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Research from China is crucial to understanding the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: Xinhua News Agency/Shutterstock

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China's government has started asserting tight control over COVID-19 research findings. Over the past two months, it appears to have quietly introduced policies that require scientists to get approval to publish – or publicize – their results, according to documents seen by *Nature* and some researchers.

This fits with media reports that at least two Chinese universities have posted notices online stating that research on the virus's origins needs to be approved by the university's academic committee and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) or Ministry of Education (MOE) before being submitted for publication.

Scientists in China say the changes are probably a response to poor-quality studies on the virus, which have been posted online and reported widely – and several welcome them. But some academics have suggested that the policies are part of China's attempt to control information about the start of the outbreak.

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not to have posted notices about the policies on their websites, and they have not yet responded to *Nature's* attempts to confirm that they have released the documents.

Researchers outside the country are concerned that the vetting process could delay publication of important insights that could help to control the pandemic. Some also fear that the Chinese government is interfering in the scientific review process.

“Researchers and research institutions should be free to share knowledge without oversight in general, provided it has been conducted according to our current ethical conventions and standards,” says Ashley St. John, a virologist at the Duke–NUS Medical School in Singapore. “Where there is a review or vetting process in place, it should be only scientific in nature.”

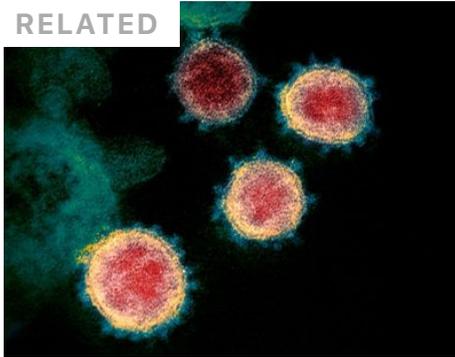
Last month, China's foreign-ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, made sensational claims that the virus might have come to the country from the United States, prompting concerns that the Chinese government's statements were not always guided by science. Although the exact origin of the virus is unknown, researchers think it probably came from bats and then spread to a carrier animal before infecting the first people somewhere in central China late last year.

## Paper trail

Government oversight of COVID-19 research seems to have started with a directive to universities. A document obtained by *Nature* that seems to be from the MOE, and is dated 10 March, orders institutions to get approval from the ministry and the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism, run by the powerful State Council, before publicly announcing results on the origin of the SARS-COV-2 virus, its transmission routes or treatments or vaccines. The document states that universities need to consider “the questions society is concerned about”

when publicizing research on the virus. (*Nature* was sent the document, which is stamped by the MOE and includes the name of an agency official, by a researcher who did not want to comment.)

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The education ministry seems to have issued another order after a meeting of the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism on 25 March, according to a second notice that also appears to come from the MOE and has been posted on Pincong, a Chinese-language forum. This notice, dated 7 April, states that studies on the virus's source must be approved by a university academic committee and the education ministry's science and technology department before being published in a journal or posted on a preprint server or blog. Academic committees must evaluate all other COVID-19 papers for "academic value and timing", the notice states. It also warns that studies must

not exaggerate the efficacy of vaccines or treatments.

According to archived web pages, the 7 April notice was reproduced on the website of the School of Information Science and Technology at Fudan University in Shanghai, but was subsequently removed. UK newspaper *The Observer* has reported that a similar notice was posted on, and then removed from, the website of the China University of Geosciences in Wuhan.

## Helpful policies

Several researchers in China think the vetting process for COVID-19 studies is a good idea. Alice Hughes, a conservation biologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, says the measure will stop the dissemination of potentially inaccurate and sensationalist research, such as a controversial study published in the *Journal of Medical Virology* on 22 January, which suggested that snakes were the virus's host. Scientists criticized the study for its lack of evidence, but it still received widespread media coverage.

Hughes says her institute's director told her in late February that research on COVID-19 required

MOST approval. She has not seen official policy documents herself. In early March, she says, she had a paper approved by the CAS, and then by MOST within 72 hours.

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Hughes hasn't noticed any major effects on research publications. "We are continuing to see China publishing papers on the origins through this system," she says.

Zhang Zhigang, an evolutionary microbiologist at Yunnan University in Kunming who published on the outbreak's origins before the vetting process came in, also thinks it's a good way to control research quality and reliability. Poor-quality research could hurt global efforts to fight the virus, he says.

But news of the policies hasn't reached all scientists. Chen Jin-Ping, an animal-disease researcher at the Guangdong Institute of Applied Biological Resources in Guangzhou who is also studying the virus's origins, says he hasn't been told that he needs ministry approval for his research to be published.

Even some institutions seem to be in the dark. Fei Ma, dean of research and graduate studies at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China, says he hasn't heard of the need for coronavirus-related research to be approved by MOST or other government agencies.

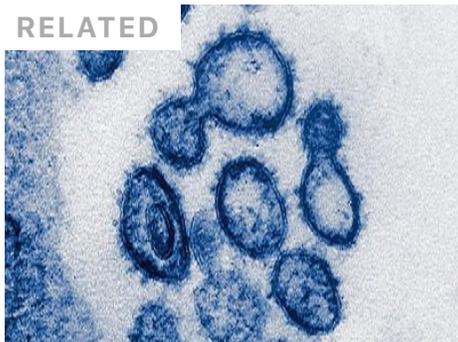
Denis Simon, executive vice-chancellor at Duke Kunshan University in Kunshan, says his institute hasn't received any official notices that coronavirus research needs ministry approval, but researchers are discussing it. "People have heard about this but nothing has arrived on our doorstep," he says.

## Delay concerns

Some researchers outside China fear the vetting process could hold up the release of important research. "Right now we desperately need all kinds of research relating to SARS-CoV-2, from basic studies to understand mechanisms of disease to vaccines and therapeutics," says St. John.

“We can’t afford any delays right now.”

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Understanding the origin of SARS-CoV-2 could also lead to early-warning systems for future virus spillovers from animals to people, she says.

Sarah Cobey, an infectious-disease researcher at the University of Chicago in Illinois, adds that it would be very problematic if results from China were being filtered or suppressed for reasons other than quality. Observations of viral spread across countries inform the use of interventions such as social distancing, she says.

“If the research presents a biased picture, much of the record can eventually be corrected through studies of SARS-CoV-2 elsewhere,” she says, “but the distortion and delay would probably come at the cost of human health.”

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