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Non-Meritocrats or Choice-Reluctant Meritocrats? A Redistribution Experiment in China and France[*]

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Abstract

Recent experimental evidence suggests that meritocratic ideals are mainly a Western phenomenon. Intriguingly, the Chinese public does not appear to differentiate between merit- and luck-based inequalities, despite China's historical emphasis on meritocratic institutions. We propose that this phenomenon could be due to the Chinese public's greater reluctance to make an active choice in real-stake redistribution decisions. We run an incentivized redistribution experiment with elite university students in China and France where we vary the initial split of payoffs between two real-life workers to redistribute from. We show that Chinese respondents consistently and significantly choose more non-redistribution across different status quo scenarios. Additionally, if we exclude the individuals who engage in non-redistribution choices, Chinese respondents do differentiate between merit- and luck-based inequalities, and do not redistribute less than the French. Chinese respondents are as reactive as the French towards scenarios with noisy signals of merit, such as inequalities of opportunities. We argue that the reluctance to make an active choice signals diminished political agency to act upon redistribution decisions with real-life stakes, rather than apathy, inattention, having benefited from the status quo in Chinese society, or libertarian preferences among the Chinese. Notably, our findings show that the reluctance to make a choice is particularly pronounced among respondents of working-class or farming backgrounds, while it is absent among individuals whose families have closer ties to the private sector.

JEL Classification: C91, D31, D63, D91, H24, P39

Keywords: Meritocracy; Fairness Preferences; Spectator Games; China-France Comparison; Beliefs; Redistribution; Status Quo Bias; Market Economy in China

1 Introduction: the Unmeritocratic & Inequality-loving Chinese?

How much a society should redistribute is one of the central questions of political economics, and fairness concern is one of the major factors influencing redistribution decisions. Previous research often discusses fairness views within a certain meritocratic framework, where inequalities based on one's merit (ability, effort) are considered fair, while those based on factors beyond one's control (luck, privilege, etc.) are considered unfair. Accordingly, in the past literature investigating determinants of redistributive preferences using survey experiments, researchers often use questions on respondents' beliefs about different sources of inequalities, such as whether respondents think inequalities in the society mainly come from entrenched privileges, or if one can achieve success mainly through personal efforts, directly as proxies for whether respondents think that such inequalities are fair or not.[1]

A recent strand of literature (Almås et al., 2020, 2025), however, uses experimental methods to question the universality of such meritocratic fairness preferences and quantify to which extent such a meritocratic fairness framework is shared by different populations in the world. In this literature, a spectator game design is often employed where a third-party spectator is asked to redistribute money between a winner who is awarded a certain sum of money, and a loser who is awarded nothing. The main source of variation is how the winner is selected—between a **merit** scenario where he or she completes a task better than the other, or a **luck** scenario where the winner is decided by a lottery. The most extensive research using this method is Almås et al. (2025), where this spectator experiment was implemented in 60 countries across the globe. The authors concluded that there are significant variations in the degree of meritocratic fairness preferences across countries, and that richer countries tend to exhibit a larger proportion of individuals favoring meritocracy overall.

The country that drew our attention in this branch of literature is China. Not only

[1]For an example, see Alesina et al. (2018). In the introduction, the authors write that "Americans are thought to view the market system as relatively fair, and to believe in the 'American dream,' i.e., the notion that one can make it from rags to riches with sufficient effort.... In contrast, Europeans tend to believe that the economic system is unfair and that wealth is the result of family history, connections, and sticky social classes." In this passage, the importance of personal effort and social mobility are used as synonyms for fairness.

did it implement one of the highest levels of inequalities among all countries in the Almås et al. (2025) study, it was also one of the two countries that redistributes almost as much when the inequality is due to merit as when it is due to luck.[2] Similar results about the Chinese public's non-meritocratic and inequality-loving preferences were also found with a redistribution study involving Chinese and Norwegian children (Cappelen et al., 2024), as well as a survey experiment study in which researchers primed a representative panel of Chinese citizens with stories of getting rich by lucky opportunities, and witnessed a significant decrease in the propensity to redistribute (Belguise et al., 2025).

The aforementioned findings are somewhat counter-intuitive, in particular given China's long history of a deeply meritocratic selection system. The Imperial Civil Service Exam selecting senior civil servants enabled high levels of social mobility as early as the 7^{th} century (Wen et al., 2024), and abundant evidence suggests that it has shaped many aspects of modern-day China, including but not limited to a very strong cultural attachment to exam-based meritocratic selection and high investments in education (Ho, 1962; T. Chen et al., 2020; S. Chen et al., 2022).

In this paper, we hypothesize that the seemingly non-meritocratic and inequality-loving preferences of Chinese respondents could be due to a strong reluctance to make an active choice in real-stake redistribution decisions. Expressing revealed redistributive preferences is to make a political choice and to realistically change other people's lives, which means bearing the responsibility for this change and potentially generating conflicts. It is thus plausible that Chinese citizens, living in a culture that emphasizes stability and conformity, could be less willing to express their preferences and may therefore be more reluctant to deviate from the status quo than their Western counterparts.

In addition, existing examples of spectator games often employ a "winner-takes-all" design, where the winner and loser start with a very unequal original split (status quo).[3] Under this "winner-takes-all" status quo, if the Chinese respondents are reluctant to make **any** changes to the distribution, regardless of the source of inequality,

[2]The other country with similarly non-meritocratic preferences in aggregate is India.

[3]In Almås et al. (2020) and Almås et al. (2025), the default option is 12 monetary pieces for the winner and 0 for the loser.

it would appear that they preferred a very unequal split and did not distinguish between merit- and luck-based inequalities.

We test this hypothesis with an adapted spectator game design, where we varied the initial split between the winner and the loser. For half of the sample, we asked the spectator to redistribute from a very unequal initial split (12 monetary pieces for the winner and 0 for the loser), and for the other half a more equal initial split (in which 7 monetary pieces are given to the winner and 5 monetary pieces to the loser). If it is choice reluctance—instead of a true preference for high inequality—which drives the final redistribution decision of Chinese spectators, we would expect to see the Chinese participants choosing the status quo more often than French spectators under **both** equal and unequal initial splits.

