US Economic Sanctions Against China: 
A Cultural Explanation of 
Sanction Effectiveness

Yitan Li

Recent patterns suggest that states are using economic sanctions more frequently. However, sanctions fail to achieve intended political or economic goals most of the time. To account for this anomaly, I introduce a culture-based explanation. The rationale is that sanction effectiveness cannot be solely judged by norms and standards of sender countries. Target countries’ cultural norms play an important role in explaining sanction effectiveness. Using cases of US economic sanctions against China, I show that the norms and beliefs of target countries play an important role in defining sanction effectiveness. The implication of the study is that senders of economic sanctions must take cultural responses and sensitivity of targets into serious consideration in order to deploy credible and successful economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool. KEYWORDS: Economic sanctions, US-China relations, political culture, foreign policy, constructivism, political economy, conflict and cooperation.

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AS A TOOL OF STATECRAFT HAVE BEEN STUDIED extensively and intensively. Recent patterns suggest more frequent use of sanctions than ever before. According to Hufbauer, Schott, Elliott, and Oegg (2007), more than sixty economic sanctions were initiated in the 1990s, almost a 100 percent increase from the previous decade. The existing literature suggests that sanctions fail to achieve intended political or economic goals most of the time. Scholars have reported success rates ranging from 1 to 30 percent. If sanctions fail so often, why are they used more and more? Under what circumstances are they most effective? Analyses of sanction effectiveness have yielded mixed results, partly because previous studies have not dealt with the culture factor as an explanatory variable.

In this article I introduce a culture-based explanation for sanction effectiveness. The rationale is that sanction effectiveness can-
not be solely judged by the norms and standards of sanctioning countries. Ang and Peksen (2007) point out that the perceptions of both the sender and target are important in explaining sanction effectiveness. While their study addresses “issue salience”—primarily a cost-benefit approach—I focus on the sociocultural dimension. In particular, target countries’ cultural norms play an important role in explaining sanction effectiveness. For instance, some target countries are more likely to surrender to accommodating demands than coercive ones. In this case, coercive-negative sanctions would be counterproductive, while accommodating-positive sanctions would be more likely to succeed. Therefore, the understanding of the culture and norms of the sender and target countries is a crucial part of evaluating sanction effectiveness. If the sender and target do not speak the same language, effective diplomacy may be undermined.

Using cases of US economic sanctions against China, I intend to demonstrate that the norms and beliefs of target countries play an important role in defining sanction effectiveness. The implication of my study is that employers of economic sanctions must take the cultural responses and sensitivity of target countries into serious consideration in order to deploy credible and successful economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool.

The Literature on Sanctions

Hufbauer et al. (2007) define sanctions as the “deliberate, government-inspired withdrawal, or threat of withdrawal, of customary trade or financial relations” (3). Baldwin (1985) treats economic sanctions as a form of economic statecraft: “organized actions governments take to change the external environment in general or the policies and actions of other states in particular to achieve the objectives that have been set by policy makers” (8). Assessments of sanction effectiveness are mixed, with the weight of opinion heavily on the side of failure. Sanction studies have gradually moved away from the question of “Do sanctions work?” to the more pertinent question of “Under what conditions are sanctions more likely to be effective?” (Pape 1997; Blanchard and
Economic sanctions can be grouped into different categories. Sanctions can be imposed unilaterally or multilaterally. For example, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter banned US grain sales to the USSR in 1979 and ordered a boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Those were unilateral actions. Sanctions against Libya provide examples of multilateral sanctions. In February 2011, after the civil unrest in Libya, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted an arms embargo against Libya and a travel and assets ban on Moammar Gaddafi’s government. The Security Council also ordered an investigation into his government’s crimes against humanity.

Discussions about the effectiveness of unilateral and multilateral sanctions have produced mixed views. Martin (1992) argues that multilateral sanctions, especially sanctions involving the cooperation of international institutions, increase the credibility of the sender. They could also increase the legitimacy of the punishment (Blanchard and Ripsman 1999). Moreover, when the sender is ready to bear heavy costs of sanctions, multilateral sanctions tend to be more successful. Eizenstat (2004) argues that multilateral sanctions, especially UN-endorsed sanctions, are more effective. Bapat and Morgan’s (2009) findings suggest that multilateral sanctions, especially those involving international institutions, have a higher probability of success than unilateral sanctions. However, multilateral sanctions often require the cooperation of multiple players. Unilateral sanctions might therefore be a relatively more effective foreign policy tool because they do not have to deal with the collective-action issue at the interstate level. When it comes to sanctions that aim to improve target countries’ human rights conditions, Peksen (2009) finds that multilateral sanctions have a poorer record than unilateral sanctions. Drezner (2000) argues that multilateral sanctions could be more effective than unilateral ones only if the
sanctions are coordinated within the bounds of the relevant international organization.

