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# CHINA INSIDER

MARK ZOU/THE EPOCH TIMES



## 30 YEARS OF FAITH AND PERSEVERANCE

FALUN GONG ADHERENTS SEE MORAL UPLIFT  
THROUGH SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

See Page 2



## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# 30 Years of Faith and Perseverance: Falun Gong Adherents See Moral Uplift Through Spiritual Practice

EVA FU

It was November 2020, nine months after then 22-year-old Carolina Avendano began living by herself, and eight months after her city Calgary, Canada, entered into a lockdown that shut schools and most businesses. She was utterly alone. The pandemic restrictions meant she couldn't visit her sister despite living in the same city.

The prolonged isolation had caught Avendano in a crisis that she had largely kept to herself. Outwardly, she was the model of productivity—living independently, working two tutoring jobs, volunteering online, while completing a double degree in math and education. But inside, she had never felt more lost and empty.

"I knew I was out of balance in every sense of the word," Avendano told The Epoch Times. Her body was sending alarm bells: she was underweight, she suffered from an eating disorder and headaches, and her period hadn't come for more than a year for no apparent cause. She said little about her struggles to her family, who anxiously noted how she was getting thinner even as she insisted they were exaggerating.

A turning point came on a rare trip outside when Avendano randomly walked into a cafe and habitually glanced at the community board for yoga and meditation classes. There, a blue flyer showing a man meditating by the seaside caught her eye. Avendano had never heard about Falun Gong, a spiritual practice consisting of three core values, truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance, along with five slow-moving meditative exercises. But the online meditation workshop advertised on the flyer seemed to be exactly what she needed.

"What surprised me the most was that it was learned for free, by people from all walks of life," she said, noting that she had seen yoga classes taught at over \$1,000, a price she couldn't afford. She registered for one session that weekend and kept practicing on her own.

The following Monday, she was surprised to find that her period had returned.

"I was excited. And I was scared," she said. "I'm like, whoa, I don't want to think it's a coincidence. But it seems incredible."

## Beginnings

Avendano's experience bears some resemblance to many who took up the practice in China in the 1990s when Falun Gong was spreading by word of mouth.

The spiritual discipline's meditative exercises and teachings, rooted in traditional Chinese beliefs including Buddhist and Daoist ideas, seemed to resonate with a population that had been stripped of their traditional beliefs and culture during the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution launched by the Chinese Communist Party a few decades earlier.

On May 13, 1992, Li Hongzhi, the founder of the practice that is also known as Falun Dafa, introduced the practice to his hometown Changchun, an industrial city and capital of Jilin Province in China's north-eastern corner.

In November that year, 28 years before Avendano's encounter with the practice, 36-year-old Mi Ruijing, a healthcare worker, was one of around 400 who went to a series of talks by Li in Beijing, during which he taught the meditative exercises and explained the practice's moral teachings.

The class lasted for 10 days, and Mi felt a change from day one. On the way home, "it was as if I wasn't walking but stepping on clouds. It was very light, very comfortable," Mi, who now resides in the United States,



It's like we take a shower every day to clean the external part of our body. But I really wanted to clean the inside, I wanted to clean my heart and my mind.

Joseph Gigliotti, chiropractor

Falun Gong practitioners take part in a rally calling for an end to the persecution of Falun Gong in China, on Capitol Hill in Washington, on June 20, 2018.

Carolina Avendano meditating in Milton, Ontario, Canada, in April 2022.

The practice website now displays in 20 languages, and over 30,000 people in 45 countries have participated in at least one session.



Mr. Li Hongzhi's lecture on Falun Gong in Wuhan, China, in 1993.



told The Epoch Times.

But Mi was even more appreciative of the changes she was experiencing on the inside. Previously she had read many books about Daoism in search of the meaning of life.

The class brought answers to all of the questions that she had been asking for years. The excitement Mi felt was similar to a person long shut in a dark room suddenly being freed and allowed to see the light.

"I felt that I hadn't actually lived for all these years and was really starting my life," she remembered telling another friend.

During the next two years, Li would hold dozens more classes in China's major cities, the largest ones attended by around 6,000, according to records compiled by Minghui.org, a U.S.-based clearinghouse for Falun Gong-related information. Mi attended more than 20 of them. By 1999, around 70-100 million Chinese would have taken up the practice, according to estimates at the time. Many were drawn to the discipline after seeing the physical and psychological improvements it brought to those around them.

Mi remembers vividly a moment when a friend accidentally burned three holes in her new outfit while helping to iron it. Mi was on the verge of lashing out before

she checked herself. Instead, she told the woman that some stitches would conceal the damage and that she needn't worry.

It was a small exercise of putting others first that she and others would be applying daily in keeping with the practice's teachings, Mi said, adding that she would have done the same even if it were a stranger.

"If it was I who did it and someone chided me, how would I feel?"

## Transformations

In the summer of 1993, Liu Yan, an engineer in Beijing, waited for two hours for a ticket for Li's class after hearing about it from a friend.