Besides choice reluctance, we also test two alternative hypotheses. One is drawn from the political philosophy literature, where Mulligan (2022) suggested that, in China, meritocratic selection is valued as a means to the end of having a higher total surplus, which means Chinese citizens are more likely to tolerate a member on top of society having a head start, as long as he or she is competent in the role and increases total social surplus at the same time. We test this hypothesis by introducing a trade-off between rewarding people proportionally to their merits and maximizing total social surplus: while the winner in this condition had as much merit as in the **merit** scenario, attributing more resources to him or her came with a cost for total social surplus. We also test the hypothesis that Chinese respondents may have libertarian fairness preferences and regard all inequalities as fair, by introducing scenarios with mixed signals about merit, such as inequalities of opportunities, and compare the redistributive behaviors of respondents in these scenarios with those in the **merit** and **luck** scenarios.[4]

Between the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023, we implemented an online survey experiment with Chinese and French elite university students, the demographic groups for which one could expect meritocratic principles to be the most salient. France was selected as a comparison group because it has a similar tradition of meritocratic selection of elites as China, but is the polar opposite of China when it comes

[4]**Luck** scenario refers to the pure lottery luck scenario. We hereafter systematically use the term **Luck** scenario throughout the paper.

to reluctance to make a choice in redistribution, or voice public opinions in general.

Our main results are the following. Overall, we find that even the elite Chinese university students (in the Chinese population, the group for whom meritocratic concerns could be expected to be the most salient) implemented "unmeritocratic" distributions in the aggregate. The gap between amounts given to the loser in the **luck** and **merit** scenarios is small in magnitude and only marginally significant. However, this result is almost entirely driven by choice reluctance: Chinese respondents played the status quo more often than French respondents in both initial splits and in all scenarios. When we remove the status quo players from the sample, we find that the respondents who do not play the status quo display a significant merit-luck gap. Furthermore, the raw amounts they redistributed are not significantly different from those of the French non-status quo players in the unequal initial split.

Interestingly, among Chinese respondents, those with weaker ties to the market economy—e.g. children of farmers and workers as opposed to children of small business owners or managers—were significantly more likely to stick to the status quo. This is also the case of respondents who gave more conformist answers, claiming that they conformed to the researchers' goal—even though the questionnaire pushed them to adapt their choices to the scenarios' specificities. Taken together, this suggests that status quo play might reflect a lack of political agency: respondents who plausibly did not grow up thinking that political agency was an option were less likely to deviate from the status quo split, even when pushed to do so. Importantly however, Chinese respondents were significantly more likely to deviate from the status quo when they were assigned to the unequal split. This suggests that they trade off the discomfort of deviating from the status quo against the perceived unfairness of said status quo.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we recapitulate the relevant literature and discuss our contributions. We give a detailed explanation of our hypotheses and the selection process of our Chinese and French elite university sample in Section 3. Section 4 details the experiment protocol. Section 5 presents the results and Section 6 discusses the mechanism of choice reluctance in light of political agency (or lack thereof), as well as our exploration of the respondents' comprehension of the

experiment. Section 7 concludes.

2 Contributions to the Literature

Our paper contributes to the literature in the following ways.

First of all, our paper is broadly related to the vast literature investigating the determinants of redistributive preferences using survey and lab experiments (Cruces et al., 2013; Kuziemko et al., 2015; Karadja et al., 2017; Alesina et al., 2018; Stantcheva, 2020; Hoy & Mager, 2021; Alesina et al., 2023). As previously mentioned, one of the limits in the current literature on redistribution experiments is the underlying assumption of universally shared meritocratic redistributive preference. A second limitation is that, until recently, this literature mainly focused on Western countries—although Henrich (2020) and Nisbett (2004) both showed that many preferences and habits of thoughts often assumed by Westerners to be universal are sometimes far from being shared by non-Westerners. We contribute on this front by connecting ourselves with the recent advance in the literature that deviates from this aforementioned paradigm (Almås et al., 2020; Cappelen et al., 2024; Almås et al., 2025), and we go one step further by showing that the seemingly unmeritocratic redistributive preferences previously demonstrated in China could be driven by other underlying cultural or political motivations: such as lower political agency and higher choice reluctance among the Chinese. A resistance to moving away from the status quo might be mistaken for low redistribution propensity or unmeritocratic behavior when the status quo is extremely unequal.

The spectator experiment design we build upon has been widely used to investigate the role of preferences and beliefs in driving redistributive choices.[5] Implementing respondents' choices with real-life stakes is indeed meant to provide incentives for respondents to think carefully about their answers, while unincentivized survey elicitation of preferences can result in very noisy measures (Nisbett, 2004). In addition,

[5] Durante et al. (2014); Bortolotti et al. (2017); Mollerstrom et al. (2015); Tinghög et al. (2017); Almås et al. (2020); Andre (2021); Müller and Renes (2021); X. Chen and Schøyen (2022); Preuss et al. (2022); Cappelen et al. (2022); Madland and Strømland (2022); Cappelen et al. (2023); Lobeck (2023); Bartling et al. (2023); Z. Huang et al. (2023); Dong et al. (2024); Sartor and Yusof (2024), for instance, had recourse to such a design.

Aguiar et al. (2013) and Konow et al. (2020) further showed that third-party spectator experiments seem to perform better at eliciting preferences than experiments involving stakeholders, as the latter appears to make self-serving choices and exhibit in-group bias. However, our results shed light on a caveat of such spectator experiments: if some respondents are reluctant to make choices that will affect others, this incentivization method can act against its initial aim of preference elicitation. The closest to our paper is Telle and Tjøtta (2023) who similarly showed that making the choice to not redistribute more salient significantly increased the share of respondents who do not implement any redistribution. In comparison to their design, we go further by showing that the share of respondents who stick to the status quo may vary greatly across countries, which could threaten cross-country comparisons, and by investigating the factors driving choice reluctance.