**Deployed Sanctions vs. Threatened Sanctions**

Another reason economic sanctions have not been effective could be because of a selection bias. Drezner (1998; 1999; and 2003), Morgan and Miers (1999), and Lacy and Niou (2004) all argue that economic coercion is more successful at the threat stage than at the imposition stage. The reason is that the target is more likely to comply with the sender at the threat stage in order to avoid the pain of economic sanctions. Once the target decides to take the hit, it is likely to have prepared to embrace the impact. Li and Drury (2004) and Drury and Li (2006), for example, find that using economic sanction threats against China to achieve human rights purposes is not only ineffective but also counterproductive.

This last observation is somewhat linked to my article here. The reason that threats may be more effective than deployed sanctions in some cases could be due to the target countries’ norms in dealing with threats. Some cultures may tend to view threats as disrespectful. As a result, these countries may be compelled by domestic reasons to act tough in response, making threats counterproductive.

**Negative Sanctions vs. Positive Sanctions**

Sanctions can be positive—actual or promised rewards—or negative—actual or threatened punishments (Baldwin 1985). Several studies have suggested that incentives work much better than punishments. For example, Cortright (2000) suggests that “inducement strategies have many advantages over coercive approaches, and that a diplomacy emphasizing positive measures over negative ones offers the best hope for building the long-term foundations of international cooperation and peace” (1). Li and Drury’s findings (2004) show that engagement would have been a much better strategy in the case of US sanctions against China for the purpose of improving human rights.
The mixed results for positive versus negative sanctions could also be linked to the target countries’ cultural norms regarding rewards and punishments. Take China, for example: Carrots are signs of respect and willingness to engage, while sticks are sure ways to make sanction recipients behave in a more withdrawn way. If the sender country does not fully understand and appreciate the cultural perception of the target country when imposing sanctions, sanctions may cause unintended consequences.

**Blanket Sanctions vs. Smart Sanctions**

One of the most common criticisms of the use of economic sanctions is their inability to discriminate. The intended goals of policy changes often aim at punishing political elites in the target country. But political elites are often better resourced, legally or illegally, to avoid the damaging effects of economic sanctions (Gibbons 1999; Selden 1999; Weiss 1999; Rowe 2000; Cortright, Millar, and Lopez 2001; Andreas 2005). Instead, the general public suffers the most. For example, sanctions against Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s had a devastating effect on Iraq’s economy and the food security of the population. Those sanctions largely failed to force Saddam Hussein and his regime to comply with UN Security Council resolutions. Cortright and Lopez (2002) argue that sanctions should be developed that maximize the target country’s costs of noncompliance while minimizing the target population’s suffering. For example, Drury and Peksen (forthcoming) show that multilateral sanctions that are designed for humanitarian purposes have no negative effects on women’s social rights. But such “smart” sanctions can only be designed if we understand the target country’s domestic political and economic systems, which are often shaped by its political culture.

**The Place of Political Culture**

One reason why there has been disagreement on the effectiveness of economic sanctions is that most studies of sanctions have only examined effectiveness from the imposer’s perspective. Only a
few studies have specifically addressed sanction effectiveness from the perspective of target countries. For example, Galtung (1967) provided an economic explanation of how sanctions affected individuals in Rhodesia. Kirshner (1997), using a “micro-foundation analysis,” examined how different types of sanctions affected different actor groups in the target country differently. One thing that has been missing is the element of culture. From a sanction recipient’s perspective, perhaps some cultures are more prone to coercion, whereas others are more prone to engagement.2

The concept of culture is hard to define. Almond (1956) defined culture as “particular patterns of orientations to political action” (396). Chilton (1988) acknowledged the difficulties of defining culture, but he identified several common characteristics, such as “sharedness” (something shared among the people), “behavioral” (observed public behavior of the people), and “comparability” (cross-cultural variations) (422–424).3 Culture is then a “way of relating” (Chilton 1988, 428). Even Alastair Iain Johnston (1995), a leading expert on Chinese strategic culture, admits that the concept of “strategic culture” remains “remarkably undefined” (1).4 Cohen (1997) also points out several key aspects of culture: “it is a quality not of individuals, but of the society of which individuals are a part; that it is acquired—through acculturation or socialization” (11).

