

# Genetic Research and U.S. Bio-Agents: Harvard Team Collected and Transferred China Blood and DNA Samples Back to the U.S.

Introduction by Michel Chossudovsky

By [Prof Michel Chossudovsky](#), [Zhao Yandong](#), and [Zhang Wenxia](#)

Global Research, April 28, 2022  
Springer

Region: [Asia, USA](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

## Introduction

*In the light of recent revelations pertaining to the U.S bio-labs situated in Ukraine focussing on the possible use of biological weapons against Russia and China, we bring to the attention of Global Research readers, excerpts from an important 2017 study entitled [“An International Collaborative Genetic Research Project Conducted in China”](#)*

*The 2017 study by scientists Zhao Yandong and Zhang Weixia pertains to a US initiative by an unnamed “renowned University” involved in collecting blood and DNA samples in China’s Anhui province in the 1990s. The unnamed university is Harvard. The name of the the coordinator of the study was not mentioned.*

*Blood samples were collected. In turn, the US scientists “acquired DNA samples of the target group for research purposes”.*

*“The principal investigator himself admitted that for the asthma research alone, 16,400 DNA samples had been transferred to the US.”.*

These DNA samples collected by the Harvard Research team were then shipped to the US.

[China Daily’s](#) medical correspondent Xiong Li, (link no longer active) had demanded:

*“ ... justice for some 200,000 Chinese farmers who were used in 12 genetic experiments without their informed consent. The experiments were conducted by Harvard researchers and funded by the US government.” (emphasis added)*

[The WPo in a December 2020 report](#) acknowledged that “This was no ordinary blood drive. It was genetic research”.

The underlying purpose of collecting Chinese DNA samples was not revealed in the 2017 study by *Zhao Yandong and Zhang Weixia*, nor was the relationship of Harvard University to several entities of the US government.

## A Note on the Ukraine based Bio-Labs

Recent studies pertaining to US bio-labs based in Ukraine have focussed on the possession of DNA samples as a means to develop bio-agents directed against specific ethnic groups. According to [Mike Whitney](#): “This idea that the US is developing bio-agents that selectively target particular ethnic groups is a recurrent theme among critics of America’s mysterious bio-projects. According to Chinese military expert, Song Zhongping: “The United States kept setting up biological laboratories around rival countries with the goal of **developing targeted viral weapons** against those countries... (“[US shuns UN meeting on biological security](#)”, Global Times)

## The 1990s Harvard Theft of Chinese DNA

The “theft” of Chinese DNA (biopiracy) represented a potential goldmine for Big Pharma. The 1990s Harvard University genetic research project was sponsored by Millennium Pharmaceuticals, Inc., of Cambridge, Mass. who “believed that the isolated population ...in Anhui province held a treasure of unpolluted genetic material that could yield medical breakthroughs and perhaps millions in biotech profits.”

Millennium which was founded in 1993, was actively involved. The research project was initiated by [Dr. Geoffrey Duyk, a Harvard geneticist](#) The project then hired a Chinese postdoctoral researcher based in Anhui province, [Xu Xiping, who then “recruited thousands of volunteers”](#).

The Chinese authors did not openly condemn the “renowned [Harvard] University” nor the Boston Brigham and Women’s Hospital (a Harvard affiliate) which was involved in the project.

The unspoken truth pertaining to eugenics was not raised.

“Millennium announced the deal in July 1995, just after the controversial eugenics law had taken effect, and many deals were to follow.”(Pomfret & Nelson, [2000](#)).

The authors report nonetheless confirmed the coverup as well as the complicity of Chinese scientists and partner institutions including Beijing Medical University, Anhui Medical University (AMU), the Anqing Municipal Bureau of Public Health which were collaborating with the Harvard team:

A strong case in point is that scientific research institutions and personnel from some high-income countries (HICs) have built on their advantages of capital and project experience to make the most of the eagerness of Chinese scientists to make their presence known in the international academic community, and have exploited the flaws and loopholes in China’s existing laws and administration to engage in unethical R&D activities in violation of international norms, scientific ethics and even Chinese laws. This has included:

- conducting clinical experiments on human research participants in China which are banned in HICs
- collecting samples in China for commercial purposes
- harvesting China’s biological resources and undercutting the intellectual property rights of Chinese scientific research personnel

- conducting human experiments and/or collecting blood samples without providing sufficient information to the participants
- exploiting information asymmetries to conceal information about the experiments
- ignoring and violating the participants' rights to know

These problems are particularly serious in fields that undertake research on medical treatment, pharmacy, genetics, and environmental and air pollution, as well as research projects with potential commercial interests. The “genetic harvest” project conducted by the US University in collaboration with Chinese medical research institutions on farmers in Anhui province in the 1990s is a typical case in point.

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On 2 May 2003, the US university [Harvard] published the investigation results of the US government, which stated that there had been some procedural errors in supervision and record-keeping, but no participant was found to have been harmed in any way, so the school would not be penalized (HSPH [2003](#)). Some biomedical experts and ethicists in China expressed regret about these results. They insisted that the studies had apparently violated basic research ethics, and called for a joint US-Chinese review of the experiments.