In addition, our paper also relates to the literature that studies cross-cultural psychology and compares the thought processes of Western and Eastern cultures. A rich literature is dedicated to describing psychological and behavioral differences between the East and the West (For instance, Nisbett (2004); Cai et al. (2011); Bartling et al. (2015)) or between the West and the rest of the world, such as the seminal study by Henrich et al. (2010) which coined the term WEIRD and their subsequent argument about the origin of this difference (Schulz et al., 2018). In our paper, we contribute to this literature by testing and rejecting the hypothesis in Mulligan (2022) that the East Asian meritocracy is "consequentialist", which is to say that East Asians only value meritocratic systems as a means to an end of having a higher total social surplus. However, we do find evidence consistent with previous findings that the Chinese respondents think more holistically, and are more likely to put the situation into context, rather than thinking in terms of simple abstract principles.

What is more, we also contribute to the literature specifically trying to understand the determinants of redistributive preferences in China. There has been a range of past studies attempting to decipher if there are salient social cleavages with respect to redistributive preferences in China (Smyth et al., 2010; Xun, 2015; Y. Chen et al., 2017; An & Ye, 2017; X. Huang, 2019; Yang, 2019). Most of these studies are descriptive, except a few recent experimental studies (Y. Chen et al., 2017; Mu, 2022; Belguise et al., 2025). The paper that comes the closest to ours is Almås et al. (2022),

which also tried to look at cross-country differences in the propensity to redistribute among China, Germany, and the United States. Compared to their study, we delve deeper into the potential mechanisms driving the stark cross-cultural differences in redistribution propensities between China and the West in an experimental setup.

Last but not least, our paper contributes to the literature on political agency and entrepreneurship in the Chinese context. In our study, respondents whose parents have closer involvement in the private market economy are significantly less likely to play the status quo. We consider this a supportive piece of evidence that private economy exposure increases political agency, which is also documented in the Chinese context by Li et al. (2006) and Kao et al. (2022). The former empirically demonstrated that private entrepreneurs are more likely to enter politics in areas with weak market infrastructures, while the latter showed that entrepreneurial elites are more likely to ask for political representation, in contrast with the rest of the population who prefer public services. Our findings also echo the hypothesis made by Nisbett (2004) that trade activities in Ancient Greek culture explain its debate culture compared to Ancient China's emphasis on agriculture.

3 Hypotheses and Contexts

3.1 Hypotheses

Choice Reluctance Previous redistribution experiments in China reveal very low redistribution levels regardless of whether inequality is driven by luck or merit. We hypothesize that this pattern may not indicate genuine anti-redistributive or anti-meritocratic preferences, but rather a form of **choice reluctance**—that is, a tendency to avoid changing the status quo.

While such behavior is rare in Western samples (Fischbacher et al., 2023), we suggest three mechanisms for its prevalence in China: (1) lower emphasis on individual agency in collectivist cultures (Nisbett, 2004); (2) social desirability biases in survey responses (International, 2017); and (3) limited civic participation under an authoritarian regime, where political decisions (including redistribution) are perceived to be within the state's purview (Whyte, 2010).

We test this hypothesis by varying the initial endowment: a highly unequal (12/0) split versus a moderately unequal (7/5) one. If Chinese respondents consistently preserve the initial split more often than French respondents, this would suggest status quo bias rather than substantive anti-redistributive preferences. Notably, a genuine preference for low redistribution would predict downward adjustment from 7/5, not simply sticking with it.

Deontological vs. Consequentialist Meritocracy Political philosophy distinguishes between **deontological** and **consequentialist** meritocracy (Mulligan, 2022). In the former, common in Western contexts, rewards are viewed as moral entitlements proportional to individual merit. In the latter, associated with China's imperial tradition, meritocracy is a means to promote collective welfare.

This distinction leads to different implications when (1) opportunity is unequal, or (2) rewarding merit reduces overall surplus. A deontological meritocrat prioritizes fairness in individual effort, while a consequentialist may prefer more productive—even if privileged—individuals.

We test this by introducing a condition in which merit-based reward reduces total surplus. If Chinese respondents are more consequentialist, they should redistribute less under this trade-off than their French counterparts.

Libertarianism An alternative explanation for low redistribution among Chinese respondents—even in luck-based scenarios—could be **libertarianism**: the belief that any outcome, even if based on chance, is legitimate.

Lottery-based treatments may overstate such tendencies, as lotteries are often perceived as fair (equal chances, voluntary participation). To better test libertarian views, we introduce scenarios involving ambiguous merit signals: noisy performance rankings, unequal opportunities, or narrow performance gaps. If Chinese respondents redistribute similarly across all scenarios, this would suggest true libertarian indifference to sources of inequality. If not, it would imply sensitivity to perceived merit—even if lottery-based inequalities appear tolerable.

3.2 Subject Selection

We focused on elite university students in China and France, a population for whom meritocratic selection is both personally salient and institutionally embedded. This group is directly exposed to high-stakes academic competition and is therefore best positioned to articulate views on meritocracy. If even among these highly selected individuals we observe deviations from meritocratic ideals, the implications for the broader population are likely stronger. Moreover, elite students are logistically easier to access and relatively homogeneous in age, academic background, and career orientation, facilitating meaningful cross-country comparison.

Our Chinese sample was drawn from former "Project 985" and "Project 211" universities—flagship institutions regarded as the apex of China's higher education system. Admission is based almost entirely on the National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*), widely viewed as the cornerstone of China's meritocratic system despite persistent concerns over unequal access to educational resources.

In France, we surveyed students enrolled at Sciences Po Paris and at other *Grandes Écoles*, including those preparing in Classes Préparatoires. These institutions are the functional equivalent of Chinese elite universities in terms of selectivity and elite reproduction. Admission typically involves competitive entrance exams or selective application procedures, and students are explicitly trained for leadership roles in politics, administration, and business.

While both countries employ academically selective systems, their political cultures diverge. French students, especially those in elite institutions, are historically more politically engaged and more inclined to contest institutional hierarchies. In contrast, Chinese students—though equally selected—tend to express less public dissent. This divergence makes the Franco-Chinese comparison analytically useful for understanding how institutional meritocracy interacts with political norms.

Further details on institutional structures and sampling procedures are provided in Appendix 8.3.

