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# A transnational public inquiry into COVID-19 origins and global biosecurity: rebuilding trust with Confucian ethics and practical idealism

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Grounded in the notion of *xin* (trust) and practical idealism in Confucius' *Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu)*, this article proposes a transnational public inquiry into COVID-19 origins and global biosecurity amid the deepening international mistrust and escalating geopolitical conflict. Confucian ethics possesses critical and constructive moral power not only for envisioning a moral world order but also for offering practical socio-political mechanisms to realise it. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the urgent need for far more robust transnational biogovernance to address growing human-made and natural biothreats, a task that depends on trust across nations and cultures. Yet an information war over the origins of COVID-19 erupted globally at the height of the pandemic and continues today. Through the Confucian ethical lenses, the dispute reflects a comprehensive crisis of transnational trust, driven by the increasing dominance of power politics and the advance of de facto Cold War II between China and the US, each with its allies worldwide. To move forward constructively, Confucian ethics mandates, morally and socio-politically, an unprecedented Janus-like international public inquiry into tracing COVID-19 origins and enhancing global biosecurity and health security, which constitute a major human rights concern of our times. Classical Confucianism, along with other moral traditions worldwide that share the spirit of practical idealism, can reshape global power politics by upholding basic human values and improving intercultural and international trust.

## KEYWORDS

Confucian ethics, Confucius' *Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn)*, origins of COVID-19, global biosecurity and health security, public inquiry, trust in international relations, world politics, human rights

## 1 Introduction: Confucian ethics' critical and constructive power

It is a truism that trust-based international relations are indispensable for formulating and implementing effective responses to persistent and pressing global issues, such as war and peace, global poverty, climate change, emerging biotechnologies, and artificial intelligence. Another major global challenge—one that COVID-19 has underscored—is the urgent need to enhance global biosecurity and health security. Meanwhile, just as the vital role of air in human health is often taken for granted until it is lacking, the matter of trust in interpersonal, social, and international relations usually becomes noticeable only after it has been damaged, if not

destroyed. As the *Frontiers'* Special Research Topic on “The Erosion of Trust in the 21st Century: Origins, Implications, and Solutions” highlights, eroded and eroding trust in all aspects of our lives, including international relations, constitutes a salient and entrenched problem of our times. Yet, academic studies on trust in international relations and world politics remain marginalised, despite pioneering research and renewed efforts (Rengger, 1997; Ruzicka and Keatingb, 2015; Haukkala et al., 2018; Wheeler, 2020; Balzacq, 2022). Although global bioethics is a rapidly evolving subfield of practical ethics (Ten Have, 2016), few scholarly works exist on the ethics of trust in international settings (Nie et al., 2018).

Trust needs to be treated as a global-scale matter in two senses. First, any community, society, or nation on this planet must address the issue of trust, whether directly or indirectly, for its survival and flourishing. Second, trust and trustworthiness, along with the widespread presence of mistrust and distrust, constitute an elementary dimension of international politics. Although the spheres of trust in domestic and international affairs can be highly intertwined, the article focuses on the second sense of trust as a global matter, which concerns transnational organisations as well as people and institutions (states and others) across nations and cultures.

Practical issues at local, national, and transnational levels necessitate innovative ethical analyses, inquiries, and answers. Far from being sufficiently recognised, moral traditions from non-Western societies and the indigenous cultures in the West, such as Confucianism from China and Māori values from Aotearoa New Zealand, have rich ethical resources for addressing global challenges. This author's two contributions to the *Frontiers* trust project engage with classical Confucianism, specifically Confucius' *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn*), a seriously underappreciated masterpiece of socio-political philosophy and interstate ethics (e.g., Dong, 1992 [a. 100 BC]; He, 2025 [a. 200 AD]; Du, 2025 [3rd century]; Cheng, 2004 [11th–12th centuries]; Hu, 2024 [1074–1138]; Zhan, 2024 [16th century]; Chen, 2021 [1869]; Zhong, 2009; [1876] Kang, 2020 [1901]; Jiao, 2018), which has been treated principally as a classic of historiography. The preceding article has elaborated on what the Confucian practical idealism (or realistic idealism) is, why it features *xin* (trust, trustworthiness, faithfulness, truth) as a fundamental ethical principle in both domestic affairs and international relations, and how Confucian ethics can be revitalised to reimagine a moral world order for our times (Nie, 2026). Confucian interstate ethics offers a more morally sound system of thought than Chinese and Western political realism, particularly today's US-led prevailing realist school of international relations.

This article will further demonstrate both the critical and constructive power of Confucian practical idealism and its ethics of *xin*, which can enable not only the envisioning of an ethically ordered world but also the practical reshaping of world politics. Critically, it will first examine the “information war” on the origins of COVID-19 between China and the US, with their allies worldwide, and its broader geopolitical context in which de facto Cold War Two has been advancing. According to Confucian ethics, the global society's failure to reach a genuinely trustworthy answer on the source of the worst pandemic in a century, 6 years after its initial outbreak in Wuhan, China, is not just a scientific and political failure, but a moral failure at a transglobal level, a symptom of rapidly collapsing world order. Moreover, to help the international community move forward constructively, this article proposes an unprecedented Janus-like transnational public inquiry into tracing the origins of COVID-19 and

enhancing global biosecurity and health security by cultivating greater international trust, at least preventing its further deterioration. Such an inquiry should serve as a meaningful endeavour in an even more daunting but necessary mission that the international community, particularly global civil society, must undertake. That is: to remould global power politics and develop a moral world order in the spirit of practical or realistic idealism, a spirit powerfully pervading Confucius' *Spring and Autumn* and other Confucian classics more than two and a half millennia ago, as well as many other moral traditions of the world.

An immediate question regarding the methodology or hermeneutics of this study can arise: How can Confucius' *Spring and Autumn*, a 2,500-year-old text from China, be interpreted and applied to the theoretical and practical issues in the 21st-century world? Many may see the Confucian classics as anachronistic, being the products of ancient, patriarchal, and hierarchical societies. It is true that the historical environments of the Confucian canonical texts reflect the social orders and worldviews specific to early Chinese civilisation, which can be outdated today. However, as the preceding article has argued, the most fundamental moral and political questions in human affairs remain unchanged, despite significant historical changes. The guiding ethical spirit and core principles of classical Confucianism can transcend time and space. When read faithfully and creatively, their deeper values can be relevant and inspirational for addressing contemporary global challenges, as this article will further illustrate. In other words, Confucius' *Chunqiu* and other Confucian classics—indeed all ancient classics from cultures and civilisations around the world—are both anachronistic and timeless: rooted in the past yet continually offering insights and wisdom for the present and the future.

