Q & A

Jasper Becker on How to Deal With China Post-Covid

The journalist talks about his new Wuhan book, the "quite damaging" circumstantial evidence and demanding reciprocity with China.

BY DAVID BARBOZA — OCTOBER 31, 2021

Jasper Becker is a British journalist who has written for the Guardian, The Spectator and The South China Morning Post. He has written about China and Asia for more than 30 years. He is the author, most recently, of Made in China: Wuhan, Covid and the Quest for Biotech Supremacy. His previous books include Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine, and City of Heavenly Tranquility: Beijing in the History of China. What follows in a lightly edited Q&A with the author.

Jasper Becker.
Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: In your book, *Made in China: Wuhan, Covid and the Quest for Biotech Supremacy*, you went beyond Wuhan and Covid to explore biowarfare, SARS, and the World Health Organization. Can you tell me a little about the origins of this book?

A: It started off with a Cambridge University think tank, which brought together a number of people who had been looking at the history of disease and disease control in China. They asked the question, "Why did this happen in Wuhan?" This was quite early on in the pandemic, and there were a lot of people who had done a considerable amount of research on the history of the bubonic plague in China in the 1920s and the efforts of successive Chinese administrations to tackle public health, particularly contagious diseases.

Then I got to thinking about what is so special about Wuhan. And I didn't have very good answers. So I began to research the history of Wuhan and the Wuhan Institute of Virology and what its purpose was, and its connection to the pandemic. I wrote a proposal pulling together the history of this subject, putting the whole thing in a Chinese context and explaining the history of virology and Chinese public health control, which is a huge thing in China for two reasons. First, China was a center of germ warfare. The Japanese used it [germ warfare] against the Chinese during the 1930s and 1940s and conducted horrible experiments in Manchuria. And later, there was a huge controversy when China accused the United States and its allies of using germ warfare against its forces during the Korean War. As a result, there has been an obsession in China with germ warfare, public sanitation and health. This became a huge political campaign by the Chinese Communist Party. The Party has always been able to mobilize huge numbers of people to eradicate disease in China, quite successfully. And more recently, it's been accused of having its own germ warfare program. It has launched all of these public-private partnerships and commercial projects to conquer new biotechnology industries. So what I wanted to do is not to come up with some amazing scoop about what really went on in Wuhan, but to try to

explain how things evolved and why this took place in Wuhan and what that means for understanding biotechnology and disease control. I also wanted to answer a basic question: was this actually a man-made disaster, and did the Chinese Communist Party control the spread of the disease?

In the book, you suggest that Covid's emergence in China is not so surprising. Is that right?

A Chinese propaganda poster from the Korean War that reads: "Vaccinate everybody, to crush the germ warfare of American imperialism!" Between 1951-1952, China, North Korea, and the USSR alleged that the U.S. conducted a campaign of biological warfare during the Korean War, a claim that has been largely discredited by historians. *Credit: Wikimedia Common*

Well, what I was at great pains to explain was the context in which this kind of research goes on. The history of virology is quite short. And there's an enormous amount that we still don't understand about viruses. It's only in recent years that we have been trying to get a grip on this science as new technologies enable us to understand it. And one of the special things about China is that it's currently believed to be the source of a number of pandemics in the 20th century, and in fact, going back to Roman times.

One of the theories that people are now investigating is why a lot of dangerous viruses have a zoonotic origin. They have jumped over from animals to humans, and researchers think China is the origin of many of these pandemics, at least for the last 100 years, and possibly more. If you go back 10,000 years, man domesticated chickens and pigs in China, perhaps earlier than anywhere else. And so a lot of the thinking is that influenza viruses have come from China, because there are an awful lot of people, who, for a long time have been in very close proximity to domesticated fowl, wild fowl, pigs and other animals. Therefore, if you want to avert a future pandemic, you have to bring China into the global monitoring system for new influenza viruses, which are emerging in other domesticated animals, like chickens, pigs, ducks and so on. Whether you're talking about this pandemic or any other, China is crucial to understanding the history of virology, and how we live with potentially dangerous new pathogens.

