



## Lesson 84

### Conspiracies and COVID-19

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In this lesson, we're going to be looking at conspiracy theories, specifically about COVID-19. We'll also look at how those COVID-19 conspiracies have led to racism against Asians.

## **COVID-19 and Yunnan**

### **Bats in Yunnan**

China is made up of thirty-four separate regions. One of those is the province of Yunnan. Yunnan is on the southern border of China. The capital city is Kunming; the whole province is home to almost fifty million people. It is one of the most diverse and also one of the poorest provinces in China. Yunnan has more plants and animals than the rest of China. It also has several different climate zones and about half of it is forest. It has more than 15,000 species of plants, and more than 1,600 species of animals. One very plentiful animal is bats. There are many caves in Yunnan that have big bat populations. Bats naturally carry a lot of viruses- which is something scientists don't understand. Bat's immune system is different from ours so they manage to control viruses without getting very sick like humans, their immune system recognizes viruses quicker but it's response is weaker; scientists think these features could be connected to their ability to fly (which requires that their immune system be tampered down). Bats carry tons of viruses, and in the crowded bat caves of Yunnan those viruses can spread and mutate. It is estimated that bats carry over 15,000 different viruses- some of which can jump (often through other animals) to humans and cause problems. Yunnan is the perfect place for new viruses to develop because of its plant and animal diversity, which includes its bat caves.

### **COVID-19 possibly came from Yunnan**

COVID-19 possibly originated in Yunnan. Scientists have good evidence that the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 ([SARS-CoV-2] which is the virus that infects you and makes you sick with COVID-19) was originally carried by bats, but passed from one or more middle animals before passing to humans. A single bat can carry over 200 different coronaviruses so SARS-CoV-2 originating in them is nothing irregular. But the area where the (SARS-CoV-2) infected bats live, is being discussed. However, there is a good idea that it came from Yunnan. This is because SARS-CoV-2's name tells us that it is the second SARS coronavirus. The first one was SARS-CoV-1, sometimes called SARS-CoV. SARS-CoV-1 was a virus similar to SARS-CoV-2 that caused a pandemic (on a much smaller scale than today). The thing is, SAR-CoV-1 originated in bats, in Yunnan. This is one reason why scientists think COVID-19 could have come from Yunnan. We'll talk about SAR- CoV-1 a little later in the lesson. Another reason to believe COVID-19 originated in Yunnan is other similar viruses. There is another virus called RaTG13 that is nearly identical to SARS-Cov-2; and just like SAR-CoV-1, it also originated in bats in Yunnan. We will look at RaTG13 later as well. On top of this, scientists also found four new coronaviruses that were similar to SARS-CoV-2 in Yunnan bats. So there's a good idea that COVID-19 originated in Yunnan, and we are almost certain its original carriers were bats.

# Conspiracy Theories

## What we are going to look at

Most major subjects have conspiracy theories about them. COVID-19 is one of those subjects. There are dozens of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and its vaccines, some more outrageous than others. For example, some people believe that the government put microchips in the vaccines so they can track you. And they believe that Bill Gates is behind it. Clearly they believe Bill Gates is the epitome of evil since they think he's behind nearly everything. Another conspiracy theory is that the vaccines rewrite your DNA. They also believe that the vaccines are creating other variants of COVID-19. Another, more common, conspiracy theory is that COVID-19 is no worse than your average flu. People believe that the elite are profiting off of the vaccines. And the stupidest conspiracy theory about COVID-19 is that it's caused by 5G. Of course, there are many, many more vaccine and COVID conspiracies. We're going to be looking at a few in this lesson.

## RaTG13

The virus most similar to SARS-CoV-2 is RaTG13. In 2012, six miners got really sick with a virus after cleaning up bat poop in a cave in Yunnan. Three of them died. Scientists went to Yunnan to look for what had made them sick. The next year many viruses were found around that cave, they came predominantly from Horseshoe Bats. One virus that was found was RaTG13, this is most likely what made the miners sick. RaTG13 is the closest virus to SARS-CoV-2; they are around 96.2% the same. This similarity is turned into a conspiracy theory. Some people think that SARS-CoV-2 was developed from RaTG13. They say that the only difference is part of the viruses' spike protein (which is what they use to attach to cells and infect them)- they think that scientists just switched a part of the spike protein of RaTG13 and they got SARS-CoV-2. But part of their spike protein is not the only difference between the two viruses, there are several. In nature it would take decades for RaTG13 to mutate into SARS-CoV-2, so it is impossible for scientists to have done it in the years since RaTG13 was discovered. Also the spike part of SARS-CoV-2 is new, so scientists could not have switched a part of the spike protein with the one on RaTG13 because they didn't know that it even existed. It is a conspiracy theory to think that RaTG13 was engineered into SARS-CoV-2, both of these coronaviruses came from nature.