As discussed in the preceding article, it is crucial to appreciate that Confucius' *Chunqiu* is primarily a philosophical and ethical classic (*jing*), not principally a work of historiography (*shi*). For Confucius himself, it is through this book composed by him in his later life that he would be judged—either appreciated or condemned—by later generations (*Mencius* III.B: 11). Ever since the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD), traditional Confucian studies, particularly the New Script School, have highlighted that the *Spring and Autumn*, contains Confucius' “subtle but profound meanings” (*weiyan*) for a better world, as well as “great principles” (*dayi*) on what ought and ought not to be done (Dong, 1992 [a.100 BC]; He, 2014; He, 2025 [a. 200 AD]; Hu, 2024; Kang, 2012; Kang, 2020 [1901]; Pi, 2017 [1908]). As this chapter will further show, Confucian practical idealism is neither naïve nor utopian because Confucianism has an astute sense of reality, no less than political realism, and is inherently oriented towards better addressing practical issues in human affairs. Thus, Confucius' *Spring and Autumn* possesses both critical and constructive moral power in not only theory but practise for today's world.

## 2 Bleak realities: global bio-insecurity, information war on COVID-19 origins, the crisis of international trust, and the supremacy of power politics

### 2.1 A Confucian critique of world politics today

Confucian ethics can help us pinpoint what has gone wrong and what has truly been at stake. Through it, we can make a penetrating

diagnosis of some of the major ethical ills of world politics, as manifested in an international information war over COVID-19 origins. First, the bleak realities of the world today remind us that, echoing through the centuries, Confucius' ethical emphasis on the vitality of maintaining *xin* in all human affairs, including interstate relations. Particularly, the intense international controversy over the origins of COVID-19 is not just a debate over a virus; it is a crisis of truth and, by extension, a crisis of transnational trust and human solidarity.

Also, the more serious concern of Confucian ethics is the dangers posed by the ongoing rise of power politics and the supremacy of political realism, as in China during the times of Confucius and Mencius and as narrated and analysed in the *Spring and Autumn* and the *Book of Mencius*. In today's world, the development of a de facto Cold War II and the increasing risks of World War III, which constitute the geopolitical backdrop to the information war over COVID-19 origins, are especially worrisome.

Furthermore, in the *Chunqiu*, Confucius has criticised most of about 120 feudal states, which were overshadowed by a dozen more powerful states, including the Five Hegemonies, over a two-and-a-half-century period. But a major point of criticism has focused on Lu, Confucius's home state. Intriguingly, an ideal moral world order is also encoded in the chronicles of the 12 Dukes of Lu. In today's context, this means the necessity and possibility of holding the Party-state and authorities of China to ethical accountability not just to international norms but also to the values of indigenous Confucianism, as the section will indicate.

In the *Chunqiu*, moral judgements about what ought to be and ought not to be done are embedded in narratives of historical events. Descriptive accounts and normative analysis are thus not separated. Following this Confucian approach, this section presents an integrated descriptive-critical overview of global bio-insecurity, the global information war on COVID-19 origins, the crisis of international trust, and the looming supremacy of world power politics.

## 2.2 Increasing global bio-insecurity

The world has always been a world of risks. Confucius' *Chunqiu* records numerous natural and human-made disasters. They include solar eclipses, earthquakes, floods, droughts, hailstorms, unusual frosts and snowfalls, fires, as well as wars, thefts, and disrupted state sacrificial rituals. More significantly, in the *Spring and Autumn*, Confucius attributed important and deep moral meanings to natural disasters. Natural disasters were never merely natural. Rulers' responses to disasters and the occurrence of the disasters themselves were signs of whether rulers had lost the Mandate of Heaven to rule and whether bad governance had caused divine displeasure, in addition to people's suffering.

The COVID-19 pandemic should serve as a wake-up call for the wide range of problems that communities, nations, and global society face, which should be better addressed. It validates the urgency of significantly enhancing global biosecurity, biosafety, and health security in response to various invisible bio-swords of Damocles hanging over humankind (Lederberg, 1999; Fraser and Dando, 2001; Guillemin, 2005; Moreno, 2009; Fidler and Gostin, 2008; Kolbentz, 2009; Enemark, 2017; Trump et al., 2021; Kosal, 2021; Nie and Fitzgerald, 2021). Various biothreats are often

categorised as animal or natural vs. human origins. But the accelerating rate of emergence of zoonoses—human infections of animal origin—is mostly due to human factors. They include widespread animal use and animal production by humans, human-caused deforestation, and the human-altered climate. In recent decades, often caused by virus spillovers from wildlife to humans via intermediate host species, zoonotic infectious diseases such as the SARS epidemic, the H1N1 avian influenza, and Ebola have been rising globally (Garrett, 1994; Quammen, 2012; Linder and Jamieson, 2023).

In addition to the better-known dangers of biowarfare and bioterrorism (Lederberg, 1999; Guillemin, 2005; Moreno, 2009; Fidler and Gostin, 2008; Kolbentz, 2009; Nie et al., 2018), other more directly human-created biothreats, such as accidents associated with and possible deliberate misuse of emerging biotechnologies, are growing (Garrett, 1994; Fraser and Dando, 2001; Trump et al., 2021; Kosal, 2021). Leakage and other accidents have occurred in high biocontainment laboratories worldwide (Blacksell et al., 2024), where the most dangerous pathogens are probed and sometimes engineered to be more lethal and infectious in “gain-of-function” research. In general, it is much easier to forge bioweapons than nuclear bombs. The revolutionary gene-editing technique of CRISPR/Cas9 and other novel biotechnologies have made bioengineering super bioweapons even more easily and widely accessible (Fraser and Dando, 2001; West and Gronvall, 2020; Chattopadhyay et al., 2024; Nie, 2024). Driven by various motives, states and non-state actors will be more and more tempted to access and even exercise such super-biological means of power and destruction.