4 Experiment Set-up

4.1 Design Overview

We built on the third-party spectator game framework widely used to elicit fairness preferences (Almås et al., 2020, 2025). Respondents made redistribution choices between two real-life workers who completed a simple task. One worker (the "winner") received a higher payment, while the other (the "loser") received less. The source of this inequality was randomized: either **merit** (task performance) or **luck** (random draw).

To test our main hypotheses, we introduced two key design innovations. First, we varied the initial payoff split: half of respondents faced a 12/0 "winner-takes-all" status quo (as in previous studies), while the other half faced a more equal 7/5 split. Second, we added scenarios beyond the standard merit/luck treatments, including:

- **Inefficiency:** The "winner" was the worker who had correctly completed the most tasks. However, the higher the bonus given to the winner, the smaller the total bonus that could be split between the two workers ("more money destroyed").[6] This scenario introduced a trade-off between giving rewards proportional to merit and efficiency and enables us to test the utilitarian meritocracy hypothesis. A utilitarian meritocrat would not reward the deserving winner in this case, since it means a lower total surplus.

- **Tutoring:** The "winner" was the worker who had correctly completed more tasks but he/she had been arbitrarily selected to receive some tutoring before the tasks. This scenario, and all the scenarios below, produced noisy signals of merit and enable us to test the libertarian hypothesis. A libertarian respondent would be indifferent to all signals as he or she considers all outcomes just.

- **Obstacle:** The "winner" was the worker who had correctly completed the most tasks, but the "loser" had been arbitrarily selected to be hindered by an obstacle before the tasks.

- **Error (wrong winner / wrong loser)**: The software used to designate the win-

[6] By contrast to other scenarios, the unequal split in the inefficiency scenario was a 6/0 split while the equal split was a 5/2 split. For parsimony, we will hereafter refer to these splits as 12/0 and 7/5.

ner (who had correctly completed more tasks) had some probability of picking the wrong worker. We used two framings: in one framing ("wrong winner"), respondents were told that the software may have picked the wrong winner, while in the other framing, they were told that the software may have picked the wrong loser.

- **Marginal winner**: The "winner" was the worker who had correctly completed the most tasks, but the difference between the winner and loser was only one task.

To ensure incentive compatibility, 5% of respondents were randomly selected to have their choices implemented and used to determine bonuses for real Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. All respondents were informed that if selected, their decisions would affect 12 actual workers (see Appendix 8.5 for implementation details). A base wage equal to the U.S. federal minimum wage was guaranteed to all workers, with bonuses determined by the survey outcomes.

4.2 Randomization

The main randomization we implemented was that of the status quo. 50% of respondents were told that, if they did not make any redistribution, the winner would receive a bonus of 12 pieces while the loser would not receive any bonus (unequal status quo or, hereafter, 12/0). The remaining 50% of respondents were told that, if they did not make any redistribution, the winner would receive a bonus of 7 pieces while the loser would receive a bonus of 5 pieces.

Since we used a within-subject design for more power, we additionally randomized the order of the **merit** and **luck** scenarios for robustness purposes, to control for whether starting with one of those two scenarios primed respondents to reply differently. 50% of respondents were therefore first asked to make a choice in the **merit** scenario, the remaining 50% in the **luck** scenario.

Finally, we randomized the framing of the **error (wrong winner/wrong loser)** scenario: 50% of respondents were told that the software picking the winner may have picked the wrong winner, the remaining 50% that it may have picked the wrong loser.

4.3 Survey Flow and Execution

The survey began with belief and control questions, followed by the redistribution scenarios. To minimize experimenter demand effects, demographic and purpose-related questions were asked at the end. Attention checks were embedded and tied to compensation eligibility.[7] Figure 4.1 gives an overall summary of the order of different segments of the survey, as well as the randomization protocols embedded in the design.

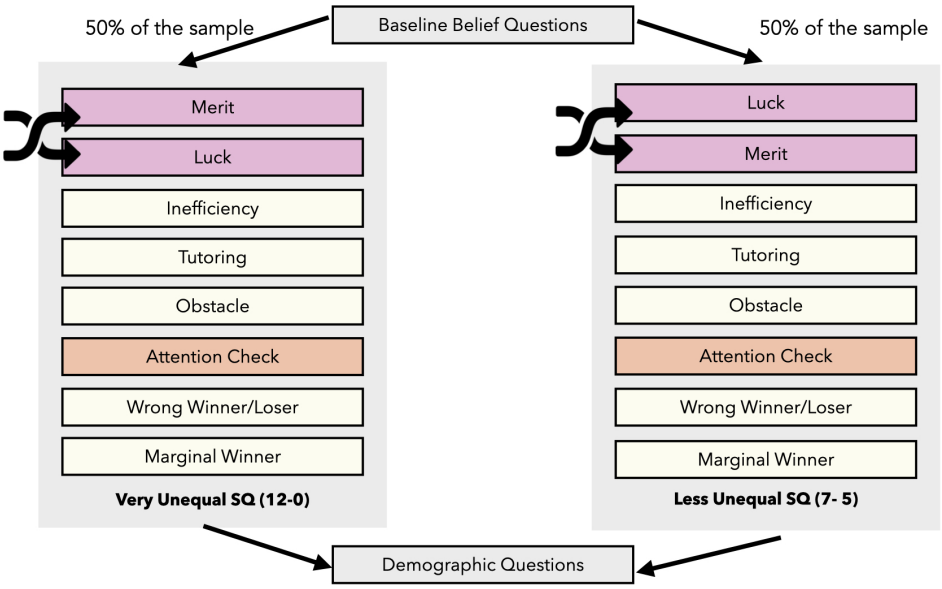


Figure 4.1: Flow Chart of the Survey Procedure

Four versions of the questionnaire were fielded across samples in France and China, adapted linguistically and institutionally. The survey was implemented across three waves (November 2022 to March 2023), with redistribution choices executed via MTurk in early 2023.

4.4 Sample Descriptives

After excluding inattentive respondents, our final sample consists of 233 French and 337 Chinese students. Appendix Table 4 summarizes basic demographics. French respondents were slightly younger on average and came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. About 19% of the French sample accessed their institution through a

[7] In some samples, compensation was conditional on passing attention checks or entering a lottery; see Appendix 8.4.3.

non-exam "discount" route, compared to only 7% in the Chinese sample. Around 40% in both groups reported having attended privileged high schools.