Yes, China does have lots of pigs and chickens, and wildlife markets, but we can also find those in other parts of Asia, Africa, and so on. Why is China unique, or why would a virus be more likely to emerge there? Is there a clear case to be made that China is more central to the emergence of flu -like viruses?

One reason we don't have a very clear picture of whether China really has a special role is because during the Mao era, there wasn't a great deal of research done inside the country. China only joined the international monitoring community about 10 or 15 years ago. One of the things that people in the World Health Organization and the science community have been trying to do is to answer the question: How do you prevent another Spanish flu pandemic, which killed between 50 and 100 million people? And the obvious answer is you have to bring China onboard and get it involved in the monitoring and surveillance of all kinds of infectious diseases, particularly these influenza viruses. As you know from living in China, everybody gets some horrible flu virus in the winter. And it usually goes away by the spring. But many of these viruses spread around the world. So there is a belief that if you can come to grips with things in China, you're sort of halfway there.

My question was really trying to understand why there is a belief that China is where so many of these viruses emerge. Do you know?

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	65
BIRTHPLACE	London, U.K.
PERSONAL LIFE	Married to Antoneta Becker

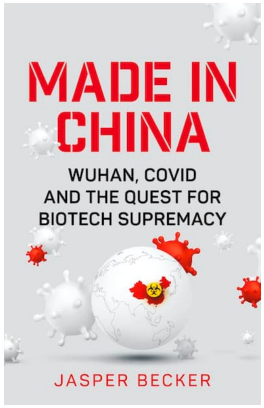
There isn't a good theory, because a lot of the research hasn't been done. The only theory they've got is that in the Yangtze River delta region and the Pearl River Delta, there are unusually high concentrations of wild and domesticated animals. There is also one theory that there may be some inherited resistance to viruses among Chinese and others in the region because of the early adoption in China of agricultural practices such as growing rice, and having lots of chickens and ducks and pigs living in your house. Therefore, if you're going to get a new variation, it's going to happen in China, because that's where it has to be successful first, before it can go somewhere else. Neither of these explanations are entirely satisfying, but that's where we are.

So there's really no consensus on how these viruses have developed, right?

There's a minority school of thought that all sorts of viruses do not come from people in agriculture, but from people who are kind of hunter-gatherers, killing wild animals in the jungles of central Africa or in Southeast Asia and eating wild monkeys or bats or strange creatures. This developed out of the research into the source of the AIDS pandemic. They eventually traced the source of this retrovirus to people consuming monkeys or buying products in wildlife markets. The EcoHealth Alliance, the people who sponsored a lot of the research in China, were strong adherents of this theory. And so when you had the first SARS epidemic in 2002 to 2003, this was traced to wildlife markets and civet cats in Guangdong Province. On the strength of that, they started looking more actively into the role of these wildlife markets, and the consumption of exotic animals in China. That's how the whole interest in these bats developed and how this funding came about. This group of people pushed very hard to find out what other potentially dangerous viruses might be lurking in some bat cave or jungle. And secondly, to figure out if there were such a new coronavirus, how we would deal with it.

Has there been any conclusion about the SARS virus, which hit China in 2003?

The whole story is still shrouded in mystery because it suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and it has never reappeared. It's escaped from laboratories a couple of times, and they haven't actually found the real source of this animal. So somehow it got passed from bats, and somehow adapted to infect people. But it's never reappeared. Again, it's a very unsatisfactory story.