The classes were already becoming so popular that tickets were sold out months in advance. But when Liu called the hosting organization, a public university, she learned that they still had some tickets available. She took a day off from work, went to the university office one hour early, and was the first in line to snap up three tickets. After attending the class, she burned all the other spiritual books she had at home in a fire.

"I couldn't put it into words, but I know that Falun Gong was the best," Liu, who now resides in the United States, told The Epoch Times, adding that the practice's



three tenets, truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance, had stuck in her head.

Liu, who had a quick temper, credited the practice for making her a better wife and bringing an immense boost to her health. The bone spurs around her waist went away, and every year, her co-workers marveled at the clean health record she got during her workplace's annual health checks. Her parents joined her too. For Liu's mother, already in her 70s, her high blood pressure and throat cancer disappeared after she took up the practice, according to Liu.

## A Crushing Persecution

Nearly one in 13 Chinese people would experience an abrupt turn in their lives by the end of the decade, when the Chinese Communist Party initiated an expansive campaign to crush their faith after perceiving the practice's popularity as a threat to its authoritarian rule. The persecution has resulted in millions of adherents being sent to detention facilities, where they are subjected to torture, forced labor, and forced organ harvesting.

Mi and Liu were both forced out of their workplace, and received jail sentences of two and four years respectively for merely refusing to renounce their faith. After their release, they were a skeleton of their former



self. Both of Liu's parents passed away while she was serving her jail term, and Liu wasn't able to see either of them in their final moments.

In one so-called transformation center designed to coerce adherents into renouncing their beliefs, Liu was brutally beaten by a wooden mop handle on her legs that blisters the size of one's palms swelled up on her lower legs and her inner thigh turned purple-black. The swelling kept growing



Liu Yan shows scars from a surgery after a beating while in detention in China over two decades ago caused her legs to swell up, in Manhattan, New York City, on May 13, 2022.

(Far left) Mi Ruijing takes part in a parade marking the 30th anniversary since the practice's introduction to the public, in Manhattan, New York City, on May 13, 2022.

(Left) Liu Yan takes part in a parade marking the 30th anniversary since the practice's introduction to the public, in Manhattan, New York City, on May 13, 2022.

(Bottom right) Police detain a Falun Gong protester in Tiananmen Square as a crowd watches in Beijing in this Oct. 1, 2000 photo. Falun Gong practitioners have tried mass phonings, street demonstrations, and hijacking satellite signals to protest their persecution at the hands of Chinese authorities. But they're now taking a legal approach, filing at least 12 lawsuits in countries as the United States, Finland, and Australia against Chinese officials they accuse of perpetrating human rights abuses, from former president Jiang Zemin down.



for days despite a machine being put on her body to suck out the pus. She ended up having to get surgery to treat the battered legs. The two scars from the surgery remain to this day.

During her first imprisonment in a labor camp, Liu's physical appearance changed so much that her husband, when finally allowed a visit, had to ask the guard standing by to confirm that the emaciated woman in front of him was his wife.

Mi developed scabies and stomach perforation while in detention. Three-quarters of her stomach had to be removed as a result. At the end of her term, Mi was literally "skin and bones," she said.

## Online Classes

It was through a recent movie "Finding Courage" that Avendano, who had begun reading Falun Gong books and joined a Falun Gong meditation group in downtown Calgary, caught a glimpse of the ongoing brutality in China. The courage and strength the adherents displayed by those incarcerated had inspired her and drew her closer to the practice, she said.

Since taking up the practice, Avendano said her health has improved and she now strives to be a better daughter to her parents, both of whom suffer from depression.

"I saw everything as an opportunity to bring up my character and I learned that I have to treat everybody with kindness," she said.

The online workshop she participated in during the pandemic was initiated by a group of volunteers including Alexander Meltzer, owner of an e-commerce business based in Florida and a practitioner of Falun Gong for over two decades.

"If you cannot go outside, go inside," Meltzer said, quoting a theme used in promotional materials for the online lessons.

The webinar offers a private experience, with a host presenting slideshows followed by videos demonstrating the exercises. The host also responds to questions instantaneously on a live chat box.

They piloted the online classes in India and Russia in February 2020, as countries around the world began issuing lockdown orders. Encouraged by the number of registrants, the team started to launch globally. Their website now displays in 20 languages, and over 30,000 people in 45 countries have participated in at least one session.

The team now has 100 volunteers. Avendano is among them, brainstorming ideas to streamline the online experience for the attendees.

"What I value the most about the practice is that it's open for everybody," she said, noting that the Falun Gong teachings are available in Spanish, her first language.

"I think just the power of sharing such a beautiful practice with everybody at no cost, that really says a lot to [people]."

"This is a project where we can directly share with people the benefits that we've gotten from Falun Gong," Joseph Gigliotti, a chiropractor who hosted the workshop that Avendano first attended, told The Epoch Times.

"Our mindset was, hey, there's people at home doing nothing. They're stuck at home, they can't go outside. There's a lot of mental health issues. People are really struggling, and they feel disconnected. This is just something that they can do to help them on their inner life."

At the very end of the class, Gigliotti always asks if everyone got what they were coming for.