Michel Chossudovsky, Global Research, February 25, 2020, Updated April 28, 2022

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## **[An International Collaborative Genetic Research Project Conducted in China](#)**

by Zhao Yandong and Zhang Weixia

5 December 2017

[https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-64731-9\\_9.pdf](https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-64731-9_9.pdf)

Below are selected excerpts of the complete study

[To link to complete document click here](#)

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Excerpts

emphasis added

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*In 1995, a research team from a renowned US university started collecting blood samples from villagers living in Anhui province, China, with the cooperation of local research institutes and the Chinese government.*

*In 2000, the US university team was accused of violating research ethics principles by not adequately informing the participants about the research and not sharing benefits fairly. Subsequent investigations by American and Chinese media and authorities showed that the US research institute, its research personnel and a pharmaceutical company involved were benefiting substantially from the project, while the Chinese research participants and the government were not.*

Genetic studies in urban and rural areas in Anhui province are the topic of this case study.

## An International Collaborative Genetic Research Project Conducted in China

[Yandong Zhao](#)  & [Wenxia Zhang](#)

Chapter | [Open Access](#) | [First Online: 05 December 2017](#)

**10k** Accesses | **5** Citations | **43** Altmetric

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### Abstract

In 1995, a research team from a renowned US university started collecting blood samples from villagers living in Anhui province, China, with the cooperation of local research institutes and the Chinese government. In 2000, the US university team was accused of violating research ethics principles by not adequately informing the participants about the research and not sharing benefits fairly. Subsequent investigations by American and Chinese media and authorities showed that the US research institute, its research personnel and a pharmaceutical company involved were benefiting substantially from the project, while the Chinese research participants and the government were not. Three levels of exploitation can be distinguished in this case:

- the exploitation of local individual citizens as human research participants
- the exploitation of the local scientific community in China
- the exploitation of the country's national interest

### Specific Cases and Analysis

The Following are Excerpts

On 20 December 2000, a *Washington Post* article titled “An isolated region’s genetic mother lode” (Pomfret and Nelson [2000](#)) disclosed that a Chinese American researcher of a renowned US University had been collecting blood samples from villagers living in the Dabie Mountains region of China’s Anhui province since 1995 with the financial support of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and biopharmacy companies.

The blood samples were transferred to the US university's genetic bank for research into asthma, diabetes, hypertension and other diseases. Because of the value of these carefully selected blood samples to the research and development of new drugs, the US team received a large amount of research funding from international organizations. The report exposed the loss of China's genetic resources and triggered a stir both in China and worldwide.

The US university's genetic harvest project, conducted in Anqing city in Anhui province between 1994 and 1998, involved tens of thousands of farmers in eight counties. The project, led by an associate professor at the US university as the "chief scientist" conducted genetics studies on multiple diseases, including asthma, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes and osteoporosis, while the experiments on asthma and hypertension were funded by the NIH (Pomfret and Nelson [2000](#); Xiong and Wang [2001](#), [2002](#)).

The principal investigator from the US team also collaborated with a US pharmaceuticals company, and received its financial support. The project had three Chinese partners, Beijing Medical University, Anhui Medical University (AMU) and Anqing Municipal Bureau of Public Health.

The US-based principal investigator started working with the AMU School of Public Health in 1993, and set up the Anhui Meizhong Bio-medicine and Environmental Health Institute in Anqing. The institute chose the Anqing Bureau of Public Health as its local partner, and selected the population groups suitable for taking samples based on grass-roots investigation.

It collected blood samples through physical examination and acquired DNA samples of the target group for research purposes. The joint research project, which was conducted under the guise of free physical examinations for the farmers, mobilized the local population with the help of the local government. Blood samples were collected from farmers in the eight counties of Anqing city: Zongyang, Huaining, Qianshan, Tongcheng, Taihu, Wangjiang, Susong and Yuexi.

Media reports and the complaints of research personnel from the US university later exposed details of certain parts of the project that were suspected of compromising research ethics. ...

According to the investigation by Chinese journalists, the collection of genetic samples had not been sanctioned by the relevant ethics committee in China (Xiong and Wang [2002](#)).

There were also serious breaches of the requirements to keep the participants informed. Many farmers who participated in the physical examination were not aware they were taking part in research. They were never shown or briefed about the "letter of informed consent" , and did not sign or put their fingerprints on any such document.

They did not even know which institution they had given their blood samples to, and nobody told them about the real purpose and results of their "physical examination" or the rights and benefits they were entitled to as part of their

contribution to research.

The asthma project was only one of the dozen human genetic research projects conducted by the US team in China. Other projects also involved the genetic screening of blood samples collected from Chinese farmers for the purpose of establishing the genetic links behind diseases like hypertension, diabetes, obesity and osteoporosis. Many of these projects were first supported by the US pharmaceutical company before NIH funds flowed in (Xiong et al. [2003](#)).

