Angela Poh, *Sanctions with Chinese Characteristics: Rhetoric and Restraint in China's Diplomacy*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 372p. $134.66

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is no stranger to sanctions. It was greeted at birth with U.S-led sanctions, and these only intensified when the PRC entered the Korean War in October 1950. After the visit of U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1972, these sanctions were gradually eased, but Beijing's brutal crackdown on regime protestors in 1989 elicited a reimposition of sanctions from the United States and other like-minded countries. Some of these sanctions—such as the restrictions on weapons exports to the PRC—continue to this day.

Beijing has thus had ample time to formulate its position on sanctions, and as a state that has long chafed under their imposition, its stance is both strong and consistent. Unsurprisingly, the PRC opposes unilateral sanctions, sanctions imposed by states outside of the United Nations (UN) framework, and sanctions which are targeted at states due to their human rights record, meant to shape or condemn their domestic political affairs, or intended to influence their governance model (125). That being, and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the PRC is not against sanctions in all instances. The PRC has stated its willingness to consider sanctions when there has been a consultative, consensus-building process "leading to authorisation by the UNSC"; when other less "coercive" means have been exhausted; and when the sanctions will be oriented towards the situation at hand, regularly reviewed, monitored for efficacy, and rescinded as quickly as possible (126). This, at the very least, is the PRC's publicly stated view.

But does its rhetoric match its practice? Dr Angela Poh's answer in *Sanctions with Chinese Characteristics* is that—despite the increasing leverage the PRC has to impose sanctions—in most cases the answer is yes. This is so even when Beijing faces situations in which its economic or political interests might lead us to expect otherwise. That being, the operative term here is "most cases." Poh's central argument is that the PRC is to an important extent constrained by its rhetoric when it comes to imposing (or opposing) sanctions. Beijing does see a need to keep its actions aligned with its words, and Poh argues that this stems from its concern for international opinion and fear of the "international audience costs" hypocrisy would impose on its status and standing. At the same time, Poh posits that hypocrisy unnoticed is hypocrisy unpunished, and consequently the mechanism of international audience costs only operates when there is an outside party that calls Beijing out for deviating. Interestingly, Poh suggests Beijing can be prompted to realign its behaviour to its rhetoric not only by being shamed but also by being flattered into action. To test these arguments, Poh examines the PRC's record at the UN and also potential cases where it imposed sanctions unilaterally.

For the former, Poh offers both a broad survey of the PRC's voting behaviour over the history of its time on the UNSC as well as more focused cases studies on PRC conduct vis-à-vis efforts to mobilise UN sanctions against North Korea, Syria, and Guinea-Bissau. Poh finds here support for her arguments, and in particular posits that the PRC supported sanctions against North Korea and opposed them in the case of Syria for reasons of rhetorical consistency. Significantly, the PRC also supported sanctions in the case of Guinea-Bissau despite the fact these were meant to support democracy—a seeming violation of Beijing's principles. Poh argues that, in the absence of actors decrying this apparent hypocrisy, the PRC was willing to let these regionally-supported sanctions proceed.

As for the latter—the PRC's unilateral use of sanctions—Poh paints a more complicated picture. Looking at a variety of suspected cases, Poh finds "at best partial support for the argument China used economic sanctions to pressure other states it had disputes with from 2008 until March 2018"; where evidence of sanctions did exist, "the sanctions could not reasonably be

characterised as 'high' or 'impactful" (214). The much-trumpeted rare earth embargo on Japan in 2010, for example, "apparently lasted less than two weeks… There is no evidence of a negative impact in the months immediately following the dispute" (198). Beijing's more recent treatment of Australia she also finds was "more bark than bite," a view that accords with others' broad findings, even if this glosses how certain individual companies or sectors may have suffered.[1] All said, she finds that when comes to the PRC's unilateral sanctions, they have generally been ambiguous, officially denied or framed as regulatory actions, and more symbolic than substantive. Bluntly, they have largely been a damp squib. Why? Here too—with few exceptions—Poh argues rhetoric played a restraining role—making explicit recourse to sanctions would be hypocrisy, as thus Beijing found itself limiting and obfuscating its choice to use punitive economic measures.

While one might have wished for more engagement with literature on what motivates PRC behaviour on the UNSC more broadly—as sanctions are one in a number of measures that it can choose to impose or veto—as well as greater investigation into how the PRC domestic public can be mobilised to impose unofficial, unilateral sanctions, there is no denying this is an important contribution. Going forward, as the PRC grows more powerful, it may well find that the resort to sanctions a temptation that is harder to resist. But Poh's excellent study shows us that for the most part the PRC has up to this point been held back by fetters of its own making.

References

[1] Parton, Charles. 2021. "Empty Threats? Policymaking amidst Chinese pressure." Council on Geostrategy Report, https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/07/Report-SBIR01-07072021.pdf (accessed 10 December 2021).