Becker's book (Hurst 2021) explores what we know and still don't know about the origins of Covid-19. *Credit: Hurst*

I thought the authorities had traced the origins back to a wildlife market, or a seafood market in southern China — like Covid-19; that there was some jump from animals to humans…

No, the viruses they study are basically adapted for bats. And somehow they have to evolve through an intermediate animal to be able to infect us. And you don't actually catch these infections by eating wild animals, necessarily. So they fingered the civet cats, because they were being held in the cages where people contracted the first SARS virus. But they haven't found the SARS virus in civet cats around Asia. So, somehow the whole story doesn't really stack up.

Can we turn to Wuhan? Did you come to any conclusions about the origins of the Covid-19?

I didn't put forward a definitive answer to that. There is a long history of zoonotic transmission of viruses. And it's certainly true that it can take a long time to understand how

that works. And generally, nearly always, most of these viruses come from contact with a sheep, goat, donkey, camel or a horse or pig. This is normally the way you would bet. If you're going to say, how do we start? Let's look for some animals. So it's not unexpected that most scientists think that way.

What I also explained in the book is that there's an enormous amount of circumstantial evidence, an obvious trail of grant applications of research papers published inside China, and in prestigious journals outside China, which show they were developing chimeric viruses. And they chose to do this, or were encouraged to do this, by collaborating with the French and Americans. These chimeric viruses are basically a kind of cut and paste virus, where you try and create a new hybrid virus, and then you passage that either in a petri dish or between animals, to study how it would evolve; you go from infecting bats to infecting mice, and then infecting human beings. Normally these infections go through the airways. So they were definitely doing this research. There's also a very good paper trail showing that they were doing this research in Level 2 or Level 3 laboratory conditions, which means that they weren't very strict. These studies weren't being done at the Level 4 labs, which is what they had in Wuhan. This research wasn't just being done at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, but at other institutions in Wuhan and other places in China. And there may be more that we don't know about, because Wuhan is the center of the biopharmaceutical industry in China. So we don't know everything they do there. The reason people are highly suspicious is that the technology to develop chimeric viruses, a new virus, is essentially what all bioweapons are about. You want to have something that the enemy is not prepared for, and that you have prepared vaccines to protect yourself against. And of course, you do this in secrecy. But essentially, the know-how and the technology and the purpose is the same. That technology used to require the budget of a superpower — billions of dollars. Now, it can be done with thousands of dollars. So it's extremely alarming. Scientists call this "gain of function" research. They argue about the definition, but there was very strong opposition to these kinds of "gain of function" research in the United States and other countries. Some scientists tried to get this banned.

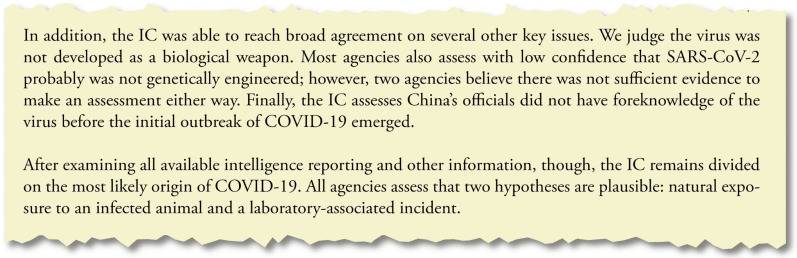
> **In a court of law, you can go down for murder if the jury is convinced by your circumstantial evidence. This is circumstantial evidence that is quite damaging.**

This was temporarily suspended for public grants in America, but it carried on in China. And when you look at the story of how the Chinese behaved after Covid broke out, it looks like they've clumsily tried to hide whatever it was they were doing. Under normal circumstances, they would just open the log books and records and say, "Hey let's all look at what we've been doing." This would show where they made a mistake, or that there was nothing dangerous going on. But they chose not to do that, and to hide various things. In a court of law, you can go down for murder if the jury is convinced by your circumstantial evidence. This is circumstantial evidence that is quite damaging. And the more that comes out about it the worse it looks.