In baseline beliefs, both groups strongly supported state responsibility for reducing income gaps. Chinese students were more likely to emphasize hard work and collective interests, and displayed higher confidence in relative ability—especially among women. However, they were also more modest when asked whether they deserved their success, consistent with cultural norms emphasizing humility (Cai et al., 2011).

Finally, Chinese respondents were more likely to report behaving in line with what they thought the researchers expected—potentially indicative of higher experimenter demand sensitivity. We explore this further in Section 6.

5 Experiment Results

5.1 Raw Sums Distributed to the Loser

We report the raw results of the experiment in Figure 5.1. The results reported here are the average sums and 95% confidence intervals given to the loser chosen by respondents for each scenario, aggregated by respondent population (Chinese or French) and the initial split (12/0 or 7/5). Averages and standard deviations of the sum given to the loser in each scenario are also reported in Appendix Table 7.

The French-Chinese Gap To begin with, we observe that the French respondents redistributed more than the Chinese respondents to the losers in all scenarios, holding the status quo (12/0 or 7/5) constant. These differences are almost all significant at the 5% level, except in the **merit** scenario: in the **merit** scenario, although the Chinese respondents still distributed slightly less than the French respondents on average, the difference is not significantly different. Reassuringly, this suggests that there might be some common baseline on how much the loser in a **merit** scenario deserves. Thus, comparisons using the **merit** scenario as baseline would make sense. Notice that in the **inefficiency** scenario Chinese respondents gave significantly less to the loser. The fact that Chinese respondents were willing to destroy more money to give more to the deserving winner contradicts our hypothesis about consequentalist meritocracy,

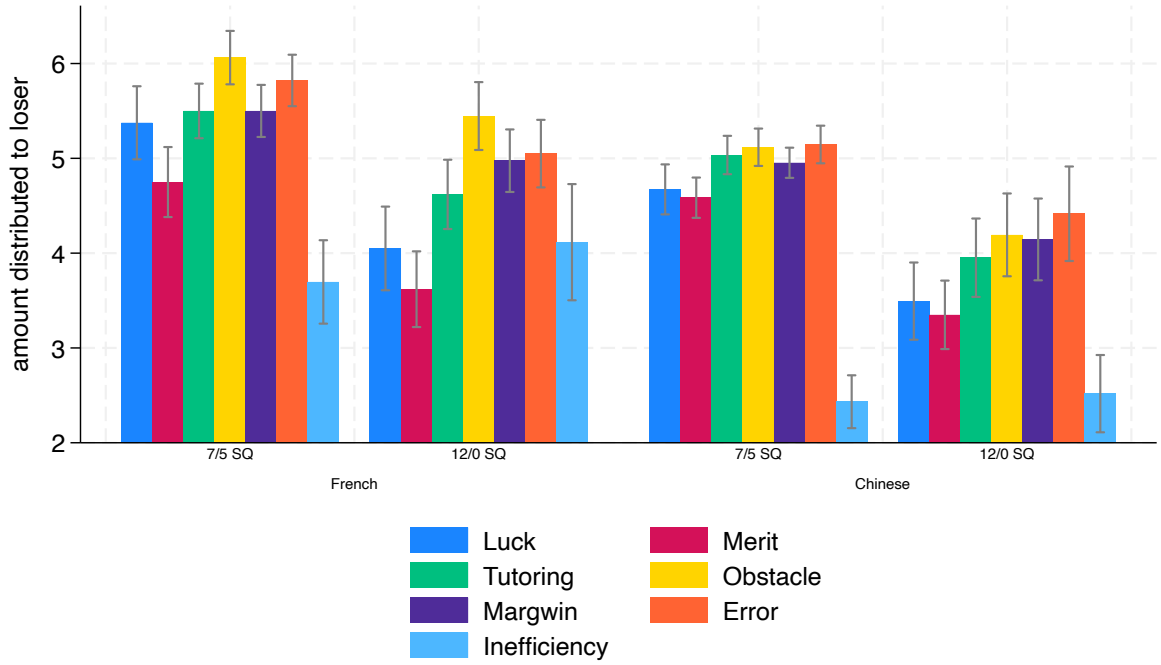


Figure 5.1: Mean and 95% Confidence Interval of Amounts Given to the Loser, by Population, Status Quo and Scenarios

where we assumed that the Chinese respondents were more tolerant of inequality for the sake of total surplus.

The Luck-Merit Gap We now turn to the differences between scenarios for the same respondent group. Coherent with the existing literature, we notice that French respondents redistributed significantly more in the **luck** scenario than in the **merit** scenario; meanwhile, this gap is not significant for the Chinese sample.[8] Results are more interesting for the scenarios framed as a merit tournament with noisy signals about merit: for the scenarios introducing inequality of opportunity (tutoring and obstacle), both French and Chinese respondents not only redistributed more than in the **merit** scenario, but also more than in the **luck** scenario. Instead of treating these scenarios as a middle ground between pure merit and pure luck as Akbaş et

[8]Compared to barely significant in Almås et al. (2025). A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that this lack of significance is not only attributable to the smaller sample size in our experiment, but also to a smaller difference between the **luck** and the **merit** scenario: according to the results graphically reported by Almås et al. (2025), the authors found that, among Chinese respondents, giving respondents the **merit** scenario instead of the **luck** scenario increased the implemented Gini coefficient by approximately 0.02, corresponding to an increase of $0.24 in the sum given to the loser, while, in our experiment, Chinese respondents only gave on average 0.11 more pieces to the loser of the **luck** scenario compared to the loser of the **merit** scenario.

al. (2019) suggested, both French and Chinese respondents appeared to think that a rigged race was worse than no race.[9] Similar results are obtained for the **marginal winner** scenario and the **error** scenario.[10]

Impact of Different Initial Split Results from the status quo randomization, however, make us extremely cautious about the results above at face value. For each scenario, respondents in the unequal status quo condition gave significantly less to the loser than those in the equal status quo condition. This phenomenon alone shows the strength of the framing effect and supports our hypothesis that status quo compliance could play an essential role in the final distribution. In the next section, we will show that Chinese respondents had, compared to French respondents, a stronger tendency to adhere to the status quo (hereafter "status quo play").