## Amino acids

One of the most common conspiracy theories about COVID-19 is that the virus was man-made. Under that heading of the virus being man-made, there are smaller different conspiracy theories each having their "proofs" that it was made in a lab. One of those conspiracy theories is the theory about amino acids. To understand this, we need to journey into the SAR-CoV-2 virus. Viruses are "simple" things, they are simply some genetic code protected by a lipid layer and proteins. When we look at the outside of the coronavirus, we see a round object with spike proteins protruding out. The spike proteins are what tricks a human cell into getting infected by a virus. When we go inside of the virus we pass through the lipid layer. There are also other parts connected to the lipid layer but we won't focus on them. The inside of the coronavirus is simple, it just contains some RNA (which is the coronavirus' equivalent to DNA), which is called the genome, and proteins

that surround and protect the RNA. The RNA is the instructions on how to replicate the virus that infected cells are forced to use. This is where amino acids come in. All proteins, in this case the ones that surround the RNA, are made of amino acids. So the conspiracy theorists find that the proteins surrounding the RNA contains four positively charged amino acids in a row. They then claim that the virus has to be man-made because according to the laws of physics, you can't have four of those in a row. The first and most obvious problem is, even man-made things must obey the laws of physics, no one in a lab can break them. The second and more scientific reason this conspiracy theory is wrong, is that a third of the proteins in the human body have this characteristic. But even still, many people believe in this conspiracy theory.

## **Sick lab workers**

In November 2019, a few lab workers from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China became sick with a flu-like illness and were taken to the hospital. Conspiracy theorists took this to mean that the institute created the virus. If the people that worked there got sick, that meant that the virus had to come from there. And that virus, of course, had to be COVID-19. There are multiple issues with this conspiracy theory. One- the lab workers never had a specific diagnosis so how do you know it was COVID-19? Two-if the virus those lab workers had had, in fact, came from the lab, then why weren't more people infected? And three- the most important- it was flu season, so of course a few of the lab workers would come down with flu-like symptoms. Those are just three reasons why that conspiracy theory is just that- a conspiracy theory.

## **Untracked cases**

Another reason people give for doubting the origin of COVID-19 is because of early cases of the disease. The origin of COVID-19 is usually connected to a wet market in Wuhan. There are a few different types of wet markets: some are like outside grocery stores, others also sell live farm animals, and others also sell live wild animals. At one wet market in Wuhan the COVID-19 virus spread to humans causing an outbreak. Many early cases can be connected to people who went to that market. But some cases cannot. The earliest case that we know of was on November 17, 2019; it happened in the Hubei province in China. Wuhan is in the Hubei province, but the case does not seem to have anything to do with the wet market. Other early cases are similarly unconnected. People use these examples as evidence that the virus isn't from where scientists say it's from. But many of the very early cases were also not very severe and since the virus was not yet discovered it is hard to find exactly when or where SARS-CoV-2 began to spread. Even if the first case of Covid-19 did not originate in the Wuhan wet market we still know that it came from an animal in China sometime in late 2019.

## Secretive government

Another conspiracy theory about COVID-19 is China's secrecy. When the coronavirus was beginning to spread in China, eight doctors were scolded for spreading "rumors" when they were actually just expressing concern. After that China continued to keep a lid on COVID-19 information. They were aware that it could spread from human to human in early January of 2020, but didn't tell anyone until January 20<sup>th</sup>. In late 2020 CNN found confidential documents listing China's COVID-19 cases on February 10<sup>th</sup>. The documents said there were 5,918 cases but China had published there were only 2,478 cases on that day. There was also another day that China had published underestimated information on. As time passed though, China did get a hold of the virus and the World Health Organization praised them for their success. Still, this cover up of the virus has led to conspiracy theories about China. If China really didn't have anything to do with the creation or release of the virus, what are they hiding? That's a conspiracy theorist's argument. But we have to consider the fact that China has always been a secretive government. It covered up the first SARS outbreak in the early 2000s, but now we know they didn't make it, it was of natural origin. China's government is so secretive because in order for its communist party to stay in power, it has to make the public believe everything's under control and going according to plan. The party's control depends on the control of information and suppression of resistance. So just because China was secretive doesn't mean the virus was planned, we have to consider the context, and context tells us that China is always secretive, they didn't start being sneaky when the pandemic began.

