

Scienziato cinese che ha affermato di fare bambini geneticamente modificati è tenuto sotto controllo

By **Elsie Chen and Paul Mozur**

Dec. 28, 2018

SHENZHEN, China — The Chinese scientist who shocked the world by claiming that he had created the first genetically edited babies is sequestered in a small university guesthouse in the southern city of Shenzhen, where he remains under guard by a dozen unidentified men.

The sighting of the scientist, He Jiankui, this week was the first since he appeared at a conference in Hong Kong in late November and defended his actions. For the past few weeks, rumors had swirled about whether Dr. He was under house arrest. His university and the Chinese government, which has put Dr. He under investigation, have been silent about his fate.

Dr. He now lives in a fourth-floor apartment at a university guesthouse, a hotel run by the school for visiting teachers, on the sprawling campus of the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen's Nanshan District, where many of China's best-known tech companies, like Tencent, have their offices.

In November, Dr. He stunned the global scientific community when he claimed to have created the world's first babies from genetically edited embryos, implanted in a woman who gave birth to twin girls. While he did not provide proof that the gene-edited twins were born, he presented data that suggested he had done what he claimed.

Scientists in China and worldwide denounced the work he described as a step too far. Many Chinese scientists said Dr. He's project was emblematic of their country's intense focus on scientific achievement and a disregard for ethical standards.

On Wednesday, Dr. He was seen pacing up and down the balcony of his guesthouse, gesticulating in the air. At other moments, he could be seen talking to a woman who appeared to be his wife, who was carrying a baby swaddled in a white cloth. Two balconies attached to his apartment were fenced off by metal wiring.

That evening, four unidentified men in plainclothes stood guard outside Dr. He's apartment. One said, "How did you know that Professor He is here?"

It was unclear whether the guards were affiliated with the police, the university or another organization. The police in Shenzhen did not respond to a faxed request for comment, and the university did not answer phone calls.

When shown the video of Dr. He on his balcony, Liu Chaoyu, who co-founded the gene-testing company Vienomics with Dr. He, confirmed that it was his colleague. A member of the hotel staff also said that it was Dr. He who occupied the rooms, but would not give any more details.

Dr. He is allowed to make phone calls and send emails. Chen Peng, another co-founder of Vienomics, said he spoke to Dr. He several days ago about company matters. "He is safe," Mr. Chen said. "But I don't know his exact whereabouts or what state he is in."

Speculation on Dr. He's whereabouts spread after Hong Kong's Apple Daily newspaper said the scientist was under house arrest. The university then denied this, saying, "Right now nobody's information is accurate, only the official channels are."

China's domestic media, complying with a directive from the propaganda department, have been silent on Dr. He after an initial flurry of reports.

On Thursday night, Dr. He was seen watching television. On Friday, a dozen guards were stationed on the floor of his apartment, blocking a hallway. They declined to identify themselves.

At Dr. He's former office at the school's biology department, security personnel also guarded the hallway leading to his former offices, though traces of his presence remained around the building: A sticker advertising his name was stuck to an empty supply cabinet, and his photo and a brief biography were on a board listing the department's staff.

In a Nov. 29 notice to the staff of the university, the school told employees that they were prohibited from accepting interviews from the news media on anything related to the genetically edited babies.

"Do not discuss the contents or progress of the investigation, do not comment on the matter," it said.

Mr. Liu said he last saw Dr. He the day before the genetics conference in Hong Kong. He had no idea, he said, that Dr. He was working on genetically editing babies. "He said: 'There will be big news.' He had a smile on his face," Mr. Liu said.

In Shenzhen, Mr. Liu said Dr. He's shocking announcement had left a trail of destruction at his companies.

"He was extremely irresponsible to the employees, partners and investors," he said. "He did not discuss anything with us before he made his announcement and we had to deal with all of it unexpectedly."

Mr. Liu, who met Dr. He in 2015 at an academic conference, said the scientist had a "do first and talk later" style. "I personally feel the real driving force in his heart is fame and fortune," he said.

Dr. He had told the conference in Hong Kong in late November that he was proud of what he had done, saying he intended to engineer babies who would not be vulnerable to H.I.V. infection. But many scientists have noted that there are simpler ways to protect newborn babies from the infection.

Among the questions that Dr. He failed to fully address was the issue of informed consent, and whether his volunteers understood what they were getting into. Bai Hua, the head of Baihualin, an AIDS advocacy group that helped Dr. He recruit the couples, said that he now regretted doing so and was deeply worried about the families.