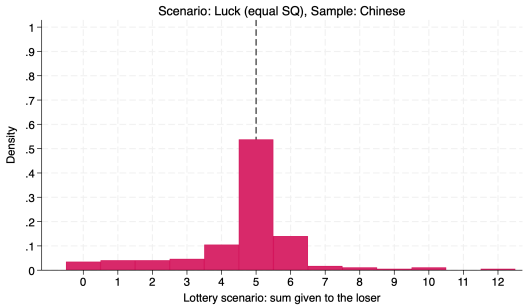
5.2 Choice Reluctance Among Chinese Respondents

Consistent with our hypothesis (in Section 3.1), Chinese respondents were much more likely to stick to the initial split in both 7/5 and 12/0 status quo conditions across all scenarios. Figure 5.2 gives an example of their adherence to the status quo. It shows the frequency distribution of the amount given to the loser in both 7/5 and 12/0 split situations in the **luck** scenario by Chinese and French respondents. It is clear that **Chinese respondents stuck more often to the status quo for both 7/5 and 12/0 initial splits than the French respondents**. This shape of the distribution of the sum given to the loser can be observed for each scenario and is sometimes more pronounced for certain scenarios (histograms for the other scenarios can be found in the Appendix Section 8.2.1). This mass on the status quo point could not have been completely reflective of respondents' true desired distribution: Since the initial distributions were randomly assigned and the respondents were not informed about this randomization, it is highly unlikely that the group of respondents who were

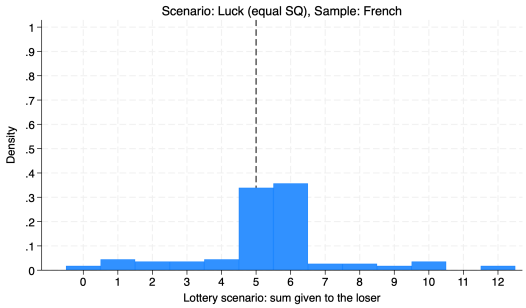
[9] In Akbaş et al. (2019) the authors elicited redistributive preferences in three situations where 1) final payoff was generated by pure luck (pure luck) 2) final payoff was generated by whether to take part in a high-risk, higher-average-return lottery and the result of this lottery (pure choice) and 3) only a part of subjects had the choice to choose the lottery (inequality of opportunity). They found that in the inequality of opportunity scenario, some respondents redistributed as though the payoff were generated by pure luck, others distributed as though the inequality were generated by pure choice and the rest redistributed intermediate values.

[10] Note that the **inefficiency** scenario cannot be directly compared to the other scenarios due to a change in total surplus.

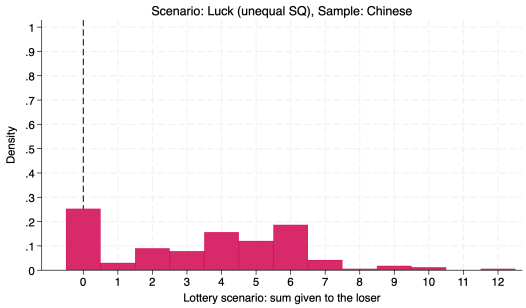
assigned the 7/5 split happened to want to implement a 7/5 distribution and those with a 12/0 split happened to want to implement a 12/0 distribution. We further test the sample balance between the 12/0 group and 7/5 group for both the French and Chinese respondents in Appendix Table 5 and 6: the samples appear well-balanced and the randomization achieved.[11]



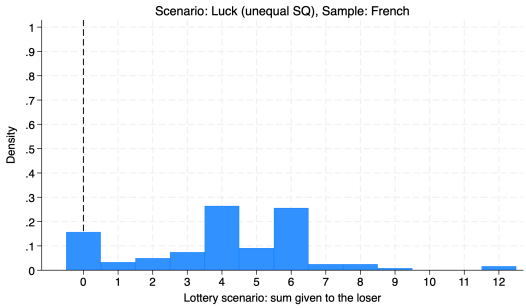
(a) **luck** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese



(b) **luck** scenario, 7/5 Split, French



(c) **luck** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese



(d) **luck** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

Figure 5.2: Examples of Adherence to Status Quo among Chinese Respondents: Chinese Respondents (Red) Play more status quo than French Respondents (Blue) in Both status quos

To further control for the effects of demographics, socio-economic background characteristics, and experimental attributes (e.g., attentiveness and time spent on the questionnaire), we estimate the following regression:

$$SQ_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Chinese_i + \beta_2 UneqSQ_i + \beta_3 Chinese_i \times UneqSQ_i + \beta_4 Scenario_j + \beta_5 \mathbf{X_i} + \epsilon_{ij}$$

where SQ_{ij} is a dummy indicating that respondent i has played the status quo (did not move away from the initial split) in scenario j. $Chinese_i$ is an indicator variable that takes the value one if the respondent is Chinese and $UneqSQ_i$ indicates

[11] In the Chinese sample, the 12/0 group appears to be slightly more privileged as more respondents in this group were in privileged high school or have lived abroad. However, this difference is likely attributable to multiple testing, and our results are robust to controlling for respondents' characteristics.

that the respondent was attributed the 12/0 initial split. $Scenario_j$ is a dummy for each scenario, and $\mathbf{X_i}$ is a vector of individual-level controls that includes one's age, gender, parent occupation, educational controls (lived abroad, went to a privileged high school, benefited from non-exam admission), and experimental attributes (experiment duration and experimenter demand controls). Standard errors are clustered at the respondent's level.