At the same time, the world is long overdue for establishing far more robust global bio-governance than what exists (Nie, 2020). Some international agreements and conventions already directly and indirectly deal with various aspects of biosecurity and biosafety in transnational settings. They include the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC, 1972, effective since 1975, most recently reviewed in 2022) and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, also known as the Biosafety Protocol (effective since 2003). However, so far, no international legal or regulatory treaty has specifically and systematically addressed global biosecurity, biosafety and health security. Because of its widely recognised lack of compliance monitoring and verification mechanisms, the BWC is hardly adequate in controlling the secret development of bioweapons. Essentially, no coordinated and dedicated institution exists within the United Nations or elsewhere to oversee transglobal governance of biosecurity, biosafety, and health security. The international community has not yet adequately recognised the full extent of the problem. The NATO report released in late 2020 on future security threats did not mention biothreats or biosecurity. Even the International Health Regulations of the WHO—the prominent legislation on global public health regarding infectious diseases and pandemics, in both versions of 2005 and the recently revised version of 2025—never highlight how to address one of the main root causes of epidemics or pandemics: global bio-insecurity. Any mismanagement of the human-made and natural biothreats mentioned above can easily cause local, national, regional, and global health crises.

Furthermore, there is a dearth of ethical visions. “Biosafety” and “biosecurity” are often used interchangeably. But this most conventional “security” approach, driven by national security concerns of individual states, is not just ineffective but can

fundamentally undermine transnational trust, cooperation, and solidarity (Enemark, 2017).

## 2.3 An information war on COVID-19 origins between China and the US and their allies worldwide

According to the ethical thoughts of Confucius' *Spring and Autumn*, the information war on COVID-19 between China and the US and their allies worldwide illustrates the perils that humankind can fall into when trust is lost at the international level, when countries turn against each other, when nations and peoples no longer believe each other's narratives, and when facts and truth become political weapons and commercial instruments. It displays that, when it has become even more desperately needed than ever in the face of pressing global challenges such as increasing biothreats, transnational and transcultural trust is extremely fragile and can be easily deteriorated in our age of scientific, political, social, and media polarisation and a geopolitical context of the development of de facto Cold War II.

Despite some laudable achievements, such as coordinating the global distribution of vaccines (Jecker et al., 2021), current transnational systems have failed in many aspects in efficiently responding to COVID-19. Most notably, there has been a total failure in reaching an adequate answer on the origin of SARS-CoV-2 with scientifically compelling and publicly available evidence. This failure has exposed many shortcomings and weak links in the international institutions and governance, as well as the erosion of international trust. They have once again revealed how powerful nation-states and geopolitical frictions can substantially undermine or even paralyse the existing world order, including the ethical norms and governing authorities and mechanisms of international relations and world politics. Given the transglobal impact of COVID-19, far better-coordinated and far more thorough international investigations into its origins should have been carried out or should be in progress. Unfortunately, due to global power politics and ideological clashes, finding a credible and trustworthy conclusion about the source of the novel coronavirus has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The world has become embroiled in a 21st-century type of information war.

Throughout history, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, human reactions to epidemics and pandemics have been entangled with politics and the ethos of societies and times, often resulting in or triggering discord and, in some cases, strife and violence between and among communities and nations (Snowden, 2020). Scientifically, tracing the origins of infectious diseases, especially a pandemic, is notoriously complex and time-consuming. Human knowledge of the origins of many epidemics, including the Black Death across 14th-century Europe (the bubonic plague pandemic that claimed 25–75 million lives), remains controversial. Still, the transglobal scale as well as the intellectual and emotional intensity of the politicisation and polarisation of the debate regarding the origins of COVID-19 are hardly seen in history.

First, the heated controversy over COVID-19 origins reveals a striking divide—mistrust and distrust—between the scientific community (including the WHO) and the general public in global society.

Despite disagreements among scientists (as is often the case in science), according to the mainstream scientific position, like SARS-CoV-1, which caused the SARS epidemic in the early 2000s, SARS-CoV-2 is believed to be zoonotic, meaning it jumped from animals to humans through an intermediate host species (Keusch et al., 2022; Worobey et al., 2022; Crits-Christoph et al., 2024; Pekar et al., 2025). However, no scientific evidence can conclusively prove the natural origin theory and rule out the possibility of unnatural origins (Chan and Ridley, 2021). For the public, as evident in massive media coverage and social media discussions, a crucial fact is that the initial epicentre of COVID-19 is in close proximity to China's first BSL-4 laboratory, located at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. With extensive international networks and support, the WIV stores the largest collection of bat coronavirus samples worldwide (Clarke and Er, 2021; Dewar, 2021; Markson, 2021). Coronavirus research has been conducted at both the BSL-4 laboratory and several other lower biosafety laboratories in Wuhan.

It is not hard at all to understand the intense public interest in the origins of COVID-19. Without any explicit ethical reflection, one can easily recognise, if not be overwhelmed by, the extraordinary moral weight of the possible scenario:

What if SARS-CoV-2, the virus that caused the worst pandemic in a century and the loss of at least 7 million human lives, originated from a laboratory leak or even deliberate bioengineering?

Of course, equating coincidence with correlation and causation is a logical mistake. This would be as absurd as believing that a rooster's early morning crowing triggers the sunrise. Nevertheless, it is equally irrational and irresponsible not to question whether the close proximity of the laboratories to the initial COVID-19 outbreak was purely coincidental. Instead, it is imperative to demand thorough and transparent procedures, as well as publicly accessible and compelling evidence, regarding the origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Second, and even more worrisomely, the controversy over COVID-19 origins exhibits the growing mistrust, rivalries, and hostility between China (an emerging superpower) and the US (an existing one).

In recent years, alongside China's general rise on the global stage, the Chinese Party-state has taken on more assertive, confrontational, and aggressive roles in international affairs. Adopting a quasi-war approach to the issue of COVID-19, it officially declared and draconianly implemented a "people's war" or "total war" against COVID-19 from the very beginning, including an "information war" concerning its origins (China's State Council Information Office, 2020; Xi, 2020; Shenzhen TV, 2021). Its forceful propaganda machinery has been promoting the theory of natural origins, denying any connection between the novel coronavirus and any laboratory in Wuhan. Yet, in the style of "wolf warrior diplomacy" or, more accurately, "Maoist Red Guard diplomacy," the authorities have inconsistently pointed to biodefense facilities in the US as a possible source. They dismiss any claims and evidence against the official narrative as "China bashing" and accuse those raising questions of "politicalising" (the English translation of "*zhengzhihua*" used in official propaganda) a scientific inquiry "with vicious motives" (People's Daily, 2021).