In this article, I confine “culture” to the target state’s shared attitude or norm toward how to deal with conflict—more specifically, whether the target state is conflict-averse or -acceptant.5

The only existing study that deals with a similar question of culture in the context of economic sanctions is the work of Driscoll, Halcoussis, and Lowenberg. They argue (2011) that “states with close cultural ties are less likely to apply economic sanctions against each other than countries without such cultural linkages,” but “economic sanctions occurring between nations with cultural ties are likely to be more effective than sanctions occurring between nations lacking shared cultural attributes” (442). The goal of my study is to examine whether the cultural norms of both the imposer and recipient of economic sanctions have played a role in our understanding of sanction effectiveness.
Constructivism and Confucianism: 
The Theoretical Explanation

Constructivism

In this article I use constructivism as the main theoretical framework of analysis to remedy some of the existing weaknesses of the sanction literature. Constructivism could be an important theoretical lens to unlock the sanction effectiveness issue because of the theory’s focus on the agency part of the agency-structure debate. Realists and liberals both assume that the anarchical structure of the international system will cause actors to behave the way they do (Waltz 1959; Keohane and Nye 1977). Constructivists, however, argue that structure itself is not all-determining. Norms and ideas matter (Wendt 1992), and they are often shaped by political culture.

In the case of economic sanctions, Western governments may consider sanctions simply one of the tools in their foreign policy toolbox. Economic sanctions are a means to achieve economic or political purposes. Other countries, such as China or North Korea, may consider sanctions as a form of humiliation (Callahan 2010). Sanctions, particularly negative ones, may not be viewed simply as the sender country’s foreign policy tool but as a political signaling process, employing punishments that are often culturally not acceptable. Such sanctions would have far deeper meanings from the target country’s perspective.

Even more interesting, as Acharya (2004) points out, local populations are “not passive recipients of foreign cultural and political ideas, but active borrowers and localizers” (244). Therefore, norm diffusion may encounter “resistance,” “localization,” or “displacement.” In a sanction scenario, a sender’s economic punishment may be considered by the target as a humiliation, making it counterproductive. What’s intended as an effective policy, in this case, depends on the recipient’s perception about the norm. Sanction effectiveness must not only be evaluated based on the sender country’s standards, such as how much trade it reduces or how much in assets it freezes. Instead, sanction effectiveness must be evaluated based on the target country’s standards. Up to
this point, however, no research has addressed this issue in the context of economic sanctions.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Conflict Avoidance

In addition to constructivism, two interrelated Chinese theories or philosophies, Confucianism and Taoism, deserve mention. Confucianism stresses benevolence and mutuality as the two key principles to follow in a hierarchical and reciprocal relationship (Fox 1999). The Confucian hierarchy has become firmly embedded in China’s political governance. Domestically speaking, social and political obedience is the key to political governance. Elites must govern by virtue. Citizens must be loyal and obedient to the elites. Only then can the elites provide benevolent care of the citizens. Confucians also argue that the correct norms “cannot be found in people’s hearts but have to be imposed on them”; thus “there is an implication of a need for authoritarianism” (Chang 1998, 126). This view makes Western-style contestation against the government socially and politically unacceptable. As a result, political elites and citizens of China both prefer “moral persuasion” over “penal laws” as the correct form of governance (Fox 1999, 191).

Internationally, the hierarchical view can lead to a Sinocentric view of the world. The common Chinese view is that China has always been a great nation. China was indeed a great power—for example, during the Ming and early Qing dynasties. The humiliation of China in the late Qing dynasty and the early and mid-twentieth century only reinforced China’s desire to one day again become a great power (Callahan 2010). Henry Kissinger (2011) calls this Sinocentric view “Chinese exceptionalism,” meaning that “China did not export its ideas but let others come to seek them” (xvi). China today is clearly on the path of becoming a great nation again. The Sinocentric view and the great-power mentality have made China particularly resistant to being told what to do, especially by Western powers and countries that are relatively younger than China. The United States falls squarely in both categories.

As a closely related philosophy to Confucianism, Taoism also has played a significant role in shaping China’s philosophical
foundation. Taoism focuses on the relationship between humans and the cosmos. Taoists believe that humans must achieve harmony through Tao with the universe. Harmony comes from wu wei (action through inaction). One should always avoid head-on confrontation or conflict with others. The best analogy would be that water, the softest of all things, can easily flow around an obstacle to avoid direct confrontation with it. Yet water can also shape stones, the hardest of all things.