	(1) SQ	(2) SQ	(3) SQ
Chinese	0.228***	0.180***	0.130**
	(0.030)	(0.037)	(0.057)
12/0 SQ	-0.208***	-0.205***	-0.229***
	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.042)
12/0 SQ × Chinese	-0.108***	-0.097**	-0.076
	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.060)
Claim: Understand Research Goals		0.010*	0.008
		(0.006)	(0.008)
Claim: Comply to Research Goals		0.017***	0.019**
		(0.006)	(0.009)
Log Duration Second		0.002	-0.008
		(0.013)	(0.022)
Controls		✓	✓
Luck & Merit Only			✓
N Distributions	3,990	3,990	1,140
N Respondents	570	570	570
Mean DepVar	0.27	0.27	0.33
Sd DepVar	0.44	0.44	0.47

Table 1: Chance of playing the status quo in All Scenarios and Both Initial Distributions

Notes: Each observation is a respondent × scenario pair. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that equals to one if the respondent played the status quo in a scenario. In column (3), we include only the luck and merit scenario per respondent. The standard errors are clustered on the respondent level.

Table 1 reports the results of this regression: in Column 1 without controls and Column 2 with controls. We also run the regression in Column 3 for merit and luck scenarios only to purge the potential effect of order of scenarios, since we have explicitly randomized the order of the two scenarios. Controlling for all individual characteristics, Chinese respondents are more likely to play the status quo than the

French as shown by Table 1; averaging over the luck and merit scenarios and both status quo conditions, status quo play was 16 percentage points higher in the Chinese sample.[12]

Choice reluctance cannot be entirely explained by apathy: respondents were significantly more likely to deviate from the status quo when the initial split was unequal. The 12/0 initial split led to around a 20 percentage points lower chance of playing the status quo, which implies a trade-off between status quo play and the desired level of inequality. Chinese respondents reacted more strongly to an unequal status quo: they reduced further their chances of status quo play by about 10 percentage points compared to French respondents.

Reassuringly, status quo play does not seem to originate from time-saving behavior either, as the probability of status quo play is not correlated with (the log of) survey duration in seconds. Intriguingly, there are some correlations between the experimenter demand questions and status quo play. We will further analyze this result in Section 6 when we discuss the identity of the status quo players.

5.3 Chinese Respondents are Meritocratic, Absent Choice Reluctance

We now revisit the luck-merit gap by taking into account the strong choice reluctance of the Chinese respondents. As we hypothesized in Section 3.1, if Chinese respondents are unwilling to move away from the initial split and the initial split is highly unequal, they would appear to prefer a highly unequal distribution. Moreover, if choice reluctance "overpowers" the fairness concern for a large part of the respondents, leading them to choose the status quo in both **merit** and **luck** scenarios, the

[12]While, to enforce attention, respondents from the French sample were required to click on the slider (but not necessarily move it) at least once before proceeding, technical limits prevented us from implementing this in the Chinese questionnaire. Instead, respondents from the Chinese sample who appeared to skim through the questionnaire quickly (spending less than 18 minutes on the questionnaire) were excluded. This difference in implementation could potentially have affected status quo play if having to click on the slider increased respondents' feeling of responsibility for the distribution and eventually moved them to action. Ultimately, while this difference in implementation could a priori affect the cross-country variation in status quo play frequencies, it should be stressed that this cannot account for our finding that French and Chinese non status quo players implemented distributions which are statistically indistinguishable (Section 5.3), nor for the within-sample heterogeneities in status quo play frequency (Section 6).

Chinese sample would appear to be non-meritocratic even if their true preferences are meritocratic. Then, a natural question arises: is the Chinese public truly unmeritocratic or is this result simply driven by choice reluctance?

Methodology In this section, we adopt a simple approach to provide insights: we compare results from analyses using the full sample with those obtained after excluding status quo players.

Of course, a fraction of status quo players may *genuinely* prefer the status quo. However, we conclude that it should be a rather small fraction. Thanks to the randomization of the status quo, we can examine the share of respondents who chose a status quo split when assigned to the alternative status quo condition.

Specifically, we perform the following regression analysis: $SplitPlaying_i^k = \beta_0 + \beta_1 UneqSQ_i + \epsilon_{ij}$, where $SplitPlaying_i^k$ refers to playing the split $k = \{12/0, 7/5\}$ by respondent i and $UneqSQ_i$ is equal to one when the respondent i was assigned to the unequal initial split, zero otherwise. We expect the constant term β_0 to represent the chance that the respondent plays this split under the 7/5 initial split, and the term β_1 to capture the effect of receiving the unequal status quo on the chance of playing this specific split. Appendix Tables 8 and 9 report the results: a 12/0 split was almost never played under a 7/5 split, and a 7/5 split was played 50% less under the 12/0 split. These results confirm that status quo play is unlikely to be entirely due to genuine preferences.

A caveat to this procedure is that status quo play is not random. We acknowledge that dropping the status quo players induces a selection bias; it is for this reason that we would like to emphasize that the comparison in the next sub-section will be explicitly about the Chinese and French respondents who made a deliberate move to redistribute.[13]

Results Figures 5.3 and 5.4 report the average sums given to the loser under the **luck** and **merit** scenarios for the whole sample (hence with status quo players) and without status quo players. In the upper Figure 5.3, we observe that there is a large

[13]We attempt to leverage the information contained in status quo play—at the cost of behavioral and parametric assumptions—in Appendix 8.7, in an attempt to recover the true preference of the whole Chinese and French sample.

luck-merit gap for the French population but not for the Chinese one. However, after removing the status quo players in Figure 5.4, the luck-merit gap significantly widens especially for the 12/0 status quo.

