative pressure—protocols consistent with CDC guidelines for wild-type coronaviruses not yet proven infectious to humans.

The study was approved by their review boards, as is customary in the United States and any other country conducting such research. It is important to note that not all countries agree on the BSL levels required for studying various pathogens. In some

instances, the US uses less stringent bio-safety levels than other countries.

Later, in an attempt to defend her own lack of objective rationality, Tufekci tries to denigrate the entire collaborative international effort by leading scientists in the field who have sought to identify the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has produced numerous publications. Each time, the results of these studies have positioned the Wuhan seafood market and the wild-animal trade as central to the outbreak of the pandemic. One must question how Tufekci can support her claim when she states, "To this day, there is no strong scientific evidence ruling out a lab leak or proving that the virus arose from human-animal contact in that seafood market. The few papers cited for market origin were written by a small, overlapping group of authors, including those who didn't inform the public about how serious their doubts had been."

Tufekci's audacity to dismiss all objective scientific evidence and belittle the efforts of dedicated scientists who have continued their work despite intense global scrutiny is both conceited and mean-spirited. Her assertion that China and Chinese scientists are leading the world toward another research-related pandemic is mere fearmongering that appeals to the lowest sentiments. Her entire argument is irrational and unhinged, aligning closely with the broader social crisis that has enveloped bourgeois society.

As previously stated, the first essay by Lipkin and Baric is more nuanced and therefore potentially more misleading and dangerous.

Lipkin, a prominent epidemiologist and virologist at Columbia University, is internationally recognized for his work on various infectious diseases, including the West Nile virus, and has expressed significant concerns over gain-of-function research. Baric, a distinguished professor in the Department of Epidemiology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is a leading expert on coronaviruses.

Baric has previously collaborated with the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) and has voiced concerns about the potential for a lab leak. His testimony before Congress, which stated that conducting certain research on bat viruses at the WIV under BSL-2 conditions was "irresponsible" due to the potential risks involved, provided both Republicans and Democrats with ammunition to criticize Dr. Peter Daszak and EcoHealth Alliance.

Aware that his opinions would likely be used to undermine Daszak and his organization, which has spent decades building a global network of researchers to address the increasing threat of pandemics, Baric chose to throw him to the wolves. In a very tangible sense, the attack on Daszak has been an assault on science, epitomizing the response of the ruling elites to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last five years.

Irrespective of Baric's opinions, research is conducted through consensus and the broad expertise of many working in the field, which establishes guidance for such work. It is this guidance, in the form of regulations and supervisory bodies, that determines the methodology of these scientific inquiries and adherence to them. Should various regulatory bodies consider more stringent measures necessary, these issues then need to be addressed in hearings and committees within the scientific communities. Indeed, one must ask why Lipkin and Baric are turning to the *New York Times* to voice their concerns when these should be raised through appropriate channels within their discipline.

From the outset, the political content of their essay is evident. They write, "As virus experts, we're committed to research that uncovers pandemic threats and helps protect people from them. But we are concerned about how some scientists are experimenting with viruses in ways that could put all of us in harm's way."

Their guest essay guides readers to misconstrue significant research conducted by Chinese scientists and sway them towards believing the unfounded claims of the lab-leak conspiracy.

By stating that the HKU5-CoV-2 research was conducted in a BSL-2 plus lab, which is not formally recognized by the CDC, they imply that safety protocols were not followed and that the virus was handled carelessly, contrary to existing regulations. This was not the case. Their portrayal of HKU5-CoV-2 as comparable to MERS is misleading, as HKU5-CoV-2 is a novel virus that has never been observed in humans and is poorly adapted to humans at present. Finally, Baric and Lipkin's essay could lead readers to mistakenly believe that genetic manipulation was involved in this study, which was not the case.

Despite the political pressures that compel scientists to make certain accommodations with those in power, it is crucial to question Baric and Lipkin: What rules have the Chinese scientists violated? Have they in any way misrepresented their work or overstated the threats posed by their findings?

Science is being undermined and replaced by anti-science; public health is being dismantled and replaced with anti-public health. The entire culture of science and the history that has promoted longevity and well-being is under threat. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International have, for more than five years, covered every aspect of the pandemic, warning the working class about the dangers posed by capitalism's response to it. The world's working class must heed these warnings as we face even more dangers in the coming years from climate change and unchecked pathogens, both recognized and novel. It is the working class that will bear the brunt of the capitalists' malign neglect.