"It's one of my favorite parts of the webinars to see how people answer that question. Because they're very, very excited. They're very happy," he said. "A lot of people say I will continue on this journey."

For himself, the principles espoused by the practice helped lift a "dark cloud of anxiety and depression" that had for years hung over his head, Gigliotti would sometimes share with the webinar attendees.

"It's like we take a shower every day to clean the external part of your body. But I really wanted to clean the inside, I wanted to clean my heart and my mind."

He called the eight years he had been with the practice "the most fulfilling years of my life."



## 2022 MIDTERMS

# Tough-on-China Stances May Prove Critical for Midterm Candidates: Analysts

MICHAEL WASHBURN

U.S. relations with China are an issue that increasingly commands the attention of voters, who are likely to cast their ballots in the November midterm elections largely on the basis of which candidates are toughest on China, experts say.

But the same experts don't always agree as to whether jobs and trade or national security is the most important piece of the U.S.-China puzzle.

"In general, I think China will be kind of like background music throughout the entire campaign coming up in the fall. It has been before and will be again. Certainly this year, with Republicans up in the polls and being identified with the Trumpian attitude toward China, we're going to see a need for every candidate to set himself or herself up as tough on China," said Douglas H. Paal, a distinguished fellow of the Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

The question of China's importance in the November midterms was the subject of a May 2 Wall Street Journal article that compared the number of times that leading Democratic and Republican candidates in some of the closest primary contests—those in Ohio and Pennsylvania—have made reference to China in their campaign ads. Leading the pack is Trump-backed Mehmet Oz, who has enjoyed a modest lead in polls against former hedge fund CEO David McCormick as they compete for the nomination to run for the Senate seat currently held by Sen. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.), who's retiring. The primary election will take place on May 17.

As of May 2, Oz had mentioned China 8,351 times in his ads, significantly more than the next-highest candidate ranked in this category, Tim Ryan of Ohio, who had made reference to China 3,417 times, the Journal reported.

## History dealt Taiwan a tough hand. They will always do their best to cooperate with the prevailing administration of either party in Washington.

Douglas H. Paal, distinguished fellow of the Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Oz has mentioned China more than three times as often as his rival McCormick, who has mentioned China 2,580 times.

As Oz's thin lead in the polls indicates, endorsement by Trump isn't, by itself, a guarantee of overwhelming support from Republican voters, and the extent of Trump's continuing influence within the party is the subject of some controversy. Candidates who want an edge with the voting public in the primaries and the midterms need to make clear that they're well attuned to the issue—China's role in the world—that preoccupies millions of voters and especially those in middle American states hit hard by overseas competition, according to experts.

### The Foreign Policy Challenge

The message of many candidates may focus heavily on economic and trade issues. But for some observers, the economic populism of candidates catering to voters who have lost jobs or fear losing jobs to overseas competition may be missing the point, given the extremely serious foreign policy and national security concerns of an Asia-Pacific region where Beijing's expansionist aims stir continual uncertainty.

Although taking a firm stand on China may be a tendency often associated with the Trump wing of the Republican Party, that doesn't mean that activism around the issue will be mostly limited to the Republican side.

President Joe Biden plans to visit Asia from May 20 to May 24, and in preparation for the trip, he's likely to make a case that Democrats are tough on China issues, Paal said.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, such as Rep. Steve Chabot (R-Ohio) and Rep. Ami Bera (D-Calif.), have cautioned strongly against complacency in a world where Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine may have emboldened other aggressors and the United States remains heavily dependent on China for rare earth minerals such as cobalt and lithium.

The self-governed island of Taiwan, which Beijing has repeatedly threatened to unite with mainland China—by force if neces-



The Chinese police canine and explosives unit do a security sweep in Tiananmen Square at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on March 10, 2022.

sary—doesn't really have a broad choice when it comes to political leaders in the United States, according to Paal.

"History dealt Taiwan a tough hand. They will always do their best to cooperate with the prevailing administration of either party in Washington," he said.

But Paal said he doesn't consider an invasion of Taiwan to be likely to happen tomorrow, what with the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) coming up in the fall and the manifold preparations this much-anticipated event requires. Nor does Paal believe that Beijing is yet in a position to try to use nuclear blackmail to advance its territorial aims.

"They're building [armaments] like crazy to put themselves in a more equal position, but they're not there yet. They're still constructing. They're not being presented with opportunities too good to resist right now," he said.

Nor can Beijing afford to ignore the steep consequences of the massive sanctions levied against Moscow, its banks, and its oligarchs in the wake of Russian leader Vladimir Putin's Feb. 24 invasion.

"China has to look at their own potential shortcoming, and they have to look at the consequences of economic sanctions. There are lots of reasons why, in my view, Beijing ought to be more reluctant to think about using military force against Taiwan after the

invasion of Ukraine than they were before," Paal said.

But the long-term threat remains. In this scenario, opportunities exist for those politicians and candidates who can make a point of promoting strategies to lessen U.S. dependence on China, such as in raw earth minerals.