Reflecting Taoism’s influence, Chinese culture strongly favors conflict avoidance rather than confrontation. In terms of dealing with conflict and the glorification of war, “In Chinese culture generally the military virtues have ranked far less eminently than in European traditions” (Clarke 1999, 263). This is consistent with the Confucian philosophy of being obedient. Evolving from the Taoist conflict-avoidance principle, the Chinese culture also strongly favors a philosophy of “chi ruan bu chi ying,” which roughly translates into “open to persuasion but not coercion” or “yielding to softness but rejecting force.” Culturally speaking, the Chinese often believe that violence will only produce more violence and “never achieves the end intended”; hence, to “impose order by force only results in disorder” (Clarke 1999, 263). When individuals or countries are dealing with China, coercion can be counterproductive, while inducement or incentive can be effective. Cohen (1997) points out that in many East Asian countries “confrontation is avoided at all costs . . . while postponement and further attempt at conciliation are preferred” (40). Moreover, “aggressive behavior, outspokenness, and crude directness are completely unacceptable.” So Taoism supports the ethic of non-coercive or cooperative action (Callicott 1994).

This conclusion strongly suggests that Confucian and Taoist norms have been deeply embedded in Chinese norms, which, for the purpose of this discussion, can be characterized as benevolence, mutual respect, and conflict avoidance. When different Western norms are imposed on China, one can reasonably expect strong resistance.

Therefore, to link the above discussions to the issue of economic sanctions, I propose that sanction effectiveness must be understood from the norm of the recipient’s perspective rather
than solely from the norm of the imposer’s perspective. The Confucian and Taoist cultural traditions have clearly placed China on a path different from the cultural traditions of the West, in terms of what works as effective economic sanctions.

Case Analysis

In this study I introduce a cultural anatomy of the China case. I selected US sanctions against China as an initial point of investigation for several reasons. First, the United States and China are today the two largest economies in the world. Second, they have two distinctly different cultural environments, underscoring the importance of political culture. Third, in spite of their strong economic interdependence, the two countries still see each other as potential strategic competitors. Cautious optimism tells me that military conflict between Washington and Beijing is unlikely in the foreseeable future, yet economic quarrels and especially US domestic pressures to act tough with China are real. US economic sanctions are either a good way to signal a threat or a convenient means to accomplish some objective. In short, US sanctions against China make for an interesting case study.

I use the 2007 study of economic sanctions by Hufbauer et al. as the main source of data. I focus on Case 89-2, which is essentially a chronicle of sanction events from 1989 (at the time of the Tiananmen incident) to 2006. Because this is a small-n study, I use process tracing as the main methodological guideline. It must be noted that the use of process tracing does not aim at theory building but rather is a structured way to examine the cases in question. Process tracing is particularly useful for small-n analysis (Collier 1991), as it attempts to identify the intervening causal process (George and Bennett 2005). Moreover, process tracing is especially common and appropriate when the theoretical framework is constructivism (Wendt 1999). Of the many different forms of process tracing, I use the simplest one, which is a “detailed narrative or story presented in the form of a chronicle that purports to throw light on how an event came about” (George and Bennett 320 US Economic Sanctions Against China
2005, 210). The hope is to use a detailed narrative to suggest the possible causal processes.

Case 89-2

I now turn to the main focus of discussion: US economic sanctions against China intended to improve China’s human rights after the post-1989 Tiananmen incident. Between the evening of June 3 and the morning of June 4, 1989, the Chinese government ordered the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to disperse prodemocracy protesters who had gathered in Tiananmen Square since April. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, were reportedly killed. As a result of the crackdown, Washington immediately imposed a series of economic sanctions against China, some of which would have a lasting impact. These sanctions spanned the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. The sanctions and threats of sanctions mainly came from the executive and legislative branches of the US government. Various reasons lay behind them, but generally speaking in the Tiananmen case, they can be classified into two categories: those related to Most Favored Nation (MFN) trade status and to non-MFN-related sanctions. The MFN-related sanctions and sanction threats became the main focus of US debate and action. My main goal is to show how these coercive sanctions, particularly Clinton’s decision to condition China’s MFN renewal on Beijing’s human rights performance, violated the recipient country’s cultural norms, resulting in what many believe were “inconsequential” results in terms of influencing China’s human rights behavior (Taylor 2010, 52).

The need to renew MFN status for China was due to two US trade acts: the 1951 Trade Agreements Extension Act and the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment. President Harry Truman terminated MFN status for China on September 1, 1951, as part of a broad US trade policy shift toward all communist countries. The Jackson-Vanik amendment stipulates that the US government should deny MFN status to countries with nonmarket economies that restrict emigration, but allows the president either to certify the target country’s compliance on an annual basis or issue waivers to renew MFN status. The question in the China case
always focused on whether China’s MFN status should be renewed or revoked, and whether its status should be linked to its human rights record.

In the five years after the Tiananmen incident, twelve bills were introduced in Congress to either revoke or condition China’s MFN status. None of the bills successfully achieved its goals. As Hufbauer et al. (2007) point out, the Tiananmen sanctions failed miserably. The annual effect of sanctions on China’s economy was negligible: only $0.28 per capita. Regarding the sanctions policy results on a 1 (failure) to 4 (success) scale, Hufbauer et al. rated the Tiananmen sanctions 1. In terms of the contribution of the sanctions to the intended policy change on a scale of 1 (negative) to 4 (significant), Hufbauer et al. rated this case 2. The overall success score of the sanctions was only 2 on a 1 (outright failure) to 16 (significant success) scale.