It seems like the early parts of your book offer circumstantial evidence that China has a bioweapons program, and that the country's scientists were experimenting in the Wuhan area. This theory has been around for awhile, and some consider it a conspiracy theory. But it appears you wanted to build the book around this possibility, that China may have been building a bioweapons program or experimenting with one and that the virus accidentally leaked out. Is that right?

The point about this is not that this was per se a biological weapon. But this technology is extremely dangerous because it's dual use. And the onus is on China to come and tell us what exactly they were up to; and to do what is normal in the scientific world and and reveal

their lab notes, health and safety records and, and so on, and allow scientists to be interviewed. It's no more complicated than that; it would immediately give us a clearer picture. The second suspicious thing is the close collaboration with the EcoHealth people led by Peter Daszak. They have been extremely reluctant to come forth with any helpful information. So it looks like they've got things to hide. And the bombshell was that they did apply to this DARPA program to do more "gain of function" research, a much bigger program with the Wuhan Virology Institute. And they wanted to do experiments with bats. They wanted to use the MERS virus, which is a pretty horrific virus. And this is, in retrospect, a crazy kind of scheme they had. Why did they keep silent about this while it sort of leaked out?



In addition, the IC was able to reach broad agreement on several other key issues. We judge the virus was not developed as a biological weapon. Most agencies also assess with low confidence that SARS-CoV-2 probably was not genetically engineered; however, two agencies believe there was not sufficient evidence to make an assessment either way. Finally, the IC assesses China's officials did not have foreknowledge of the virus before the initial outbreak of COVID-19 emerged.

After examining all available intelligence reporting and other information, though, the IC remains divided on the most likely origin of COVID-19. All agencies assess that two hypotheses are plausible: natural exposure to an infected animal and a laboratory-associated incident.

On Friday, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released the U.S. intelligence community's assessment of the origins of Covid. Although intelligence agencies disagreed on a number of points, the report found broad agreement on key issues, including that Covid was not developed as a biological weapon. *Credit: Director of National Intelligence*

DARPA is part of the U.S. military. Why would an agency linked to the Pentagon be working with China on such a project?

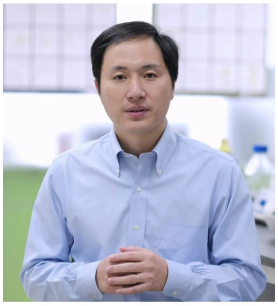
This stuff lends itself to conspiracy theories, because most of the research grants, or at least the half that the EcoHealth Alliance has been getting in the United States, have come directly or indirectly, from the U.S. military. For a long time, the U.S. military has been very interested in protecting its troops from dangerous viruses when they're in the field. And so, they're often sent to strange places with strange diseases. And so they've been funding a lot of this research. So you've got to think, "Well, if the U.S. military is funding research into finding and hunting for new, deadly viruses around the world, why shouldn't the Chinese military be doing the same?" I mean, it stands to reason, doesn't it?

Why would the U.S. and China be collaborating on this?

Well, military research into finding new weapons is done in secrecy. It's not an open source collaboration. But if you want to make advances in science, it depends on having an open and free sharing of information. That's how we build on our knowledge of things like dangerous viruses. It's not about trying to shut China out of advances in biotechnology or punishing scientists. The trouble is that one of the things I described in the section about the first SARS virus is that the Chinese Communist Party responded to the pandemic, first of all, by lying about it, and covering it up. And then they admitted it and then, after admitting it, they issued a whole bunch of regulations, tightening the secrecy of reporting of all dangerous disease episodes. So they actually doubled down on the secrecy which exists anyway in China. And that's why when this new virus outbreak took place, everyone was under very strict control rules, that they shouldn't speak to the public or to scientists around the world. So they immediately controlled all this information, which is just plain wrong and crazy.

Can you say something about China's ambitions in biotechnology? Some of the most promising young biotech companies are emerging in China, right?