"Research and development are leading to new substitutes so we don't have to have the kind of dependency on the things we're getting from China" that has long characterized the trade relationship, Paal said. It's possible to develop alternate sources, following the example of Japanese manufacturers who are striving to find new ways to source the raw materials for microelectronics and cell phones.

### The Trade Wars

Other experts acknowledge the importance of Taiwan and other foreign policy concerns, but affirm the wisdom of candidates focusing on trade and jobs and tailoring their campaign strategies accordingly, especially in the hard-hit rustbelt states.

"Clearly, being tough on China is likely to be a litmus test in elections across the country, particularly on the Republican side. We are at a point in time when the Republican Party, in particular, and most national security professionals in the U.S. view China as a strategic competitor, and anyone who ap-

pears not to sufficiently share that concern is going to be questioned," said Cleve Willems, a partner at the law firm Akin Gump and special assistant to the president for international trade, investment, and development during the Trump administration.

The paramountcy of the trade issue isn't going away, in Willems's view. While some people in Washington, including former Trump officials, view any modification of the tariffs that Trump imposed on China as a betrayal of his legacy, Willems believes that it's imperative to look at how those tariffs have played out over the past few years. Trump-era tariffs remain in place on more than \$300 billion of Chinese goods. Some may have hurt China, but others have hurt U.S. competitiveness, he said. Candidates in the midterms can't afford to ignore this reality.

"You have to modify the tariffs, and not modifying them is not going to be an effective China strategy. Let's be smart about how we're tough on China," Willems said.

He said addressing abusive Chinese practices, and, in particular, Beijing's failure to adhere to the "phase one" trade deal that's part of Trump's legacy, will be a top campaign issue for Republicans. He expressed doubt that Democrats will be able to capitalize as successfully on this issue.

"I think President Biden and the Democrats have huge headwinds due to inflation, mismanagement of the economy, and foreign policy problems, including in Afghanistan. I think they've failed to deliver on much of their agenda, and that's the bigger issue," Willems said.

Stephen Ezell, vice president of global innovation policy at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, a Washington-based think tank, said it makes sense that many campaigners have focused to such an extent on China.

"The United States lost as many as a million manufacturing jobs over the past decade as a result of trade with China. Clearly, that has hit the industrial Midwest the hardest. Those issues are going to find a more receptive audience there," he said.

Ezell differs slightly from other experts as to which specific China topic will be of primary concern to voters this election season. "When it comes to China as an issue, it's going to have a lot more salience from an economic than a national security perspective," he said. "This could change, obviously, if something were to happen in Taiwan."



Pennsylvania Republican U.S. Senate candidate Dr. Mehmet Oz joins former President Donald Trump onstage during a campaign rally at the Westmoreland County Fairgrounds in Greensburg, Penn., on May 6.



Falun Gong practitioners stage a demonstration of organ harvesting from imprisoned practitioners in China, during a protest in Vienna on Oct. 1, 2018.

## ORGAN HARVESTING

# China's Killing of Prisoners of Conscience for Their Organs a 'Tool of Genocide': Rep. Smith

GARY BAI

The Chinese communist regime's mass killing of prisoners of conscience for their organs is a "tool of genocide," according to Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.).

Beijing's forced organ harvesting involves "the execution of people declared enemies of the state, as if on order to provide certain organs to meet transplant needs," he said. "This is also an apparent form of punishment, and indeed a tool of genocide meant to cull minority populations deemed 'undesirable' by the state."

Smith made the remarks at a May 12 hearing of the House's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to explore evidence of China's organ harvesting. The Republican from New Jersey is a co-chair of the commission.

A 2019 independent panel found "beyond a reasonable doubt" that the Chinese regime has for years been forcibly harvesting the organs from detained prisoners of conscience on a significant scale, with no signs showing that the practice had stopped. The primary victims are detained Falun Gong practitioners, the tribunal found. It also found that the practice amounted to "crimes against humanity."

Falun Gong is a spiritual practice consisting of meditative exercises and moral teaching centered on the tenets of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance. After it became widely popular in China in the 1990s, the communist regime, perceiving that popularity to be a threat, began a nationwide persecution targeting the practice and its adherents. Millions of practitioners have since been held in detention centers, jails, and labor camps across the country, effectively turning them into a living organ bank for the Chinese regime.

Smith also urged Congress to approve his legislation seeking to punish those involved in China's forced organ harvesting trade.

He said the proposal, the Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act (H.R. 1592), would impose sanctions against known perpetrators such as Chinese officials, prohibit surgery devices proved to be used for forced organ harvesting from being exported from China, and require the State Department to report on these measures.

### Chilling Details

At the hearing, Ethan Gutmann, China studies research fellow at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation and author of "The Slaughter," recounted his interviews with victims who were jailed in concentration camps in China. The people shared strange and chilling details that he said were signs that they were a living pool of involuntary organ donors.

"Following a camp-wide health check, including comprehensive blood tests, certain individuals are cross-matched for organ harvesting," Gutmann said, recounting how Sayragul, a teacher in a camp, told him she had printouts for the blood tests on which "a pink checkmark" was manually added to certain names.

