

## Where did the COVID-19 virus come from? The mystery-solving race

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### Summary

This book review examines the book 'Where Did the COVID-19 Virus Come From? The Mystery Solving Race' by Dr. Monali C. Rahalkar-Bahulikar and Dr. Rahul A. Bahulikar. The book explores the origins of SARS-CoV-2 and highlights the possibility that the virus was engineered through gain-of-function research. The review situates the book's detailed investigation of the origins of COVID-19 within the significant policy lessons on biosafety and the risks of gain-of-function research.

An article published in March 2026 in the *Science* magazine of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) reported that a 'new analysis' of a set of old Wuhan market maps by French evolutionary biologist Florence Débarre seeks to bolster the natural origin theory of COVID-19. Débarre, in her report, argues that the identification of stalls where live animals were infected and the vendors had developed antibodies in the old maps offers major information about the animal-to-human transmission. However, her colleagues in the field remain unconvinced, questioning the origin and the credibility of the data and contend that the accuracy of the maps does not validate the origin or the transmission trajectory of the virus.<sup>1</sup>

The exchange reported in the *Science* journal epitomises the wider debate about the origin of SARS-CoV-2 that has been ongoing within the larger scientific community since 2021. The book, 'Where did the COVID-19 virus come from? The mystery-solving race' by Dr. Monali C. Rahalkar-Bahulikar and Dr. Rahul A. Bahulikar, published in 2026, comes as a timely intervention, offering crucial insights into the controversial subject. The question that anchors this work is whether SARS-CoV-2 emerged through a natural evolutionary process or was linked to laboratory research. To address this puzzle, Dr. Monali and Dr. Rahul draw on a large body of materials, including published scientific literature, documented events, genomic analyses, social media posts, and interviews of concerned individuals. As the authors present their findings through storytelling, the core argument that emerges is that the novel coronavirus may have been synthetically engineered, and the pandemic was possibly triggered by a lab leak due to

poor safety protocols in the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Dr. Monali and Dr. Rahul, in their book, discuss multiple instances to substantiate their thesis. Some of the major points are presented here. First, analysing the trajectory of years of gain-of-function research (from 2014 to 2020) jointly conducted by American and Chinese scientists led by Dr. Ralph S. Baric and Dr. Shi Zhingli (also known as China's batwoman) on SARS-like coronaviruses, the authors contend that it is highly probable that the researchers had developed capabilities to engineer COVID-like viruses through genetic alternation. They highlight a grant request that was made to the then US Department of Defense (DoD) in 2018 for Project DEFUSE, involving both Dr. Baric and Dr. Shi, and contained a blueprint for making a SARS-CoV-2-like coronavirus. The authors opine that while this project was not approved, grants from the US NIH and the US NIAID for existing gain-of-function research projects could have been diverted to fulfill the objectives of the DEFUSE. An analysis by the Decentralized Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19 (DRASTIC) group, comprising independent scientists, data sleuths, and researchers, reveal that the genome of SARS-CoV-2 exactly appears to be the product of DEFUSE. Second, the authors point towards efforts of data concealment and discrepancies in public records by Dr. Shi as intensifying doubts about the lab origination. Conducting a meticulous paper-trail investigation of Dr. Shi's research, Dr. Monali and Dr. Rahul argue that there are several anomalies, for instance, non-disclosure of the deaths of three mine workers from Mojiang County in 2012 from severe respiratory illness with symptoms strikingly similar to COVID-19. Second unreferenced renaming of the original sample Ra4991 (the closest known relative

of SARS-CoV-2) collected from the mines at Mojiang to RaTG13. Third, Dr. Shi's attribution of the miners' fatalities to fungal infections rather than a viral pathogen, and finally, the presence of a furin cleavage site (FCS) (as proposed in the project DEFUSE) in its spike protein, between the S1 and S2 subunits, which to date has not been found in any beta coronavirus. The authors contend that these deliberate efforts to obscure the origins of the COVID-19 virus and increased lethality point towards its unnatural origin. With regard to the lab leak, the authors quote Dr Shi's July 2020 interview with Science magazine. The interview revealed that often experiments were done using biosafety level 2 (BSL-2), which is a very low level of protection for bat coronaviruses. In the book, this aspect is further corroborated through reference to a doctoral thesis presented under Dr Shi's supervision, which also informs about experimentation with live viruses and cell infection with biosafety level 2 (BSL-2). According to Dr. Monali and Dr. Rahul, this opens up several possibilities as to how the virus could have escaped the lab. Notably, the authors at one point also suggest that the virus could have originated in a lab in the US, as Dr. Baric's lab had similar capabilities. Combined with their own analysis and findings, Dr. Monali and Dr. Rahul also cite statements, research articles by other observers, including Jeffrey Sachs and David Baltimore, and, most importantly, intelligence reports by the CIA, which strongly suggest the possibility of a lab leak.

While the book offers the reader a granular analysis and a treasure of information (in terms of publicly inaccessible Chinese-language sources) on the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also raises questions about whether circumstantial evidence adds up to build a case for the lab leak theory. However, this study does more than settle the debate on the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. For policymakers, the key

takeaway should be the dangers posed by gain-of-function research. Although undertaken to “prepare” humanity for pandemic prevention and control, minor errors or operational oversights can lead to a humanitarian crisis of immense magnitude.

### **Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Jon Cohen, “A Forgotten Social Media Post may Hold Key Clues to COVID-19’s Origin”, *Science*, 16 March 2026.