As Taylor (2010) points out, the fact that the Chinese leadership did not do more when faced with the threat of MFN withdrawal is very puzzling, “particularly given the enormous economic and political stakes Beijing apparently had in securing MFN renewal” (54). Taylor provides several convincing economic and rationality-based explanations. Furthermore, by the time Bill Clinton was campaigning for president, China had a $15 billion trade surplus with the United States. Even Clinton believed at the time that in any US showdown over trade benefits, China would yield. But in the end, it appeared not to be a “dollar-for-dollar calculation of the balance of trade” (Mann 1998, 276). Why were these sanctions ineffective? I believe there is a deeply embedded cultural reason.

First and foremost is a matter of definition: Washington and Beijing have two significantly different notions of human rights. The US definition is clearly based on Western norms, which value participation, contestation, and civil liberty. The Chinese definition is very much Confucian-driven. Chang concludes that “Confucians not only did not talk about ‘human rights,’ they did not talk about ‘rights’ at all.” As a matter of fact, “Confucians did not think it meaningful to say that a person can make such claims simply because he is a human being.” Confucians did maintain, however, that “people should treat each other as fellow human
beings and help one another to live a good human way of life.” The correctness of the norms upon which people should treat each other is primarily defined and imposed by the higher elites. As a result, if people follow these correct norms and respect one another’s proper roles “there should be no serious differences and no need for anyone to assert and fight for his ‘rights’—there should be, not confrontation, but harmony” (Chang 1998, 132–134). In fact, Chinese president Jiang Zemin has pointed out on multiple occasions that the most basic human right is the “right to survival”; otherwise, one cannot even begin to talk about other rights (Jiang 1999). He was probably speaking under the Confucian prescript of conforming to the collective interests of the state rather than seeking rights as individuals.

As a matter of fact, if one examines China’s responses to US sanctions and sanction threats, the lack of effectiveness of the US sanctions can immediately be seen. Earlier, I identified three preferences as norms that shape China’s understanding of the human rights issue and China’s general policies in dealing with the US pressure: the (Taoist) preference for conflict avoidance; the preference for persuasion (inducement or engagement) instead of coercion (punishment); and the preference for not being lectured to as a great power (the Sinocentric worldview), especially in public.

Thus, from a cross-cultural comparative perspective, what the United States perceives as a simple punishment for China’s human rights violations and a demand for China to improve its record is very likely considered by the Chinese government as insulting and humiliating. Rather than being confronted, Beijing would prefer soft engagement strategies. In regard to foreign policy issues, it always prefers nonconfrontational strategies and expects the same in return. If, however, Chinese concessions are unrewarded, especially when they are met with Western coercion in return, Beijing enters an eye-for-an-eye mode. Once a foreign power uses coercive force, Beijing will reciprocate and will be unwilling to revert back to engagement. The following series of events clearly show China’s preference for the cultural norms identified above.

Right before the first Tiananmen anniversary in May 1990,
China released 211 prisoners arrested in the previous year’s protests. Analysts believe that China was trying to engage the United States by extending an olive branch in anticipation of the upcoming renewal of its MFN status. In another incident, the Hong Kong *South China Morning Post* confirmed on May 22, 1993, the early release of two prominent human rights activists: Xu Wenli, who was a leading participant in the Democracy Wall movement of the late 1970s, and a Catholic cleric, Bishop Casimir Wang Milu (Kohut 1993). President Bill Clinton was scheduled to decide by June 3 that year whether to attach conditions to China’s MFN renewal. Analysts believe that the early releases showed clearly that the gesture was aimed at appeasing Washington (Agence France-Presse 1993). Then, on April 23, 1994, China unexpectedly sent a prominent political prisoner, Wang Juntao, to the United States for medical treatment. The *South China Morning Post* quoted a Western diplomat in Beijing as saying that “China has played its ace” and that “it will be difficult for its critics in [the US] Congress to top this” (Crothall and Beck 1994). As a further gesture of goodwill, just days before Clinton’s MFN decision, China granted an exit visa to dissident Yu Haocheng, allowing him to leave for the United States (Agence France-Presse 1994).