"Other witnesses recalled that certain

individuals were forced to wear colored bracelets or vests, sometimes pink, sometimes orange," he said. "Either way, approximately a week after the test, the color-coded individuals vanished in the middle of the night."

Gutmann noted that "witness testimony from approximately 20 camps is strikingly consistent—between 2.5 percent to 5 percent annual disappearances from the entire camp."

These disappearances, he said, are predominantly of people in the 28-year-old age group, which is "deemed the ideal age for organ ripeness by the Chinese medical establishment."

Adding to the testimony was a regretful recount by Dr. Enver Tohti, a former oncology surgeon who the Chinese regime ordered to carry out the first known case of live organ harvesting, in 1994. Tohti was made to extract the organs of a prisoner who had purportedly just been executed, only to discover on the operating table that the man was still alive.

"The whole operation took around 30 to 40 minutes. Chief surgeons happily put those organs into a weird looking box, and said, 'OK, now you take your team back to hospital; remember nothing happened today,'" Tohti testified.

The hearing came weeks after researchers published a paper in the American Journal of Transplantation that reviewed more than 2,800 Chinese-language articles from between 1980 and 2015, and concluded that Chinese transplant surgeons forcibly removed organs from people without performing tests required to determine brain death.

"In plain language, the papers appear to show that the donors, who were prisoners, were alive at the time of surgery, and were killed by the transplant surgeons in the process of heart extraction," Matthew Robertson, co-author of the transplant paper and a doctoral candidate at the Australian National University, testified at the hearing.

### More Action

Others at the hearing called for more action from the international community and medical entities.

"The topic for today's hearing, organ harvesting, has far too long been swept under the rug by the international community," said Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.), who is a co-sponsor of the Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act.

"The United States and our allies must send a strong and unwavering message in defense of basic human rights and protections for all people."

Last week, the European Union approved a resolution voicing "serious concerns" about the Chinese regime's "crime against humanity."

"Respect for human rights is not an option, but a requirement in all areas, including in the challenging medical and ethical area of organ donation and transplantation," said the EU's top foreign policy official, Josep Borrell.

The medical community, meanwhile, has been largely silent on this issue be-



Falun Gong practitioners take part in a parade in Brooklyn, N.Y., marking the 22nd year of the persecution of Falun Gong in China, on July 18, 2021.

cause of significant professional and financial opportunities in China, Gutmann said.

"This catastrophe was created by Beijing. Yet, for the last 10 years, it has been continuously enabled by a handful of Western doctors who thought they could ride the Chinese dragon and come back home as if everything was normal," he said.

Robert A. Destro, former assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor during the Trump administration, urged the United States to take concrete action.

Congress must use its "power of the purse to demand accountability from the bureaucracy and the business community."

From NTD News



Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) speaks on Capitol Hill in Washington on June 25, 2015.

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## PANDEMIC HANDLING

## Top US Scientist Tried to Help Wuhan Lab Counter Virus Leak Concerns

Efforts coincide with push to deepen collaboration with China

EVA FU

As the pandemic engulfed the world in 2020, a top U.S. scientist that had for years worked with the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) actively tried to help Chinese researchers at the lab counter concerns that the virus might have originated from the facility, newly released emails show.

These efforts include alerting Chinese scientists of U.S. investigations into the lab and providing them with a list of questions to answer to help respond to outside concerns.

Meanwhile, the U.S. scientist James LeDuc, the then-director of the Galveston National Laboratory at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB), and his colleagues, engaged in a concerted effort to strengthen their partnership with the Wuhan institute, even as scrutiny over the lab as a potential source of the outbreak mounted as the pandemic progressed, the emails revealed.

On April 16, 2020, as Beijing was facing rising scrutiny over how it had handled the COVID-19 pandemic and whether it had a role in starting the outbreak, an email titled "Rubio" landed in the LeDuc's inbox.

"I heard from someone in government this evening that Senator Rubio is starting to push for AN investigation regarding Wuhan lab," the email read. "Just found it on the web at Forbes by Kenneth Reposa. Title of article is 'eight senators call for investigation into coronavirus origins.'"

The email was from David Franz, a former commander with the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases and retired colonel. Both scientists had years of contact with the WIV, the facility at the center of speculation over whether the virus may have been leaked from it. LeDuc's Galveston National Laboratory, in particular, had been working with the WIV and other Chinese virology centers for years on training and collaborative projects.

"Thanks for the heads up. Clearly the topic of the day. Time to pile on and find a scapegoat," LeDuc wrote back.

In no time, LeDuc forwarded the email to Shi Zhengli, a top scientist at the WIV nicknamed "bat woman" for her research related to bat coronaviruses, to warn her about the investigation. Shi is the head of the facility's Center for Emerging Infectious Diseases and deputy director of WIV's Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory, the country's first biosafety-level-4 (P4) laboratory that opened for operation in 2018.

LeDuc wrote that he hoped that Shi had been "surviving all the COVID19 drama" and requested a phone call "sometime soon."

Shi replied on April 18 rejecting the offer for a call, writing: "Due to the complicated situation, I don't think it's a right time to communicate by the call. What I can tell you is that this virus is not a leaky [sic] from our lab or any other labs. It's a shame to make this scientific question so complicated."