The Party-state endorses the conclusions of the WHO-China study regarding the most likely natural origins and the extreme

unlikely of laboratory leakage (from a lab in Wuhan). However, it exerted undue influence on the study concerning China's early responses and the origins of COVID-19, furthering its political agenda. Despite claiming to be open and transparent, the government refused to provide the raw data from early cases to its citizens and the global community. The Head of WHO, for whom data sharing should be a standard practise in global public health investigations, repeatedly criticised the Chinese authorities for withholding primary data, making scientific studies extremely difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, withholding and withdrawing data violate the information-sharing obligations of member states under the IHR, particularly Articles 6 and 7. Naturally, politically authoritarian and totalitarian regimes are not typically known for genuinely valuing and practising the norm of openness and transparency. Humiliating Dr. Li Wenliang, one of the courageous earlier whistle-blowers, was just the tip of the huge iceberg of the tight state control of information (Nie and Elliott, 2020). Ethically, the militaristic or biomilitaristic approach to the whole issue, biomilitarism in general, violates the cardinal principles presented in the *Chunqiu* and other Confucian classics, such as *ren* (beneficence, humaneness), *yi* (righteousness, justice), *li* (rites, rule-abiding), and *xin* (see preceding article), as to be explored more specifically elsewhere (Nie forthcoming c).

The US has retaliated on the issue (Jaworsky and Qioan, 2021). Donald Trump and his administration endorsed the lab leak theory, which ironically turned a valid concern into a widely rejected conspiracy theory. Joseph Biden's administration tasked the US National Intelligence Council (2021) with assessing the matter, resulting in ambivalent conclusions. Inquiries by the US Congress accused the Chinese Party-state and the WHO of covering up the real origins and delaying an initial critical investigation. They assert that "ample proof" exists on the possibility of the coronavirus being genetically modified and leaked from one lab in Wuhan (US Congress House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2021; US Senate Committee on Health Education, Labor and Pension, 2022). And, to enact a law that passed both the House and Senate without dissent, Biden signed a bipartisan bill to declassify much intelligence about COVID-19 origins, particularly any "potential links" with the WIV. US intelligence agencies remain divided over whether a lab leak or a spillover from animals is the most likely source of SARS-CoV-2.

The Chinese Party-state has counterattacked. In response to the US *COVID-19 Origin Act of 2023*, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs typically stated that China "strongly resents and firmly opposes [it]" and urged the US to "immediately stop politicising, instrumentalising, and weaponising the origin-tracing issue." Instead, what should be investigated are US military biological labs and bases around the world. The propaganda machinery has produced numerous items condemning the US's actions and statements. For instance, the specially commissioned article series in *People's Daily* (2021) labels the US's actions as "making and spreading lies," "poisoning the world," committing "wicked deeds," and being "despicable and evil." *Xinhua News* (2021b) characterises the laboratory leak conspiracy theory supported by the US as proliferating "three viruses": a "political virus with evil motives," an "information virus distorting the truth," and a "moral virus abetting hate." A report by a think tank of a prestigious university, published in both Chinese and English, sarcastically bestows "eight world's firsts" upon the US in response to COVID-19, including being the world's No.1 s in political

blaming, disinformation, and "origin tracing terrorism" (Renmin [People's] University of China, 2021).

Most recently, China's State Council Information Office (2025) issued a white paper titled "Covid-19 Prevention, Control, and Origin Tracing: China's Action and Stance." It iterates the above points, including the theory of the US origins of SARS-CoV-2. It is a response to a series of new reports in the US, which include *Muddy Waters: The Origins of COVID-19 Report* (2023) coordinated by Senator Roger Marshall, *After Action Review of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned and a Path Forward* (2024) by the House of Representatives' Select Committee on the Coronavirus Pandemic Committee on Oversight and Accountability, and *Holding China Accountable for Its Role in the Most Catastrophic Pandemic of Our Time: COVID-19* (2024) by a non-partisan commission convened by the Heritage Foundation (2024). Notably, the Chinese Party-state's white paper is a direct response to the ruling of the US District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, which ordered China to pay the state of Missouri \$24.49 billion in compensation for COVID-related losses.

Third, the controversy has expanded far beyond China and the US, becoming a radically polarising global dispute, pitting largely democratic nations against authoritarian countries with roughly half the world's population in one political camp and the other half in the other.

Almost immediately after the release of the WHO-China Study, a coalition of nations, including all European Union member states, Japan and South Korea, issued a joint statement calling for a truly transparent, independent, and international investigation. As a counter-response, Chinese diplomats rallied support from 48 countries, including Russia, Iran, and many nation-states in Africa and South America, urging the international community "not to politicise" [sic] the issue. While the list of these countries remains undisclosed, the Chinese UN office claimed that 78 nations supported the official Chinese position in a letter to the Director General of the WHO.

Not surprisingly, a significant dissonance between China and the West has been ensured. With hearty debate, mainstream media coverage and social media discussions in the US and Europe, it is widely believed that the deadly coronavirus originated in China, either in an animal market or a laboratory accident. In contrast, no meaningful public discussion or open debate has occurred in China. The great majority of people there believe that either the US or Europe was the source of SARS-CoV-2, as demonstrated by a nationwide cross-sectional survey (Zhu et al., 2023). It is worth noting that the absence of meaningful open debate in China should not be interpreted as a consensus or a lack of interest in the subject among Chinese people.

## 2.4 The geopolitical context: the erosion of international trust, the supremacy of power politics, and the advance of de facto cold war II

Confucius composed the *Spring and Autumn* in his later life because he was deeply "fearful" of the political and social upheavals and the moral decay of the entire world known to the Chinese at the time. We, human beings living in the 21st century, should be more fearful because of the bleak realities of world politics and the far more destructive military and political capabilities humankind possesses.

The global information war on the origins of SARS-CoV-2 revealed not just a severe and extensive erosion of international trust but an even deeper crisis of a rapidly collapsing world order, driven by the increasing supremacy of power politics and the advance of de facto Cold War II.

More perilously, the vocal and diplomatic dispute over the origins of SARS-CoV-2 has swelled into other areas of international relations (Cosentino, 2023). Rarely, if ever, in history has the origin of an infectious disease been directly linked to the initiation of new transnational military and security programmes. The Australian government was the first to publicly call for an independent and international inquiry, likening it to a weapons inspection. Consequently, along with other factors such as its open criticisms of China's human rights violations, Australia faced diplomatic frictions and a "trade war," with China imposing economic sanctions on several of Australia's major export industries (Hunson et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2023). Moreover, all of these have contributed to the formation of new global security initiatives by the US and its allies, such as AUKUS (a trilateral military pact with Australia and the UK) in the Indo-Pacific region, and other military developments.