This strange tug of sanction wars—what Taylor (2010) refers to as China’s “smile offensive”—would continue on an annual basis for a number of years, always preceding the US vote on renewal of MFN status. Beijing also tried to avoid a direct confrontation on the human rights issue during Clinton’s 1998 visit. Instead, it simply waited until after Clinton’s visit to arrest fifteen democracy advocates, some of whom received substantial prison terms. The “clean the house after the party” approach sent a message to Chinese dissidents that the United States would not be able to come to their rescue and that Beijing still had absolute control.

While China definitely prefers accommodating Washington, it did not bow to US pressures. In some cases, Beijing actually became more repressive and often played the human rights issue in a strategic way. As a result, in the aftermath of the crackdown and the US push for better human rights, repression actually
increased. In November 1989, China’s Communist Party Central Committee reportedly issued a 39-point document calling for increased state planning and new restrictions on private enterprises. For the most vocal group of protesters, university students, their time to graduate lengthened. Prior to 1989, college or university students needed four years on average to graduate. In the years immediately after the 1989 protests, many universities across the country, including Peking University and Tsinghua University, the top two universities in China, added one year of mandatory military training at the beginning of the university curriculum (to impose “discipline” on students), lengthening the time required to graduate to five years.

On May 28, 1993, President Clinton signed an executive order, supported by then Senate majority leader George Mitchell and Representative Nancy Pelosi, to link China’s MFN status to its human rights performance. Clinton’s goal was to force China to make “significant progress” before MFN status could be renewed. Keep in mind that Beijing had already released two prominent dissidents to placate Washington in the weeks prior to the decision. Washington not only did not reciprocate with a favorable decision; it explicitly linked MFN renewal to the human rights issue. Clinton’s 1993 decision essentially became an ultimatum for Beijing (Mann 1998).

Clinton’s decision violated all three cultural norms identified earlier. First, China tried to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States over the human rights issue. However, Washington refused to let China circumvent the confrontation by placing the human rights issue at the center of US-China relations. Second, although China preferred persuasion (an accommodating strategy) to coercion, Washington handed Beijing a clearly coercive demand: improve human rights or not be granted MFN treatment. Third, Washington lectured Beijing on what it should do to improve human rights and, more importantly, did so very publicly and with reference to a non-Confucian definition of human rights. One could easily expect Beijing to be furious and humiliated.

Clinton’s 1993 decision was momentous in the sense that it changed China’s position from being willing to appease or placate the United States to playing hardball. According to James Mann
(1998), in preparation for Secretary of State Warren Christopher’s visit, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights John Shattuck had been dispatched to Beijing for exploratory talks. While in Beijing on February 27, 1994, Shattuck met (not surprisingly, as arranged by the US Embassy) with China’s most prominent dissident, Wei Jingsheng, who had recently been released from a 15-year prison sentence. The meeting, seen by Shattuck and other US officials as standard operating procedure, angered Chinese officials and violated Chinese cultural norms. Beijing accused the United States of interfering in its internal affairs. In a show of defiance, one week after that meeting and on the day Christopher left Washington for Beijing, China arrested Wei Jingsheng and 15 other human rights activists (Mann 1998).

Christopher’s three-day visit turned out to be the “most discordant high-level meeting between America and China since the Nixon opening,” with both sides filled with anger (Mann 1998, 301). While meeting with Chinese premier Li Peng, Christopher was told that “China will never accept the United States’ concept of human rights” (Mann 1998, 301). When China was under US threats to condition MFN renewal, it made sure that nothing in public would appear conciliatory toward the United States. It treated Clinton’s secretary of state with disdain, a clear instance of eye-to-eye defiance. China would soon learn that it had scored a major victory. Coupled with US domestic pressure from the business community, Clinton announced on May 26, 1994, that it would delink MFN renewal from China’s human rights performance. Clinton’s coercive threats turned out to be ineffective and counterproductive. Mann’s analysis (1998, 311) suggests that “Clinton’s retreat on human rights made matters worse than if he had never imposed his MFN conditions.”

On the other hand, China welcomed accommodating US policies. By May 1994 Washington realized that the MFN sanctions had “reached the end of the usefulness of that policy”—in other words, that “Chinese concessions amounted to nothing more than a set of superficial, cosmetic measures” (Taylor 2010, 54). For example, after President Clinton announced in May 1994 that future renewal of MFN status would be independent of China’s human rights issues, China reciprocated by saying that it was ready to reopen bilateral talks on human rights.
Similar practices by Beijing have gone far beyond the 1989 Tiananmen sanctions. In recent years, especially since Hu Jintao succeeded Jiang Zemin as China’s supreme leader, one could argue that to some degree China has imposed much tighter political control on its citizens. A recent example is the international community’s call for China to release the 2011 Nobel Peace laureate, Liu Xiaobo, and allow him to go to Oslo to receive the award. That effort not only did not lead to his release but instead led to increased isolation for him and his wife. This is a clear sign that China has a different set of norms defining human rights. Efforts to convince Beijing’s leaders to relent on Liu fell on deaf ears as once again they were not about to have foreigners tell them what to do.