The message string was part of an email trove recently released under the Texas Public Information Act requests made by U.S. Right to Know, a nonprofit focusing on food and public health issues, as well as Judicial Watch, a nonprofit government watchdog.

Together, the emails paint a picture of how prominent U.S. scientists publicly and privately came to the defense of their colleagues at the WIV and China's health agencies during the early stages of the pandemic as Beijing faced growing questions about its handling of the pandemic and the virus origins.

"These startling documents show that China had partners here in the United States willing to go to bat for them on the Wuhan lab controversy," Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton said in a May 9 statement.

UTMB has disputed this claim. "The GNL has never collaborated with WIV on SARS-CoV-2 / COVID-19 research—and as the documents themselves demonstrate, Chinese scientists were disappointingly unwilling to collaborate in fighting the disease," Chris Smith Gonzalez, a director of media relations for the university, told The



A security person moves journalists away from the Wuhan Institute of Virology after a World Health Organization team arrived for a field visit in Wuhan in Hubei Province, China, on Feb. 3, 2021.

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Chris Smith Gonzalez, director of media relations, University of Texas Medical Branch

Epoch Times in an email.

In response to a query from The Epoch Times, Franz said that he "didn't express an opinion regarding that possible move by the senate" in his email of April 16, 2020. Even if he had, that would have been an opinion held at that time, but "[t]hings have changed a lot since then."

#### Helping Out a Friend

As reports first emerged questioning the potential role of the WIV in causing the pandemic, LeDuc reached out to Yuan Zhiming, director of the WIV's P4 lab, in early February 2020 offering suggestions to counter "misinformation."

LeDuc urged Yuan to "conduct a thorough review of the laboratory activities associated with research on coronaviruses" so that he would be "fully prepared to answer questions dealing with the origin of the virus."

"I have the utmost respect and admiration for Dr Shi and I am in no way casting doubt on her or her colleagues. I just think that we need to aggressively address these rumors and presumably false accusations quickly and provide definitive, honest information to counter misinformation. If there are weaknesses in your program, now is the time to admit them and get them corrected," he wrote. "I trust that you will take my suggestions in the spirit of one friend trying to help another during a very difficult time."

The email attached a two-page document containing questions about the lab's activities from October 2019 for Yuan's consideration. Some of the questions read:

"Is there any evidence to suggest a mechanical failure in biocontainment during the time in question?"

"What are the coronaviruses in your possession that are most closely related to nCoV based on genetic sequences and are able to replicate in culture?"

"Is anyone on your team conducting gain of function studies, recombination studies or any other studies that may have resulted in the creation of the nCoV?"

"How many people have access to the coronavirus stocks and laboratory?"

"Have any of individuals working at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (main campus or BSL4 campus) been infected with the nCoV? Family members of employees?"

Yuan never answered that email. LeDuc later shared this email with Franz in April 2020, writing, "Please do not forward."

"Good note ... and timely on your part," replied Franz. "I just hate for our friends to have to deal with all this, as you note ... particularly in their world."

LeDuc seemed to understand the evasiveness from the Chinese side, as he would note in an email to Franz a week later.

"I think they are under pretty strict orders to keep quiet [sic]," he wrote.

The UTMB scientists appeared to wel-

come the news when WIV's Yuan appeared in a Chinese state media interview on April 18, 2020, defending the facility.

"I'm glad Zhiming is speaking up. I have been encouraging him and Zhengli Shi to speak up. Their direct engagement is essential. Otherwise, all we do is secondary," wrote senior molecular biologist UTMB Shi Pei-yong.

When reached by The Epoch Times about the February 2020 note and subsequent emails, Franz said he "would have been surprised if [Yuan] Zhiming answered or responded fully, because of the quite different world in which they live and work."

"I did 'hate' [that] the colleagues we had been working with have to deal with media and the bureaucracy above them," he said in an email, noting that "we were leaning toward a wet market origin in April 2020."

"We had obviously had good working relationships with some of our Chinese colleagues as they were very interested in operating the new WIV BSL-4 lab safely," he told The Epoch Times. "These labs are VERY complex; a lab director would, by definition, have some serious concerns not having the experienced and expert staff that I inherited when I was asked to command USAMRIID those many years ago."

USAMRIID refers to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, where Franz served as a commander from 1995 to 1998.

LeDuc's support for the WIV and its researchers in early 2020 came at a time when scrutiny over the lab as a culprit in leaking the virus was a taboo topic of discussion among many mainstream scientific, political, and media channels.

While Shi and other scientists at WIV have denied that the virus leaked from the lab, the Chinese regime has not allowed outside investigators to inspect records and data from the facility to properly probe the matter.

It wasn't until mid-2021 when the theory became a focus of public discussion after mounting reports about the lab's gain-of-function research activities, its collaboration with the Chinese military, its suppression of information, and that staff were hospitalized with COVID-like symptoms in November 2019. This culminated in President Joe Biden instructing the intelligence community to provide a report on the source of the pandemic, including the lab leak theory, a report that ultimately was inconclusive about how the outbreak emerged.