The dispute over COVID-19 origins reflects and has fuelled growing geopolitical instability and rivalries between China and the US, the emergence of an officially undeclared but de facto New Cold War between the two culturally different and ideologically hostile countries, each with its allies globally. China's rise in recent decades—a remarkable story in human history—has far-reaching global consequences. Alongside Russia, China leads the global expansion of authoritarian rule and the further polarisation of the world into "liberal and illiberal spheres" (Foa et al., 2022). A war between China and the US, possibly triggered by the Taiwan issue (China's State Council, the Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office, 2022), is becoming increasingly possible, whether it will be "destined" or "avoidable" (Allison, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2014; Brands and Beckley, 2022; Rudd, 2022).

Global society must find constructive ways to prevent the debate on COVID-19 origins from further escalating into a new Cold War and potentially triggering a Third World War, an unthinkable prospect. Nuclear bombs were the defining weapon of the 20th century, but their threat to human existence was substantially reduced, even though only for some decades, through sustained efforts to promote disarmament and non-proliferation. This demonstrates the goodwill and creativity of humankind, as well as the possible effectiveness of transnational institutions and global governance. Similar institutions and mechanisms are urgently needed today to limit exposure to biothreats and enhance global biosecurity and health security. Unfortunately, nuclear threats, along with human-made biothreats, have been re-emerging in recent years in the development of the Russian war in Ukraine and de facto Cold War II.

The world is rapidly descending into an all-devouring vicious circle, a vicious circle of mistrust on a global scale, in which escalating geopolitical tensions and conflicts damage transnational trust and cooperation, paralysing transnational systems, which in turn exacerbate geopolitical tensions and conflicts. The need for better national security, prompted by military conflicts and de facto Cold War II, can provoke both rational and irrational collective actions by different nations. This, in turn, can further damage, if not destroy, the already fragile international trust and often deficient existing transnational institutions. As a result, individual countries'

pursuits of national security can deepen, rather than alleviate, the necessity for better global security. Realists from Thucydides onward have described and called this situation "the security dilemma."

Something constructive must be done to prevent humankind from descending into an even darker abyss before it is too late. A similar abyss, for which Confucius and Mencius were deeply concerned in the *Spring and Autumn* and the *Book of Mencius*, but unfortunately occurred in ancient China, an abyss from the chaotic and violent Spring and Autumn period to even more brutal and destructive Warring States period and to the establishment of the Qin Dynasty, one of the most despotic and draconian regimes in Chinese and world history.

### 3 Moving forward constructively: a proposal for a transnational public inquiry into COVID-19 origins and global biosecurity

Confucian ethics has not only critical power but can positively inspire creative moral imagination, guiding ethical values, and pragmatic collective actions. *Weiji*, the Chinese term for crisis, which means both danger and opportunity, has become a familiar phrase in international discourse in recent years. It captures the philosophical essence of *Yijing* (The Book of Changes), the oldest and foundational classic in Chinese civilisation for Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism), as well as the *Spring and Autumn*. This perspective derives from Confucian practical idealism (see the preceding article). However, as ancient Confucian philosophy emphasises, no crisis can become an opportunity without moral courage, wisdom, creative thinking, and individual and collective will and actions. Following this spirit of classical Confucianism, a transnational public inquiry is proposed here to help, as part of the positive force, transform the bleak realities overviewed in the previous section into opportunities for building more effective global governance of biosecurity and health security, thereby fostering a bio-safer and more prosperous future for humankind.

Expert-centred committee investigations constitute the predominant mode of international inquiries into science-related topics. Many international expert committees have undertaken to investigate various global issues. Soon after announcing COVID-19, the WHO commissioned the WHO-China Study on China's early activities, the high-profile WHO-China Study on the origins of SARS-CoV-2 (WHO-China Study Team, 2021), and an independent panel to examine international and national responses to the preventable pandemic. The second has been widely criticised, as shown in the previous section. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, a number of articles and open letters from researchers and the concerned general public have called for independent and rigorous investigations into COVID-19 origins (Relman, 2020; Bloom et al., 2021; Butler et al., 2021; DRASTIC (Decentralised Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19) Group, 2021; Harrison and Sachs, 2022; Carafano et al., 2023). One proposal suggests investigating the related biological and biopolitical issues under the auspices of the WHO, particularly in relation to the *Biological Weapons Convention* (Himmel and Frey, 2022). All of them explicitly or implicitly advocate investigations of expert-centred committees.

This article calls for a Janus-like transnational public inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 and global biosecurity. This section offers a sketchy outline, rather than a detailed practical blueprint, for such an inquiry.

Publicness constitutes the most distinctive characteristic of the proposed inquiry. Like successful investigations by expert committees, public inquiries must meet certain essential conditions, such as independence, transparency, reliability, truth-seeking, and procedural fairness. They should avoid conflicts of interest and be free from coercion, manipulation, or undue influence from governments and organisations. However, public inquiries differ from expert committee investigations in some key respects. Expert committee investigations are typically conducted by closed-door committees consisting of scientific and medical experts. In contrast, public inquiries are often led by respected and trusted socio-political leaders and are open to the public, including journalists, to serve the interests of society. Any transnational public inquiry should primarily serve the rights and interests of the general public and the global civil society.

The central terms of reference for the inquiry must encompass both the origins of COVID-19 and the improvement of global biosecurity, akin to Janus, the two-faced ancient Roman deity. The absence of satisfactory explanations regarding the source of SARS-CoV-2 has significantly contributed to the proliferation of contradictory conspiracy theories. The most effective means of countering these theories is to provide the public with credible and reliable information, supported by compelling and trustworthy evidence. It is crucial to recognise the unfounded nature of certain popular conspiracy claims (e.g., the notion of a bioweapon deployed by either China or the US). However, this acknowledgement should not lead to the dismissal of the possibility (e.g., accidental leakage from a BSL-4 or lower biosafety level laboratory) or the legitimate concerns surrounding biosecurity and biosafety in general.

