

Blame, a documentary film: The defense of science and scientists against the Wuhan-Lab leak conspiracy

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“Disinformation has become a deliberate instrument to attack and discredit scientists and health professionals for political gains.”

— *The Lancet*, January 18, 2025

On April 18, 2025, the second Trump administration codified the Wuhan lab-leak conspiracy into official state policy. This is the politically engineered claim that COVID-19 began as an accidental escape from the Wuhan [China] Institute of Virology.

Donald Trump weaponized the theory five years earlier at the outset of the pandemic, but it has since gained bipartisan traction, with Democrats under Joe Biden aiding its spread. This allegation fuels anti-Chinese sentiment and lays the groundwork for war, as proven by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s warning at the Shangri-La Dialogue that China seeks to “become a hegemonic power in Asia.”

Christian Frei’s *Blame*, which premiered April 4, 2025, at the 56th Visions du Réel [Visions of Reality] film festival in Nyon, Switzerland, arrives as a vital rebuttal. The documentary confronts these weaponized conspiracies head-on—exposing their devastating consequences: the defunding of scientific research, mass layoffs and the public vilification of scientists. *Blame* is both a defense of science and a searing indictment of the political assault on public health.

Frei tackles the lab-leak narrative with precision, emotional depth and a carefully constructed counter-narrative. At its core are three scientists—Linfa Wang, Zhengli Shi, and Peter Daszak—whose decades-long collaboration in virus discovery and pandemic prevention becomes the target of political scapegoating and geopolitical maneuvering.

Blame required more than journalistic rigor—it demanded courage. Filming began weeks after the Wuhan outbreak, in politically fraught environments. Frei gained intimate access to his subjects and constructed a narrative not just of what happened, but why it matters. He draws a direct line between the lab-leak conspiracy and other politically charged disinformation campaigns, arguing that both rely on the same architecture: the rejection of complexity in favor of blame. Truth becomes the enemy.

“Complexity loses against conspiracy,” Frei writes. But

Blame does not concede that loss. Instead, it meticulously reconstructs the facts while preserving the emotional stakes. Through archival footage, fieldwork and deeply personal interviews, the work serves as both a microscope and mirror: examining the roots of zoonotic pandemics while reflecting on an official culture increasingly hostile to scientific inquiry.

Structured in four chapters—“The Age of Pandemics,” “Cassandra’s Curse,” “The Silent Lab” and “Blame Game”—the film transforms itself from scientific chronicle to evidentiary case. Frei opens with a drone’s descent into a vast bat cave—a metaphorical and literal plunge into the origins of pandemic threats. Here, we meet Wang, Shi, and Daszak not as controversial figures, but as scientists whose work on zoonotic spillover helped identify bats as coronavirus reservoirs. They warned of global vulnerabilities, but the world, largely, ignored them.

Then, December 31, 2019. A novel virus emerges in Wuhan. Shi races to her lab, identifies the RaTG13 sequence, and publishes findings within weeks. Frei presents this period with urgency, capturing the pressure and chaos of early response. But her discovery—a digital sequence unrelated to SARS-CoV-2—becomes the seed of accusation. What was meant as a scientific contribution is twisted into suspicion.

The shift is stark. Visual fragmentation mirrors social disarray: shuttered streets in China, the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, the closure of the Huanan Seafood Market. Into this atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, conspiracy entrepreneurs like right-winger Steve Bannon seize on the claims of Dr. Li-Meng Yan, a virologist from Hong Kong, to push an anti-China agenda. When the Trump administration cuts EcoHealth’s National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding, the film registers a pivot: science is no longer inquiry; it has become politicized terrain.

Frei resists the urge to rebut soundbites with soundbites. Instead, he builds a forensic timeline using primary sources: internal reports, peer-reviewed research, WHO communications. The WHO’s Phase One mission to Wuhan becomes a critical moment. Daszak, part of the team, recounts visiting the market where wildlife was sold. The film intercuts testimony with market footage—slaughtering stalls, animal cages and soiled countertops. It is no longer a conjecture, but visual documentation.

The film commendably gives weight to work by evolutionary virologists and renowned researchers Michael Worobey and

Kristian Andersen, who used location data gathered by the WHO Phase One investigation to identify the market's southwest corner—where raccoon dogs were kept—as a likely outbreak origin. Their studies are not offered as final verdicts but as examples of the scientific process. Frei insists that science is not storytelling. It is structure, revision and accumulation of evidence. The process attempts to approximate objective truth with each iteration. And it is to the Huanan seafood market where the evidence for the COVID pandemic's origin leads us.