Yes, this is very interesting because the Chinese government has put a great deal of money into the sector, and it wants to be a world leader in biotechnology. It's been begging, buying, borrowing and stealing scientific know-how in order to do that because there is an enormous political and economic gain to be made here. If you can master this technology, you can create new plants; you can create new microbes; you can create new domesticated animals and you can cure many diseases or prevent them; and you can manipulate the genes of people; so it's an enormously powerful technology. They've thrown enormous resources at that in order to get ahead. They try to do things which other countries have found dangerous, and need close supervision. So I go through the record of some of the dangerous experiments that they've been doing. And these artificially created monkeys, babies and some strange sheep and pigs with extra vertebrae — all kinds of horrible accidents have happened. There is a certain recklessness and lack of regulation in China. So in the context of this story, it is entirely plausible that they were doing something that wouldn't have been permitted elsewhere in the world.



Chinese biophysicist He Jiankui, who announced in November 2018 he had successfully edited the genomes of human embryos. 122 Chinese scientists signed a letter denouncing his claims as a "huge blow to the global reputation and development of Chinese science." He was later jailed for three years for "illegal medical practice." Beijing also tightened its laws around gene-editing research in 2019. *Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

Wait, I thought China was producing cutting edge research in biotechnology, and as you can see from our recent article, Biotech's Borders, making great advances by hiring internationally. Isn't that true?

Regarding China begging, borrowing, and stealing biotech know how — there are several chapters [in the book] which describe this in detail. And the point is that actually, they are ahead of the world in many areas and sometimes this is because they are doing things that are banned elsewhere.

In the book, you cite groups of CRISPR researchers doing gene editing on large colonies of monkeys; and cloning a gene edited monkey "on the way to create populations of genetically identical primates that might revolutionize biomedical research." There is also a project that used CRISPR gene editing techniques on 86 human embryos — some of this for cancer research. Is this what you mean by documentary proof of strange experiments?

There is quite a considerable paper trail of these dangerous experiments. So it's no secret. And, we know that in many fields China has a very poor safety record. And after a while, they've corrected some of that. They used to, for instance, have a terrible safety record in aviation, during a period when they expanded domestic flights. And they managed to get to grips with that. They have a pretty good record now. And so when you have new fields like biotechnology, it's quite predictable that they are going to do a lot of things that are very dangerous because they don't have that regulatory infrastructure in place that other countries have. And that's no surprise to anyone inside or outside China.

You have an entire chapter on "the strange story of France and Wuhan's BS4-Lab." Can you explain?

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK REC	*The Lettuce Diaries: How A Frenchman Found Gold Growing Vegetables In China* by Xavier Naville
FAVORITE FILM	*Inside Llweyn Davis,* by the Coen brothers. Very poignant in many ways. Nice music.
PERSONAL HERO	Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises, who has illuminated a lot about why socialism in China and elsewhere was always destined to go so badly wrong.

This is a very strange story. It started after the SARS virus, and then nothing happened for a long time. And finally, the Chinese and French got together and the French essentially provided the blueprints to build this advanced safety lab, which everybody wanted the Chinese to have, because they need to bring China into this global virus monitoring system. And so they build this thing. And the Chinese then said, "We don't actually need your know-how; we just need the blueprints, thank you, and we'll build it ourselves." There were a lot of reports saying they didn't build it well; it wasn't properly sealed. There was corrosion in some of the pipes. When officials from the U.S. government visited, they were unhappy with the safety record and the construction. And the French said they couldn't certify it because "We didn't build it and you didn't use our firms and materials." The Chinese said, "Well, we don't want to collaborate with you anymore anyway." Hundreds of French scientists were supposed to go there and they were going to collaborate on all kinds of things. But the thing opened without any foreign participation and no French scientist ever went to work there. The U.S. government has alleged that the People's Liberation Army took over this lab to investigate all these dangerous viruses that they've been collecting from around the world. I don't know if this is as alarming as it sounds. But certainly, we would like to know a lot more about this lab, what exactly it was doing and who was doing what there? They said, for instance, that there weren't any animals being kept on, but this was found not to be true. They were in fact, keeping bats and other other animals in this laboratory. There are a lot of loose ends and that raises a lot of red flags.