The proposed inquiry should not aim to settle the debate over whether the origin of COVID-19 was natural (zoonotic) or human-made (research-related). This is ultimately a scientific question for scientists and scientific communities to uncover the truth. However, it should scrutinise what has gone wrong with the existing international system in probing the source of SARS-CoV-2. While it must avoid unproductive politics of blame, the inquiry should not shy away from the crucial and most challenging issue of accountability. It should critically investigate the roles played by various states and international organisations, including China, the US, the WHO, and scientific communities, in the unfortunate chain of events that led to the global “information war” surrounding the origins of COVID-19.

The focus of the proposed inquiry should be forward-looking, centred on how global society can better facilitate and organise more vigorous scientific investigations that will settle the matter of COVID-19 origins. Actually, the ultimate mission of the Janus-like inquiry should be more about the future than the past. It must methodically examine the blind spots, missteps, and, especially, institutional failures of the current international systems concerning the tracing of COVID-19 origins. Yet, undertaking this retrospective analysis is a constructive step towards achieving the higher goal of establishing more effective transnational biosecurity mechanisms and, in general, fostering cooperative international relations in an increasingly conflicting world.

Politicising public health responses to COVID-19, especially the issue of its origins, has encountered strong criticism not only from

Chinese authorities but also from the WHO Director-General and scientists (Xinhua News, 2021a; Associated Press, 2021). However, despite its negative connotations, the real problem is not politicisation per se, but rather the unethical politicisation of it. Public health is inherently socio-political because it relies on political will and collective actions. And not all forms of politics or biopolitics are equal. An “apolitical” approach to public health can ultimately serve to cover up and justify ethically problematic and wrong biopolitics, as well as complicity in them. Such an “apolitical” approach certainly contradicts the practical idealism of classical Confucianism, particularly its belief in the primacy of morality and ethics over socio-political practises as discussed in the first of these twin studies. What is needed, thus, is to identify, resist, and overcome morally misguided politics. For the proposed transnational public inquiry, a central task should be to reveal the predominant unethical strategies in politicising the issue of COVID-19 origins and explore ethical international biopolitics for better global bio-governance.

International trust must be at the central agenda of the proposed transnational public inquiry: identifying the causes of trust erosion, cultivating better trust among people across cultures and nations, and at least preventing its further deterioration so as not to further fuel geopolitical tension and conflicts. According to Confucian ethics, trust is not given; it must be cultivated, earned, and shared.

The proposed public inquiry sounds unprecedented, as the world does not seem to have existing international mechanisms to organise such an inquiry. But the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 origins, global biosecurity, and de facto Cold War II demand unprecedented responses. Meanwhile, there are numerous possible models from which such an inquiry can learn. One such model is the 1990s South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s investigation into human rights violations under apartheid, a public court-like inquiry chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Another is the aforementioned WHO’s Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, co-chaired by two female world leaders: Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, formerly the President of Liberia. The inquiry proposed in this article should be even more public and transnational than these two models, whose level of publicness and internationality was already outstanding. It should also be noted that the WHO’s Independent Panel has barely addressed the issues of accountability and COVID-19 origins.

A persistent and structural shortcoming of transnational systems and world politics lies in the dominance of one or a few great powers. Every effort should be made to avoid this pitfall when organising and implementing the proposed inquiry. One possible approach is to have social leaders from small and mid-sized nations, which represent the majority of the world’s nations, assume leadership roles. Also, representatives from the public and non-governmental organisations of the global civil society should be empowered to conduct the transnational public inquiry. In other words, the matters regarding the origins of COVID-19 and global biosecurity should not be left solely to scientific communities, national authorities, and existing international organisations. To better serve the interests of the global public, the proposed inquiry should seek their support while remaining fundamentally independent from scientific communities, governments of countries (regardless of their size or form of governance, whether authoritarian or democratic), and international organisations like the WHO and the UN.

Suppose the first outbreaks of COVID-19 occurred in a city in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) that hosted a BSL-4 lab with a large collection of coronaviruses. In such a case, a public inquiry would be nearly inevitable. Following a socio-political tradition in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries (Elliott and McGuinness, 2002), conducting public inquiries is a characteristic NZ response to disastrous events. Two common themes of these public inquiries are the pursuit of truth (to determine what happened) and a focus on prevention or improvement (how to prevent similar disasters in the future). Between 2012 and 2020, NZ conducted three major public inquiries that investigated the Pike River mine disaster, building failures in the Christchurch earthquakes, and the terrorist massacre in Christchurch, respectively. In medicine and bioethics, the landmark 1987/8 Cartwright Inquiry into an unethical research project at a national hospital openly scrutinised the country's medical practise, research, and education. It led to institutional reforms and long-term improvements, including the establishment of legislation-status codes and a national mechanism to protect patients' rights in healthcare and medical research more effectively (Paul, 2000; Nie and Anderson, 2003; Manning, 2009; Elliott, 2017). In 2023 and 2024, a Royal Commission of Inquiry, the highest form of public inquiry in New Zealand, was conducted to learn lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Obviously, it is too naïve to assume that implementing this socio-political mechanism of a small and geographically remote democratic country on a global scale would be easy. However, even though a transnational public inquiry into any global issue may have never been conducted to date, such an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 and global biosecurity is not just practically necessary but ethically mandatory.

## 4 Reshaping global power politics through Confucian practical idealism, along with other moral traditions around the world

Even more broadly, the proposed translational public inquiry should aim to contribute to an even more daunting mission that the international community needs to undertake. That is: to reshape global power politics and establish a moral world order in the spirit of practical idealism, grounded in fundamental ethical principles and human values. In this regard, Confucianism is far from alone, but rather in great company with other moral traditions of the world, such as today's well-established international framework of human rights.

### 4.1 Addressing a major human rights issue

The origin of COVID-19 and the challenge of improving transnational bio-governance constitute a human rights issue on a truly global scale. At the cost of millions of human lives, extensive social suffering and disruption, and massive economic damages, the most recent pandemic has displayed that these are matters concerning all human beings and across national boundaries. It is thus essential for everyone's human rights that the global society discover better practical ways to investigate the origins of COVID-19 and improve

global biogovernance. The historic *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) has firmly stipulated that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person" (Article 3) and "is entitled to a social and international order" in which human rights and human dignity "can be fully realised" (Article 28). In the COVID-19 context, the moral and political norm of human rights dictates that every person has a basic right to know the truth about the origins of the coronavirus and to live in a more biosecure world. Global society has a collective moral duty to determine where and how SARS-CoV-2 originated, an obligation owed to all humans. Our human rights normatively demand publicly available and convincing evidence to rule out any research-related possibilities, such as genetic engineering, laboratory escape, or mishaps during scientific expeditions.

