

How Li-Meng Yan's challenged claims about China and covid went viral | The Washington Post

By Craig Timberg

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Scientists from Johns Hopkins, Columbia and other leading American universities moved with rare speed when a Chinese virologist, Li-Meng Yan, published an explosive paper in September claiming that China had created the deadly coronavirus in a research lab.

The paper, the American scientists concluded, was deeply flawed. And a new online journal from MIT Press — created specifically to vet claims related to SARS-CoV-2 — reported Yan's claims were "at times baseless and are not supported by the data" 10 days after she posted them.

But in an age when anyone can publish anything online with a few clicks, this response was not fast enough to keep Yan's disputed allegations from going viral, reaching an audience in the millions on social media and Fox News. It was a development, according to experts on misinformation, that underscored how systems built to advance scientific understanding can be used to spread politically charged claims dramatically at odds with scientific consensus.

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