All these events show that Chinese leaders prefer a conflict-avoidance approach in dealing with US sanctions. Conflict avoidance is a deeply embedded Chinese cultural assumption and practice. However, if conflict cannot be avoided, Beijing prefers an engagement strategy much more than coercion. In the language of economic sanctions, this can be translated into a preference for incentives and inducements rather than punishments. The case analysis above and several other previous studies have shown that positive engagement would be more effective and coercion could be counterproductive (Peksen and Drury 2009; 2010; Peksen 2010), largely because Chinese culture assumes that coercive punishment is disrespectful. Beijing especially does not want to be lectured to by the United States or any foreign power, and certainly not in a public way. But more importantly, such lecturing challenges the Sinocentric hierarchy in which Beijing considers itself the center of power, which will become particularly important as China’s status continues to rise in the years to come. Beijing will be increasingly resistant to being told what to do. This point is also consistent with Tong Zhao’s (2010) findings that, historically, all “strategic sanctions” against China have failed.

**Conclusion**

This preliminary case study shows that norms matter in terms of defining sanction success. Norms can be defined by both the
sender country and recipient country. More specifically, when the sender country and recipient country do not share the same set of norms, the effectiveness of intended sanctions is questionable. In the case of US sanctions against China, the United States simply considers economic sanctions a tool to convey its foreign policy messages. US norms do not necessarily consider punishing sanctions as confrontational and insulting. From China’s perspective, however, a much softer and less confrontational approach to dealing with human rights issues is preferable. Chinese norms often consider sanctions imposed by the United States as insulting and humiliating. As a consequence, China often reacts negatively to US sanctions but positively to accommodating incentives.

These findings have several implications. Washington must take account of China’s definition of human rights and understand that China’s preference regarding conflict resolution is based on a different set of cultural norms. Confrontation is to be avoided and accommodation is welcomed. These preferences are deeply embedded cultural norms that can hardly be altered. If Washington is truly interested in implementing policies that would change China’s behavior, it should avoid confrontational policies. Cooperation may be more effective for sanctions to be more effective. Washington should also impose sanctions that have clearly defined and measurable goals with no unspoken political purposes attached.

My study may serve as a springboard to a broader range of cases that would involve other countries and cultures. Future research may include the examination of US economic sanctions against North Korea, Myanmar, and Iran. North Korea presumably shares many similarities with the China case and therefore might be a case that either strengthens or disproves my argument. A study about how sanctions have fared against North Korea’s three different leaders in the Kim dynasty would be interesting. With the recent warming of relations between Washington and Naypyitaw, the Myanmar case could serve as a case where sanctions might have had positive effects on the intended US policy goals, since they may have contributed to the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar’s recent democratization. The Iran case would definitely be an interesting example of how the cultural
norms of the sanctioned country have influenced the effectiveness of economic sanctions. Can we attribute the softening of positions by President Hassan Rouhani compared to those of his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to successful sanctions against Iran?

Another possible direction for future research might be to assess changes in China’s reaction to sanctions as a recipient and behavior as a sanction imposer since China became more assertive internationally. As a sanction recipient, Johnston points out that a country’s strategic culture does change, but very slowly, "lagging behind changes in ‘objective’ conditions" (1995, 1). Whether a rising China is reacting differently to US and other countries’ sanctions now that its status has changed would be worth examining. As for China as an imposer of sanctions, James Reilly’s (2012) recent research suggests that as China rises, there are signs that its leaders are rethinking criticisms about unilaterally imposed sanctions, particularly by the United States. China has begun to impose unilateral sanctions more frequently on other countries in order to defend its economic interests overseas. It would be interesting to look at the role China’s political and strategic culture plays in imposing sanctions on others.

Notes

Yitan Li is assistant professor of political science at Seattle University. His research focuses on international relations, foreign policy analysis, international conflict and security, and Chinese and East Asian politics. He has published in a number of journals, including Asian Affairs, the Canadian Journal of Political Science, Foreign Policy Analysis, International Studies Perspectives, and the Journal of Contemporary China. He can be reached at liy@seattleu.edu.

I would like to thank Cooper Drury and Dursun Peksen for their encouragement and comments on an earlier version of the paper, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments. I also would like to acknowledge the support of Seattle University’s College of Arts and Sciences faculty research fellowship for this project.

1. One may ask, What country doesn’t prefer cooperation to coercion? I do not try to argue whether a sanction recipient prefers cooperation over coercion. My analysis focuses on what works between cooperative and coercive strategies.