The moral stakes and social consequences of not doing so are far too high for humankind. In the 21st century, in an increasingly interconnected world, people deserve much better than what has been evolving, and this may not come to pass if the international community does not take more effective actions. It has been widely acknowledged that searching for an adequate answer to the origins of SARS-CoV-2 is necessary to prevent and prepare for future pandemics and improve global public health. A transnational public inquiry into the source of COVID-19 can thus become a meaningful step to help not only safeguard individual rights but also the common good of humankind.

It is also a human rights issue for future generations. It is needed to establish a more positive precedent for the global community to handle international problems in the future. Failure to achieve this can jeopardise future generations' rights and wellbeing. Allowing the current situation to persist will establish a morally unacceptable precedent for managing global crises and averting future catastrophes. Otherwise, future generations will justly shame our generation for our gravely failed duties.

Nevertheless, here the purpose is not to argue in what ethical senses the issues of COVID-19 origins and global biosecurity constitute a major human rights issue. It can be philosophically better framed as a public health matter of the common good of humankind, rather than individual rights, or both. Also, the subject of whether Confucian ethics and socio-political values are compatible with human rights has been widely debated globally in recent decades. Here, the points are that the well-established international human rights frameworks necessitate the proposed Janus-like translational public inquiry and that Confucianism shares the fundamental spirit of practical idealism with the global human rights movement.

### 4.2 Following the spirit of practical idealism, upholding the primacy of morality

As Confucius' *Spring and Autumn* as well as other Confucian classics have shown, in addition to our innate drive to seek security and the truth, another unique aspect of humanity is our inclination and explicit efforts, individually and collectively, to engage with and endeavour to reshape reality—particularly the widespread existence of inhumanity, human wickedness, and grave moral failures—according to our moral ideals, sentiments, principles. Thus, many moral traditions, including the truly global human rights movements, are grounded in this spirit of practical idealism. This is one of many reasons why Confucianism, unsurprisingly, has significantly

contributed to the positive development of international human rights and can continue to contribute more. For example, Confucianism contributed directly to the drafting of the UDHR, including its First Article, which states that all human beings “are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Such expressions reflect Confucian beliefs in ethical and political cosmopolitanism, the inherent goodness of human nature, and the moral sense of a common humanity (see the preceding article). Indeed, due to Confucianism, human rights have long become a “Chinese value” (Svensson, 1966; Nie, 2011).

As stated in the very first entity in the *Spring and Autumn*, King Wen (1152–1050 BCE) has been revered in Confucianism as a sage ruler whose ethical governance and humane politics exemplify the spirit of practical idealism, the “kingly way” (*wangda*), the ideal of “benevolent polity and rule” (*renzheng*), and the vision of “all under heaven returning to humaneness” (*tianxia guiren*). Confucius and Mencius honoured King Wen for transforming a humble village beneath Mt. Qi into a model of humane governance, which was subsequently extended to his kingdom. Therefore, for Confucianism, ethically sound or exemplary practises in one local setting can and should be applied in more comprehensive contexts, both within a *guo* (state, nation, country) and *tianxia* (all under Heaven, the world). Earlier, the New Zealand practise of public inquiries has been invoked to support the proposed transnational public inquiry. In NZ, the Cartwright Inquiry transformed a medical research scandal into a constructive force aimed at systematically realising the rights of patients and research participants. This was achieved through reforming existing institutions and practises, establishing new ones when necessary, and revitalising bioethics primarily as a public discourse. Similar transformations can and should occur on a much larger scale, according to the practical idealism and cosmopolitan ethics of classical Confucianism.

A cornerstone of practical idealism is the belief in the primacy of morality. Just as human rights concerns and claims are primarily normative in nature, an illustrative example of this belief is the use of terms—“crisis of trust” or “erosion of trust”—as a normative claim. Despite significant historical differences between Confucius’ China and the 21st-century world, they share a crisis of trust in domestic and interstate affairs, a leading theme in the Spring and Autumn period. According to Confucius’ *Spring and Autumn* and its three canonical interpretative traditions (Gongyang, Guliang, and Zuo), the theme of the erosion of *xin* implies two claims: one descriptive and the other normative or ethical. The empirical claim describes a perceived “matter of fact” that trust, including interstate trust, had deteriorated markedly over the two and a half centuries that generations would later name as “the Spring and Autumn period,” due to the title of Confucius’ work. However, for Confucius, the diagnosis of “erosion of trust” in his and earlier eras means, foremost, a normative claim, with the empirical and historical claims being secondary. That is to claim, normatively, that socio-political life and interstate relations in the Spring and Autumn period were far short of classical Confucianism’s ethical principles and ideals, including its trust-related moral norms.

Similarly, in this and preceding articles, the term “the erosion of international trust” encompasses both empirical and normative claims. Empirically, the phrase suggests that trust between and among nations has been substantially eroded compared to the world order established after the collapse of the Soviet Union-led

communist bloc. As a result, the US slogans for foreign policies have evolved from “trust but verify” regarding the Soviet Union during the Cold War to “distrust and verify” in response to China today. Arguably, the world had experienced one of its golden ages of largely peaceful and trusty international relations—a remarkable achievement in the transformative process of historic globalisation—until the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in the 2020s. Yet, following Confucius’ *Chunqiu*, the term “the erosion of international trust” primarily makes a normative claim. This means that, even though the empirical claim can be tested or refuted through historical and sociological studies, the current state of trust in international relations falls far short of what is morally right or acceptable. In other words, even if the current international relations might be the best empirically compared to earlier ages, some collective and transglobal actions have to be taken to respond better to the calling of our ethical ideals and principles, not only today’s international human rights norms but the age-old ethics of classical Confucianism as well.

More importantly, practical idealism and its doctrine on the primacy of morality define humans first and foremost as moral beings and secondarily, political beings. However bad the reality may be and however challenging the practical issues are, these should not be the reason for us not to take action. Embodying the spirit of firmly upholding moral ideals and human values prevalent in the *Spring and Autumn*, Confucius was known even in his own time as “a person who tirelessly keeps on trying what he knows is hardly possible [but morally calling].” *The Analects* (Book XIV: 41) thus records:

Zilu [one of Confucius’ disciples] spent the night at Stone Gate. The morning gatekeeper asked, “Where from?” Zilu answered: “From the clan of Kong.” The gatekeeper said: “Oh, isn’t he [Kongzi or Confucius] the person who tirelessly keeps on trying what he knows is hardly possible [in practice but morally calling]?”