In March 1999, the US University sent a team to China to ensure that the Anhui research was ethically and scientifically sound. Five months later, regulators from the US Department of Health and Human Services launched an investigation into the US university's genetic research in China.

In March 2002, the department found that the genetic project in China seriously violated the regulations in multiple respects, including medical ethics, participant safety, and supervision and management (Yangcheng Evening News [2002](#)).

On 2 May 2003, the US university [Harvard] published the investigation results of the US government, which stated that there had been some procedural errors in supervision and record-keeping, but no participant was found to have been harmed in any way, so the school would not be penalized (HSPH [2003](#)). Some biomedical experts and ethicists in China expressed regret about these results. They insisted that the studies had apparently violated basic research ethics, and called for a joint US-Chinese review of the experiments (Pomfret and Nelson [2000](#)).

In this international research cooperation on a "genetic harvest", the actors and participants included both international and Chinese research institutes and research personnel, international companies, local government and the local residents who participated in the study.

During this cooperation, the US university [Harvard], from its commanding position as a world-famous, authoritative international scientific research institute with first-class research personnel and advanced technologies, attracted the participation of Chinese partners and sold them the idea of building partnerships and the opportunity for co-authorship with US research personnel in return for the provision of genetic resources used for research purposes. As a result, they obtained access to a valuable pool of research data resources.

In 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Health and the Chinese Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine jointly issued regulations limiting the export of special medical articles involving human genetic resources. However, most of the DNA samples the US team had collected in Anhui had already been shipped to the US. The principal investigator himself admitted that for the asthma research alone, 16,400 DNA samples had been transferred to the US (Zhao and Cai [2013](#)). In 2002 and 2003, he set up a biopharmaceutical company and a biopharmaceutical research institute in China. Several Chinese research personnel who had participated in the genetic project in Anhui became



his partners.

The US pharmaceutical company became the ultimate beneficiary after supplying research funds. As part of the agreement signed with the US university, they obtained the genetic information of Anhui farmers and claimed that it owned the relevant patents. In July 1995, the company announced that it was in possession of a large collection of asthma genetic samples from China. Soon afterwards, a large Swedish pharmaceutical company, invested USD 53 million in the pharmaceutical company for research into respiratory disease. The company's control of obesity and diabetes genes from China attracted another commitment of USD 70 million from a pharmaceutical giant. The stock price of the company soared from USD 4 per share, when it was listed in May 1995, to more than USD 100 per share in June 2000. Several of the company's senior executives earned a net profit of over USD 10 million each through trade in stocks (Xiong et al. [2003](#)).

In striking contrast, the research participants from China received very few benefits from the project. Chinese research institutes and research personnel did gain the opportunity of working with renowned international research institutes, access to research funds and the co-authorship rights to scientific papers published in international academic journals – all of which appeal to most Chinese scientists – but the local residents who participated in the studies received nothing but a free meal and an insignificant sum of money in travel and job leave allowances. In the words of a Chinese journalist, it was China's national interests and the unprotected Chinese farmers that were most harmed by the project, and it was the big US companies, research institutes and research personnel that received the real benefits (Xiong et al. [2003](#)).

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In November 1998, the Chinese Ministry of Health established the Committee of Ethical Review on Bio-medical Research Involving the Human Body. To regulate international cooperation in genetics, China promulgated the *Provisional Methods for the Management of Human Genetic Resources* in 1998, which clearly stipulated that international cooperation on China's genetic resources must be conducted on the basis of equality and mutual benefit, with a formal agreement or contract, the approval of the Chinese government and informed consent in the collection of samples.

In 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Health and the Chinese Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine jointly issued a notice which prescribed that special medical articles involving human genetic resources were not to be taken abroad without authorization. The *Methods for the Ethical Review of Human-involved Bio-medical Research (Provisional)* were promulgated in 2007.

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Zhao Y., Zhang W. (2018) An International Collaborative Genetic Research Project Conducted in China. In: Schroeder D., Cook J., Hirsch F., Fenet S., Muthuswamy V. (eds) Ethics Dumping. Springer Briefs in Research and Innovation Governance. Springer, Cham

## Notes

1. [1](#). These documents (and others referred to later) are not available in English and have therefore not been included in the reference list.

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#### About the author:

Michel Chossudovsky is an award-winning author, Professor of Economics (emeritus) at the University of Ottawa, Founder and Director of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal, Editor of *Global Research*. He has taught as visiting professor in Western Europe, Southeast Asia, the Pacific and Latin America. He has served as economic adviser to governments of developing countries and has acted as a consultant for several international organizations. He is the author of 13 books. He is a contributor to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His writings have been published in more than twenty languages. In 2014, he was awarded the Gold Medal for Merit of the Republic of Serbia for his writings on NATO's war of aggression against Yugoslavia. He can be reached at [crgeditor@yahoo.com](mailto:crgeditor@yahoo.com)

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