The emotional and thematic apex arrives in “The Silent Lab.” Frei brings us to the rainforests of Thailand, where bat caves teem with life. Daszak is joined by blogger Philipp Markolin—whose recent book *Lab Leak Fever*, published in Germany, explores both the science and the conspiracies surrounding the pandemic—and journalist Jane Qiu, an independent investigator recognized for her deeply nuanced reporting and the only journalist to have interviewed Zhengli Shi twice. Together, they follow field researchers who collect guano and tissue samples, reminding viewers that pandemic research is not abstract—it's physical, painstaking and often dangerous. “There are no bad bats,” the narration says. “Nature does not know these terms.”

In this section, Frei also turns his lens on the toll the conspiracy has taken. “How did we get here?” Daszak describes receiving death threats and needing police protection. His frustration and anguish are evident. Qiu, torn between her sympathy for Shi and frustration with Daszak's public persona, criticizes his “polarizing” communication, suggesting it may have exacerbated attacks. Furthermore, she worries the film will be seen as another piece of propaganda. Markolin urges reflection and objectivity. These are not scenes of consensus, but of reckoning. It's a rare moment of honest disagreement among allies, and Frei captures it without editorializing, trusting the viewer to process the nuance.

Most compelling, in a video call, Shi, unable to leave China, speaks with quiet anguish: “Nothing sinister, irresponsible, or secretive was done in my lab. The ruling principle should not be, ‘Guilty until proven innocent.’” Her voice shakes. This is not evasion; it is heartbreak. Frei then, in defense of Shi, circles back to the Mojiang mine and RaTG13—the supposed “smoking gun.” He clarifies it was a digital sequence, too genetically distant to be relevant. “A digital sequence cannot escape from a lab,” the narrator says. In this one simple line, he dispels years of viral speculation, and makes the injuries caused by these dangerous conspiracies visually palpable.

The final chapter, “Blame Game,” shifts to Washington, D.C., where Daszak prepares to testify before Congress. The setting is sterile, the tone theatrical. Frei juxtaposes the hearing with a voiceover by *LA Times* columnist Michael Hiltzik: “A clown show... spittle-flecked posturing by members who had no idea what they were talking about.” It would be funny if it weren't so dangerous. Over two years of witch hunts against scientists and the promotion of the lab-leak theory—despite the absence of a single piece of concrete evidence—have not been the work of Republicans alone. The Democrats, far from resisting, have marched in lockstep, lending bipartisan legitimacy to a campaign that has undermined public trust in science and endangered those who practice it.

Frei's camera doesn't flinch. He captures not only the fury unleashed by these buffoons of lawmakers, but the fatigue on Daszak's face—the toll of being turned into a symbol. The attacks are personal, but their implications are structural. If scientists can be dragged before Congress based on misinformation, what of science? What kind of science will go undone? The image of a congratulatory shaking of hands by the triumphant fascist Trump and antivaccine zealot Robert F. Kennedy Jr. provides a stark reply.

On the train back to New York, Daszak rides alone. Shi's voice returns, comparing the spectacle to Cultural Revolution show trials. “Shouldn't scientists decide what science gets funded?” she asks. “It's anti-China geopolitics,” Daszak replies. Quiet. Final.

By film's end, the EcoHealth Alliance is in collapse. Their funding is gone. Lawsuits loom. Daszak warns again: there are an estimated 800,000 unknown viruses in wildlife that could pose risks to humans. The message is chilling: the very systems designed to prevent the next pandemic are being dismantled not for failure—but for political inconvenience.

Blame is not just a documentary. It is a field report. A case study. A moral reckoning. Frei offers no melodrama, no easy villains. His subjects are not saints or martyrs, but scientists—professionals committed to understanding and protecting life. But the political maelstrom surrounding the lab-leak theory has left them battered. Zhengli Shi remains confined to China, her reputation tarnished by suspicion. Peter Daszak faces threats to his safety, financial ruin and the dismantling of his life's work. Beyond them, countless scientists now second-guess every research proposal, haunted by the fear that their work might be misrepresented, their motives questioned, their careers upended. The damage is not just personal; it cuts into the foundation of scientific inquiry itself.

Frei's great achievement is that he restores complexity without losing clarity. Each frame, each quote, each scientific detail builds toward a singular point: the greatest threat to public health may not be a virus, but the systems that distort truth for political gain. By the end, one thing is clear. The scandal is not in a Chinese lab. It's in the halls of power where ignorance is weaponized, and science is silenced. *Blame* is not merely a defense of scientists; it is a defense of the very idea that truth still matters.

As one of the few voices in cinema that has come forth to challenge the political conspiracy, it is a remarkable achievement and deserves wide distribution. *Blame* is presently touring the festival circuit and expected for wider release in Fall 2025.



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