It is following this spirit of practical idealism—“tirelessly keeping on what is hardly possible in practise but morally calling” (*zhiqibuke er weizhi*)—that the Janus-like translational public inquiry was proposed.

Just as political realism is not unique to Western civilisation, practical idealism is not unique to Confucianism and Chinese civilisation. Among many examples, liberalism, along with liberal internationalism, has been a far more influential system of thought than Confucianism in the modern and contemporary world. Kant’s moral, socio-political and cosmopolitan philosophy lies at the core of the Enlightenment and liberalism. Echoing the Confucian spirit of practical idealism in interstate relations, the great 20th-century philosopher in the Kantian tradition proposed “the Law of Peoples as a Realistic Utopia,” an ethical framework for a just and peaceful international order (Rawls, 1999). In her process of elaborating on Kant’s doctrine on the moral kingdom of ends, a contemporary interpreter of Kant’s moral philosophy articulated the spirit of Kantian practical idealism with these words:

In ethics, we cannot always trim our concepts so that they will fit neatly onto the world. Sometimes what we must do instead is try to reshape the world so that it will be more adequate to our concepts (Korsgaard, 1996: 358).

This deliberately understated but beautiful remark about Kant's ethics, about human morality and its relation to reality, offers another way to summarise the spirit of Confucian realistic idealism and its practical implications for better addressing global issues. Of course, more in-depth comparative discussions will have to be carried out elsewhere.

## 5 Conclusion

The ethical spirit, vision, thought, and wisdom conveyed in Confucius' *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn*) possess critical and constructive moral power to help build a better world in the 21st century. The first of two articles for the *Frontiers* trust project has expounded how Confucian ethics of *xin* (trust, trustworthiness) and practical idealism *theoretically* envision a moral world order beyond dominant Western realist international relations. This second one explores how Confucian ethics can *practically* address the issues of COVID-19 origin, global biosecurity, and health security, thereby reforming the harsh realities of international power politics. Altogether, their main aim is to contribute to the building of a better world order and the further positive development of Confucian global ethics.

One of this article's key points is that classical Confucianism is in great company with many different moral and religious traditions of the world, which share the spirit of practical idealism and have contributed to the establishment and development of international human rights, among many other moral progresses humankind has achieved. But recognising shared transcultural grounds and a common humanity should not obscure the unique contributions Confucianism can make to global affairs. As this article has illustrated, these contributions include endorsing, justifying, and reassessing established global norms, as well as critically examining the realities of world politics through the lens of Confucian ethics.

The most distinctive contribution of Confucianism lies in holding the Party-state of China, an emerging superpower, to moral accountability in international relations and global governance, drawing on the most influential indigenous ethical and cultural tradition in Chinese and East Asian civilisations with an increasing global reach. This is against the political practises of the Chinese Party-state, which has shifted the complete condemnation in Mao's regime to co-opting for or hijacking Confucianism to serve authoritarian or totalitarian ideology and rule in recent decades. If China—the Chinese Party-state and its ideology that has masterly integrated political realism with utopianism, indigenous Chinese despotism with Western modern totalitarianism—has long been a big part of many global problems, including its failed duties to the international community on the origins of SARS-CoV-2, Chinese cultural and moral traditions—most prominently Confucianism—must and can be one of the necessary, constructive, and inspirational moral forces for the effective global solutions.

Meanwhile, this study has limitations and points to several directions for future research. More innovative work is needed to clarify the distinctive contributions Confucianism can make to shared human values, evolving global norms, and the resolution of

practical challenges. Further studies should also examine, both normatively and empirically, the claim that world politics *should* and *could* follow Confucian ethics and produce better outcomes, especially given that world politics has long been associated with domination of power under the Westphalian system. Greater elaboration is required on why we might assume that international actors share a commitment to truth and justice, and on how Confucian idealism might realistically overcome the forces of political realism, security dilemmas, and the vicious circles of distrust and mistrust.

To illustrate how Classical Confucian ethics could operate in today's world, this article has proposed a translational public inquiry as a constructive way to address the harsh realities of international politics. Yet this proposal remains largely a principled sketch and may appear overly idealistic. More creative research is needed to explore its practical dimensions—including concrete procedures, transnational institutions, international mechanisms, legal and political frameworks, funding models, leadership and membership structures, strategies for navigating existing political obstacles, and methods for securing cooperation from powerful but reluctant states, particularly China, where previous WHO initiatives have encountered significant barriers.

More specifically, the success of the proposed transcultural public inquiry, and, more generally, the grand cause of reshaping realist international relations and world power politics, depends on effective communication, especially intercultural and international communication. These two articles on Confucian ethics of *xin* and practical idealism emphasise the indispensable role of ethical principles and human values in rebuilding international relations and trust. This argument should and can be extended to promote ethically grounded, more creative and effective communication in global society. But, due to its scope and limited space, this article has not directly addressed the important issue of communication in international relations and world politics from Confucian ethics of trust and practical idealism.

Nevertheless, this and the preceding articles present the results of the first in-depth studies that revitalise the interstate ethics of Confucius' *Spring and Autumn* to reimagine international relations through a Chinese or East Asian system of thought and to open new practical pathways in global governance. Two main conclusions can be reached. First, as an essential part of the remarkable intellectual and spiritual creations in the "axial age" of world history, classical Confucianism, especially Confucius' *Spring and Autumn* (an internationally seriously underappreciated masterpiece of socio-political and interstate ethics), can inspire and sustain us with bold moral imagination and visions, guiding ethical values and frameworks, as well as pragmatic collective actions, in our deeply troubled 21st-century world.

Second, there exist compelling socio-political reasons for a Janus-like public transnational inquiry into a major human rights issue in today's world: what has gone wrong with investigating the origin of COVID-19, and how global institutions and mechanisms of biosecurity and biosafety can be improved. Such an inquiry must address the erosion of international trust and identify ways to move forward constructively in the context of increasing geopolitical tensions and conflicts, the growing dominance of power politics, and the emergence of a de facto Cold War II. The real issue is not whether

such an inquiry is morally imperative or even practically feasible. The real questions are:

Are we—as human beings who are, above all, moral beings—collectively faithful (*xin*) to our ethical ideals and principles? And does the global community possess the collective and political will to organise and execute it in pursuit of a more biosecure future and a renewed, trust-based, and morally grounded world order?

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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