#### 2 Labs in Partnership

The Galveston National Laboratory is a federally-funded P4 facility that has trained staff from the WIV and conducted joint research projects with them since 2013. LeDuc and other senior UTMB staff also maintained close contact with WIV scientists, including Shi.

AP PHOTO/NG HAN GUAN

contents. Because the statement appeared later in the tranche of documents released under the freedom of information request, it is unclear if this version was attached to the email.

"Please review carefully and make any changes that you would like. I want this to be as accurate as possible and I certainly do not want to misrepresent any of your valuable contributions," LeDuc said. "I need to submit this on Monday, 20 April, so your prompt reply would be very much appreciated."

Shi responded by sending some reference materials and provided a document with her revisions to the statement. The document, which was an email attachment, was not included in the email tranche disclosure.

LeDuc told his colleagues two days later that he had more than one hour teleconference with five to six people from the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations to discuss the possible lab leak.

#### 'Our Friends in China'

LeDuc also publicly defended the Chinese regime's initial response to the pandemic, even as he and some colleagues privately expressed some frustration at the lack of response from the Chinese scientists they had been working with when they sought data about the new virus.

In mid-January 2020, about two weeks after the first report of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Chinese city Wuhan, LeDuc penned an op-ed article for local media, the draft of which he shared with several senior Chinese health officials soliciting their opinion. Among the recipients were George Gao, director of China's Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Yuan, director of the WIV's P4 lab.

With the working title "Chinese Response to New Virus Shows Promise," the draft article praised how China "quickly isolated the patients, and instituted an impressive set of interventions to limit the spread of disease and characterize the new pathogen."

"Importantly, they have been transparent in sharing their findings with the world, thus allowing other nations to be on the lookout for the new disease," LeDuc added.

The article appeared to overlook the fact that the Chinese regime took weeks to confirm that the virus could spread among people, despite there being ample evidence on the ground of transmission occurring in hospitals and elsewhere, and its suppression of COVID-19 information and data.

Despite the upbeat tone expressed in the op-ed, LeDuc in an email revealed some reservations to a close acquaintance.

"I hope I'm not overstating their competence in responding..." he wrote to Franz on Jan. 17, 2020, before the article's publication. To another Chinese scientist, LeDuc acknowledged that he didn't have the "specific examples to note if asked" about China's "impressive" measures referenced in the article, and asked if his colleague could provide any.

Minutes after the article's publication online on Jan. 21, Franz would send a note to LeDuc congratulating him, copying Gao of China's CDC and WIV's Yuan.

"Well done, Jim ... and our friends in China," he wrote.

Yuan later replied and thanked LeDuc for his "positive attitude to Chinese public health response system and the practice."

Franz told The Epoch Times that the contentions in LeDuc's op-ed were appropriate given it was written based on events prior to Jan. 21, 2020.

"On that date, I still believe the oped was appropriate. And I might say the same thing in response," Franz said in an email. "I would not necessarily write the same

thing 6 months later ... nor would he."

"I'm sure Chinese scientists and clinicians knew that had a problem on 21 Jan and well before, but probably just not how big a problem," he added.

The op-ed's publication occurred at a time when UTMB's repeated efforts to get original viral samples from China were hitting a brick wall.

"With cases occurring outside China, others will soon have their own isolates and China will have lost the opportunity for leadership," LeDuc wrote to Yuan on Jan. 22, 2020, urging for more openness on virus data.

"And if scientific publications start appearing from Chinese investigators without the world having independent access to a strain, China will likely be heavily criticized."

Yuan replied that he would "try [his] best to promote the sharing of viral strains," and LeDuc days later would coordinate a formal letter to push the matter forward.

But the Galveston lab never ended up receiving virus samples from China. Three weeks later, though, it was able to source samples from an infected patient in Washington who traveled to China.

UTMB told The Epoch Times that WIV had denied their request for samples. "UTMB scientists were forced to obtain samples for research from U.S. patients who had been infected with COVID-19 and used these in its important work to combat COVID-19. The lack of cooperation and transparency from Chinese institutions remains troubling," Smith, the university spokesperson, said in an email.

#### Dismissing the Lab Leak Theory

On April 15, 2020, Frederick Murphy, a professor emeritus of UTMB who while working at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) helped discover the Ebola virus, wrote to LeDuc and two other UTMB faculty members asking for advice about what he called the virus "conspiracy" that "the CoV came from the Wuhan lab."

"I need some advice / fodder to deal with this, as the stuff spreads around here—several retired ambassadors live here (stuffy, arrogant types)," he said before asking if the UTMB or the Galveston Lab have put out public statements countering these allegations.

The request brought a prompt reply from LeDuc and Thomas Ksiazek, a UTMB professor specializing in pathology, microbiology, and immunology, who had coordinated U.S. outbreak response to Ebola and SARS as the head of the special pathogens branch at the CDC in Atlanta.

"As you know there have been no end to the stories on the origin of the virus," wrote Ksiazek. While a prominently-cited article in the science journal Nature by scientist Kristian Andersen and others "pretty much puts an end to the stories that the virus was cooked up in the lab," he said, other theories are emerging that the virus might have been a lab leak and that lab researchers became "patient 0" after getting infected in the field.

