

The Guardian

China clamping down on coronavirus research, deleted pages suggest

Move is likely to be part of attempt to control the narrative surrounding the pandemic

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Coronavirus test samples in a lab. Xi Jinping said in March that tracing the origin of the virus was a national priority. Photograph: Thomas Kienzle/AFP via Getty Images

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China is cracking down on publication of academic research about the origins of the novel coronavirus, in what is likely to be part of a wider attempt to control the narrative surrounding the pandemic, documents published online by Chinese universities appear to show.

Two websites for leading Chinese universities appear to have recently published and then removed pages that reference a new policy requiring academic papers dealing with Covid-19 to undergo extra vetting before they are submitted for publication.

Research on the origins of the virus is particularly sensitive and subject to checks by government officials, the notices posted on the websites of Fudan University and the China University of Geosciences (Wuhan) said. Both the deleted pages were accessed from online caches.

Prof Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute in London, said the Chinese government had had a heavy focus on how the evolution and management of the virus is perceived since the early days of the outbreak.

“In terms of priority, controlling the narrative is more important than the public health or the economic fallout,” he said. “It doesn’t mean the economy and public health aren’t important. But the narrative is paramount.”

With the virus having infected more than a million people worldwide and caused heavy casualties particularly across Europe and the US, details about its origin and the first weeks of the pandemic - when there was a cover-up by local officials - may be considered particularly sensitive.

“If these documents are authentic it would suggest the government really wants to control the narrative about the origins of Covid-19 very tightly,” said Tsang of the reports of new regulations.

China University of Geosciences (Wuhan) appears to have published and then deleted new requirements that academic papers dealing with the origins of the virus be approved by China’s ministry of science and technology before publication.

The university’s academic committee was expected to first go through the research “with an emphasis on checking the accuracy of the thesis, as well as whether it is suitable for publication,” the regulation said.

“When the checks have been completed, the school should report to the Ministry of Science and Technology [MOST], and it should only be published after it has [also] been checked by MOST,” it said.

Despite its name, the geosciences university announced elsewhere on its website that it was carrying out coronavirus research.

A separate document obtained by the Guardian, which could not be independently verified, appears to be from the Renmin Hospital of Wuhan University and also said publication of research into the origins of Covid-19 would need approval from the science and technology ministry.

Another notice, which appears to have been published on 9 April by the school of information science and technology at Fudan University in Shanghai, called for “strict and serious” management of papers investigating the source of the outbreak.

Papers could only be submitted for publication after being approved by a special office. Email, names and phone numbers provided on the notice suggested that office was part of China’s ministry of education.

A source who alerted the Guardian to cached versions of the websites, and who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said they were concerned by what appeared to be an attempt by Chinese authorities to intervene in the independence of the scientific process.

The person said researchers submitting academic papers on other medical topics did not have to vet their work with government ministries before seeking publication.

A technical analysis of the cached websites indicated that the posts were published on verified university websites before they were removed. The Guardian could not independently verify that they reflected a new government policy.

The notices appear to be part of a broader push to manage research on the virus. The science and technology ministry said on 3 April that ongoing clinical research on the coronavirus must be reported to authorities within three days or be halted.

In March China's president, Xi Jinping, published an essay that included "tracing the origin of the virus" on a list of national priorities. It was referenced by the science and technology ministry shortly before the universities posted their orders.

The Chinese government did not reply to a request for comment sent by the Guardian to the Chinese embassy in Washington.

While the exact origin of the pandemic is still not certain, one commonly held hypothesis is that it began following an interaction between a human and an animal at the Huanan seafood "wet market" in Wuhan.

Scientists have said the virus probably originated in bats and then passed through an intermediary animal before infecting the first human.

Scientists believe the transmission was similar to that in the 2002 outbreak of Sars. Some criticism of China has focused on why the government did not shut down wet markets after the previous outbreaks of coronaviruses.

Kevin Carrico, a senior research fellow of Chinese studies at Monash University, said he was not aware of any specific recent change to rules for academic research in China in connection to Covid-19, but the documents were generally consistent with efforts by China to control the narrative of the pandemic.

"They are seeking to transform it from a massive disaster to one where the government did everything right and gave the rest of the world time to prepare," Carrico said.

Carrico said those efforts had been evident in communications ranging from government pronouncements at the highest level to public sentiment on social media.

"There is a desire to a degree to deny realities that are staring at us in the face ... that this is a massive pandemic that originated in a place that the Chinese government really should have cleaned up after Sars," he said.

Around a month ago senior Chinese diplomats, officials and state media all publicly encouraged speculation that the new coronavirus could have come from outside the country. The foreign

ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian suggested without evidence that the US military might have brought the virus to Wuhan.

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