## Distance SARS-CoV-2 traveled

Like a lot of viruses before it, SARS-Cov-1 came from Yunnan. But scientists didn't always know that. The outbreak took place in the early two-thousands, beginning in Guangdong, China, killing nearly 800 people worldwide (which is a drop in the bucket compared to SARS-Cov-2's four million deaths worldwide). In the spring of 2004, Shi Zhengli, the "Bat Woman", and a group of international scientists went on an expedition to discover the origin of SARS. After eight months of trapping and testing bats, they came up with nothing. Then a neighboring lab encouraged them to test the bats for the antibodies that people that were infected with SARS had. And it worked. Some three hundred horseshoe bats had the antibodies for SARS. They narrowed down their search to Shitou Cave. There they discovered a strain of coronavirus that was 97% identical to the virus that appeared in Guangdong. That would mean that SARS-CoV-1 traveled over one thousand miles from Yunnan to Guangdong. It started in bats then was discovered in Civets and then transmitted to humans. So no, SARS-CoV-1 wasn't created in Guangdong- it started in Yunnan and traveled 1,045 miles. Conspiracy theorists believe that SARS-CoV-2 couldn't have originated in Yunnan because it's so far away from Hubei but we saw that SARS-CoV-1 traveled that distance before it.

## **Wuhan Institute of Virology**

People believe the SARS-CoV-2 virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. That lab studies coronaviruses, and it is located in the city of Wuhan close to the wet market. Since that lab studies viruses like the COVID-19 virus people believe that the virus is man-made: a conspiracy theory. They think that it is too much of a coincidence that the pandemic began in the same city as a lab that studies those types of viruses. But we know that because of the bat caves, China has a lot of coronaviruses- and where would you put a lab that studies coronaviruses? You would put a virology lab in a country with a lot of viruses. So a virology lab should be in China. It's not a coincidence that the Wuhan Institute of Virology is in Wuhan- there should be a virology lab somewhere in China. We have looked at some "proofs" people give for their conspiracy theory that COVID-19 is not natural, but those "proofs" do not hold up.

# Why We Don't Believe Them

## What conspiracy theories lead to

We have been looking at various conspiracy theories about COVID-19. We know we shouldn't believe them because they're wrong, but they affect us more than what might be apparent. Conspiracy theories are the basis of nationalism, and nationalism can lead to racism/sexism. In the case of the conspiracy theories we looked at, if we believe China created the COVID-19 virus and then leaked it out to the public, accidentally or on purpose, we can begin to be nationalistic against Chinese and Asian people. And that is what is happening today- Asian people are being discriminated against. So this is the result of conspiracy theories; they are the methodology of the false stream of information and is what the far-right conservatives believe in. If we don't want to be one of them, then we have to reject conspiracy theories in every shape or form, even the ones that seem to "make sense". Our test in 2018 was conspiracy theories, racism, and sexism. While we might focus on sexism more than the other two today, they don't suddenly vanish from being a test. Conspiracy theories are still part of the messages testing this movement and if we fail these tests, we will become as all the other people that have left the movement from the beginning until now.

## In summary:

People believe that Yunnan is a terrible province because a lot of viruses, including SARS CoV-2, came from the bat caves there, but that's just not true.

There are many conspiracy theories connected to COVID-19

People believe that because RaTG13 and SARS-CoV-2 are so alike, the latter has to be a man-made version of the former. That would be impossible.

Because SARS-CoV-2 has 4 positively charged amino acids in a row, people believe it has to be man-made since that doesn't exist anywhere else in nature. Except it does- in their bodies.

People think that because a few of the lab workers in the institute got sick with flu-like symptoms, means that the lab had to have made the virus. What they didn't take into consideration was the fact that it was flu season.

People believe that since a lot of COVID-19 cases can't be traced back to the market in Wuhan, that that is firm proof that it's a man-made virus. The problem with that is that a good percentage of people who spread the virus didn't even know they were sick, therefore they weren't traced back to the market.

Because Xi Jinping isn't telling the world everything about the virus in China, people believe that means China is hiding the fact that they made the virus. The thing is- China is always secretive.

People believe that it would be impossible for SARS-CoV-2 to travel from Yunnan to Hubei, but if SARS-CoV-1 could travel basically the same distance from Yunnan to Guangdong, SARS-CoV-2 could do it too.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology had to have made the virus because how did it just coincidentally appear so close nearby? Right? Wrong. Scientists put institutes in countries where virus' like SARS CoV-2 tend to pop up.

COVID-19 conspiracy theories are perfect examples of why you shouldn't believe in conspiracy theories. Because of the outrageous blame on China for creating the virus, Asians across the world are being discriminated against.

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