2. Several other studies have also identified the importance of under-
standing sanction effectiveness from the target’s perspective. For example, Hovi, Huseby, and Sprinz (2005) identified three conditions under which imposed sanctions are likely to work—namely, “an initial underestimation on the part of the target regarding the impact of the sanctions,” “a miscalculation on the part of the target as to the sender’s intention to actually impose sanctions,” and “an incorrect perception on the part of the target” (cited in Taylor 2010, 21–22).

3. For example, in some cultures, conflict avoidance is preferred, while in others, resistance is preferred. One example of the latter might be the seemingly perpetual struggle of the Israelis and Palestinians.

4. Johnston interprets strategic culture as variables that are “consistent and persistent historical patterns in the way particular states (or state elites) think about the use of force for political ends. That is, different states have different predominant sets of strategic preferences that are rooted in the ‘early’ or ‘formative’ military experiences of the state or its predecessor, and are influenced to some degree by the philosophical, political, cultural, and cognitive characteristics of the state and state elites as they develop through time” (1995, 1).

5. It can be very hard to pinpoint specific elements of a culture. In this study, the main norms and values I look for are a shared attitude and beliefs in dealing with conflict. In order words, what are shared practices by the Chinese to deal with conflict, whether domestically produced or foreign imposed? The historical elements are China’s conflict resolution in general and responses to US sanctions and sanction threats specifically as a result of the 1989 Tiananmen incident.

6. One can argue that the egocentric or nationalistic way of approaching international affairs is not unique to any particular culture. The difference in the Chinese case, however, is that China did once indeed achieve a semblance of “international supremacy.” That supremacy was bluntly defeated by foreign powers at the turn of the nineteenth century. China fell from the position of a “great man” to the position of the “sick man of Asia.” Such a dramatic fall from grace created traumatizing and xenophobic consequences, making the Chinese extremely resistant to foreign demands and pressures.

7. Since China has one of the oldest state traditions, it perceives almost all countries in the international system as relatively young. The United States in particular has a history of less than 300 years.

8. The 89-2 case contains multiple-year sanction events, all related to the Tiananmen incident. For that reason, Hufbauer et al. (2007) treat all the individual sanction episodes as one major sanction event. In order to maintain consistency for comparison with other cases in the future, I decided to use their classification of events instead of breaking them up into individual cases.


10. In the context of this law, the right to emigrate is considered a human right. The amendment is generally believed to be a response to the former Soviet Union’s refusal to allow Jews to immigrate to other countries.
11. Taylor (2010) identifies several reasons for Beijing’s reluctance to offer concessions under US pressure, including the insecure position of the Chinese leadership and Beijing’s belief that the Clinton administration would not be able to execute the threat of MFN withdrawal.

12. The annual congressional debate over China’s MFN status went on for almost another decade. Beijing soon learned that most of Washington’s sanctions against China had political goals. For example, labor unions and business groups lobbied Congress to either revoke or grant China MFN status, and the US government often spoke in different voices as between the White House and Congress. Clearly, Washington did not always have a unitary policy in dealing with Beijing (Mann 1998), which became an advantage for Beijing. In several cases, in anticipation of US criticism for China’s human rights performance every year before the congressional renewal of the MFN status, China would “round up the usual suspects” only to release them in order to placate Washington.

13. Wei would later be handed another 14-year sentence. He would be released in 1997 for medical reasons and exiled to the United States.

14. Going beyond the strict context of sanctions and into the general context of conflict resolution, examples of cultures where coercion or resistance is preferred can be found in the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Thomas Friedman (2000) has used the fight over the “olive trees” to symbolize the culture of resistance rather than conflict avoidance in that arena.

References


Weiss, Thomas G. 1999. “Sanctions as a Foreign Policy Tool: Weighing
The China Journal

Cutting-edge scholarship about China and Taiwan

The China Journal is a cutting-edge source of scholarship, information, and analysis about China and Taiwan. TCJ has published informed and insightful commentary from China scholars worldwide and stimulated the scholarly debate on contemporary China for more than thirty years. With its reputation for quality and clarity, the journal has proven itself invaluable for instruction and research about one of the most significant regions in the world.

Audience
China studies scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and related scholars.

Editors: Andrew Kipnis and Luigi Tomba
Sponsor: The Australian National University College of Asia and the Pacific

2014 Individual Subscription Rates:
Electronic + Print: $31

To Subscribe:
Online: www.journals.uchicago.edu/TCJ Phone: 1 (877) 705-1878 (U.S. & Canada, toll-free) 1 (773) 753-3547 (International)

Individual Subscription Rates valid through December 31, 2014. Additional shipping and taxes applied to international orders.

CHICAGO JOURNALS
www.journals.uchicago.edu