"I don't know, but don't think they were working with live bats," Ksiazek wrote in the email, adding that based on a colleague's "discussions with the 'bat lady,' Dr. Shi, I don't believe that they had this virus in the lab before this started."

Declassified emails would later reveal that Andersen had said some of the features of the virus "look engineered" weeks before publishing the March 2020 study.

Video footage from 2017, featured on the website of the state-run Chinese Academy of Sciences that administers the WIV, as well as in Chinese media reports, also showed live bats being held in cages inside the facility. In one, a researcher feeds a bat held in his hands protected by blue surgical gloves.

"I'm a lot more worried about the US status as a leader in world public health and science than Chinamen hiding behind every tree," Ksiazek wrote. "Not that there isn't some level of industrial espionage occurring, but we're killing ourselves in terms of how we're seen by others."

"I agree with Tom's assessments (of course!)" was LeDuc's response before he went on to detail the joint meetings he participated in annually with Chinese researchers at WIV since 2015. LeDuc added he never heard about any safety concerns from the Wuhan lab until coming across an April 14 Washington Post opinion article on leaked State Department cables. That report stated that a 2018 cable expressed concerns about safety and management weaknesses at the WIV, and warned that the lab's work on bat coronaviruses posed a pandemic risk.

#### Push to Deepen Ties

The emails reveal that the U.S. officials and scientists maintained an interest in collaborating with the Chinese as the pandemic raged on and despite growing attention on the possible role of the WIV in spreading the initial outbreak.

On Feb. 3, 2020, as the UTMB was still scrambling for access to Chinese virus data, LeDuc wrote that he got "strong encouragement" from a Department of Health and Human Services official to "try to initiate real collaborative studies between our lab and Wuhan."

"Folks are recognizing the value of the engagement we have developed—hopefully this will translate into some sustained funding," he wrote to Franz.

In an April 2020 email with the subject "China bio grants and project plan," Benjamin Rusek, a senior program officer with the National Academy of Science (NAS) informed the UTMB researchers that NAS was unable to extend the two grants for their "bio activities with China" that were soon to expire. He then suggested holding bilateral meetings on how they utilize the remaining funds, including on "gene editing technology to combat SARS-CoV-2."

"Pei-yong, do you think that our Chinese friends would be willing to participate?" Rusek wrote, noting that "all discussion would be off the record."

The scientists received his proposal with enthusiasm. "If you believe the press, it looks like they have been successful in their control efforts and perhaps we could learn from them," wrote LeDuc later that month as they organized the meeting.

The email records suggest that two virtual conferences between Chinese and American health officials and scientists took place in mid-May 2020. Rusek also told a corresponding officer from China's CDC not to issue a press release or inform the media for the moment.

Last June, when the lab leak theory gained mainstream attention, LeDuc again floated the idea of engaging with China.

"The politics are probably too intense now to really do anything," he said, adding that they could try to kickstart discussions with their Chinese counterparts by drawing upon a 2018 joint editorial published in Science announcing the two labs' partnership. "[T]he editorial is tangible evidence of our work together and would perhaps offer China an opportunity to engage in an activity that may have wide global support," LeDuc wrote.

#### 'Sincere Thanks'

LeDuc and others meanwhile had sought to keep the engagement going at a personal level.

In July 2020, LeDuc forwarded headlines of several recently-published papers on American scientific journals to Shi and Yuan of WIV, writing: "You may find the first two papers of special interest."

One of them read: "Keep Politics out of Funding Decisions for Medical Research and Public Health."

"Thank you for the information," Shi wrote back. "I appreciated very much the spirit support from scientists [sic] in USA."

LeDuc received an invitation in January 2021 to join the editorial board for the Journal of Biosafety and Biosecurity co-edited by Yuan. Although there's no sign he replied to it.

A month later, Yuan responded to a "Happy New Year" note from LeDuc to express his "sincere thanks" to LeDuc and his colleagues' "assistance for the safety and secure operation of the lab" in Wuhan.

"During the last year, we all experienced the hardest time, fighting against the virus, fighting against the rumors. The lab operated smoothly [and] efficiently, providing a crucial platform for pathogen identification, animal modeling, antiviral drug screening and vaccine development, and we are very proud of the role and achievements of the laboratory," he wrote. "I really hope you could come back here after the epidemic and we could share our understanding on lab management and infectious disease control."

In response to an inquiry by The Epoch Times about the email exchanges between LeDuc and others, UTMB said that the university and Galveston National Lab "firmly believe academic research and the exchange of best practices in biosafety and lab operations must be a global pursuit."

"As scientists, we collaborate with colleagues around the world to develop countermeasures to safeguard the public health and national security of the United States," a spokesperson said in an email.

Murphy, Ksiazek, Rusek, Shi of UTMB, and Shi and Yuan of WIV didn't respond to The Epoch Times' inquiries by press time.



Workers are seen inside the P4 laboratory in Wuhan, China, on Feb. 23, 2017.





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