You don't have definitive conclusions in the book about the origins of the virus, but lots of context and, as you said, circumstantial evidence about China's research operations. What's the message you're trying to convey with this book?

The message is that this research that they're doing is extremely dangerous. China has proved itself to be a non reliable partner. And we have to put a lot of pressure on China to be open about this, because we can't allow another pandemic like this to happen. We don't even know what kind of safety measures they put in since the pandemic started.

What can be done about this? China has decided it's not really interested in a full investigation into the virus. We've seen a breakdown in relations between the U.S. and China over this…

Well, it's really been a symbol of the failure of the engagement policies with China over the last 35 years. We have shared an awful lot with China. We've done a lot of business with them, and they profited from that. And we had expected in return, that China would become more open and more cooperative and more trustworthy and follow international norms of behavior. We didn't necessarily expect that it was going to become a parliamentary democracy but you've got to stick to some kind of common rules. And you've got to have some kind of trust. Instead, China has become more aggressive, secretive and militaristic, and that undermines a policy that dates back to the late 1970s. We believed that the more we dealt with the Chinese the more they would relax the oppressive rule and allow more freedom. So the whole thing raises questions about "Where do we go with China after this?" We certainly can't carry on the way we did before.

"The message is that this research that they're doing is extremely dangerous. China has proved itself to be a non reliable partner."

There are those who say the U.S. and other nations ought to get tough on China, while others say that has actually made things worse. Where did things go wrong?

Well, I think what people did in their eagerness to do business with China, and to encourage the open door policy, is that they abandoned the principle of reciprocity. So they could do things in America or the U.K., which we couldn't do in their country. So the Chinese government can publish op-eds and promotional material in *The New York Times*. But you know, we can't do the same thing in the *People's Daily*; they can offer to open a Confucius Institute in every university, but we can't do the equivalent in China. So that's just a couple of minor examples. But across the board, there have been very unilateral concessions to kind of rope the Chinese in and give them confidence. And so I think being tough wouldn't really mean being hyper aggressive, but adhering to a principle, which the Chinese understand. And that would be a pretty good place to start. You shouldn't be allowed to have Chinese scientists benefiting from research grants in the U.K. or the U.S., and then taking that research back if you can't do the same thing in China. Also, we urgently need a new Biological Weapons Convention. The existing treaty is completely toothless and useless.

On Friday, the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a declassified assessment of the origins of the Covid-19 virus. In that report, there was no conclusion as to the origin of the virus, largely because China has not fully cooperated. The agencies do not believe it was a biological weapon and do not have confidence it was engineered. But it is plausible, the report says, that the virus emerged from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, perhaps by accident. There is also not clear evidence the Chinese government knew of this far in advance of the outbreak. What do you say?

Regarding what the Chinese know, I think they know everything. As I mention in the book, it took them 24 hours to identify everyone who has been in contact with a traveller who arrived with MERS. That's hundreds of people. I believe they quickly carried out track and trace in Wuhan. They must know who got Covid first. So they know where it came from. China has the world's best citizen surveillance mechanism. If the truth was ever leaked it would destroy Xi Jinping. It's like Gorbachev and Chernobyl. The stakes are very high. So I suspect the U.S. is hesitating. It would also destroy public confidence in science and scientists. How much do they want Xi to help with global warming, or Taiwan? Or could the U.S. demand reparations?

David Barboza is the co-founder and a staff writer at *The Wire*. Previously, he was a longtime business reporter and foreign correspondent at *The New York Times*. *@DavidBarboza2*

COVER STORY

Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMANN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

THE BIG PICTURE

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BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

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Q & A

Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEAPLE

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