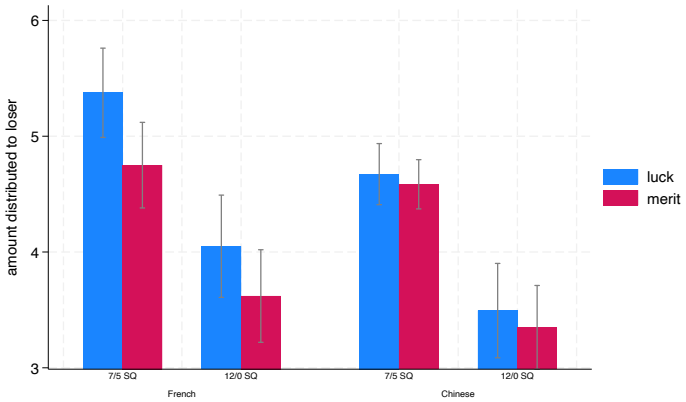


Figure 5.3: The Meritocratic Gap, With Status Quo Players

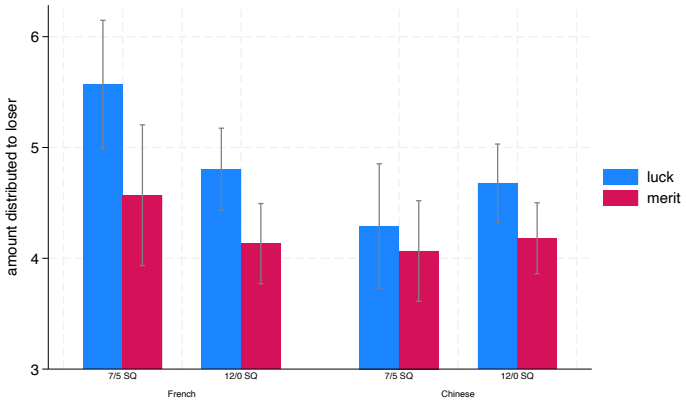


Figure 5.4: The Meritocratic Gap, Without Status Quo Players

To further illustrate this point and control for the other factors, we run the following regression for a sub-sample containing respondents' choices in the **merit** and **luck** scenarios:

$$\begin{aligned} SumLoser_{ij} =& \beta_0 French_i + \beta_1 Chinese_i + \beta_2 French_i \times Merit_j \\ &+ \beta_3 Chinese_i \times Merit_j + \beta_4 \mathbf{X_i} + \epsilon_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

where $SumLoser_{ij}$ is the amount distributed to the loser. The coefficients of interest are the terms $French_i \times Merit_j$ and $Chinese_i \times Merit_j$ which capture the magnitude of the meritocratic gaps. Finally, we control for the vector of personal characteristics and experimental attributes as mentioned in 5.2. We run the regression for three sub-samples separately: the whole sample, the sub-sample where we remove

all distribution decisions that contained the status quo, and the sub-sample where we remove all respondents who had played any type of status quo.[14]

The results are reported in Table 2. With the whole sample (in Columns 1 and 2), the luck-merit gap (the *Merit* × *Chinese* or *Merit* × *French* term) is significantly negative at 0.1% for the French respondents but not significant for the Chinese respondents. However, when we remove the observations where the status quo was played in Columns 3 and 4, the luck-merit gap increases in magnitude and becomes significant at 5% in the Chinese sample. Columns 5 and 6, where we exclude a respondent if he or she played any status quo in any scenario, present a similar and even stronger result compared to Columns 3 and 4: the meritocratic gap for the Chinese sample is significant at the 5% level. For the French sample, it slightly decreases in magnitude but is still significant at 0.1% level.

	All Distributions		Without SQ Distributions		Without SQ Players	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
French	4.687***	2.211**	5.125***	2.818**	4.971***	1.800
	(0.156)	(1.063)	(0.167)	(1.176)	(0.182)	(1.284)
Chinese	4.092***	1.345	4.527***	1.772	4.587***	1.013
	(0.127)	(1.182)	(0.157)	(1.325)	(0.163)	(1.457)
merit × French	-0.524***	-0.524***	-0.827***	-0.874***	-0.676***	-0.676***
	(0.173)	(0.175)	(0.197)	(0.196)	(0.199)	(0.203)
merit × Chinese	-0.116	-0.116	-0.388**	-0.370**	-0.395**	-0.395**
	(0.111)	(0.112)	(0.170)	(0.169)	(0.169)	(0.172)
Controls		✓		✓		✓
N Distributions	1,140	1,140	759	759	622	622
N Respondents	570	570	448	448	311	311
Mean DepVar	4.19	4.19	4.51	4.51	4.50	4.50
Sd DepVar	2.24	2.24	2.17	2.17	2.11	2.11

Table 2: The Meritocratic Gap when Removing Status Quo Players

Notes: Each observation is a respondent × scenario pair; we include only luck and merit scenarios for each respondent. The columns (1) and (2) include all respondent × scenarios; (3) and (4) exclude a respondent × scenario pair if status quo was played, and the columns (5) and (6) exclude all players who played any status quo in either of the two scenarios. The dependent variable is the amount attributed to the loser. The standard errors are clustered on the respondent level.

The Chinese respondents who did not choose the status quo appear to hold meritocratic preferences. Ideally, we would develop a structural model to extrapolate the underlying preferences of all respondents. However, doing so would require strong and somewhat arbitrary assumptions. In Appendix 8.7, we outline such a model and present the corresponding estimation results, along with a discussion of the necessary

[14]The difference between the second and the third sub-sample is that if one respondent played the status quo for luck but not merit, he or she will be included in the second subsample, but not included in the third.

assumptions and associated limitations.

5.4 Do the Chinese Respondents Redistribute Less Overall?

Finally, we revisit the differences in raw amounts given to the loser by the French and Chinese respondents. In the existing literature, the Chinese respondents redistributed one of the lowest amounts in the entire world; we argue that status quo play largely drives this result. Similar to the analysis run in the last subsection, we compare the raw amount given by the French and Chinese respondents with and without the status quo players and control for demographics, education, and experimental attributes. We run the following regression:

$$SumLoser_{ij} = \beta_0 \mathbf{Scenario_j} + \beta_1 \mathbf{Scenario_j} \times Chinese_i + \beta_2 \mathbf{X_i} + \epsilon_{ij}$$

given to the loser by respondent i under scenario j. The vector $\mathbf{Scenario_j}$ consists of dummies for the 6 scenarios but the **inefficiency** scenario, and the terms $\mathbf{Scenario_j} \times Chinese_i$ is a vector of scenario dummies interacted with a dummy for Chinese respondent.[15] The coefficients on this vector capture the size of the China-France gap for the corresponding scenario. $\mathbf{X_i}$ is the vector of control variables already used in Section 5.2. The standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. Appendix Table 10 reports the China-France gap in the whole sample: the Chinese respondents redistributed significantly less than the French respondents under both initial splits and most scenarios apart from merit.[16]

When we remove the status quo distributions in Appendix Table 11, the French-Chinese Gap disappears entirely under the 12/0 split. In other words, in the 12/0 split, Chinese and French status quo challengers chose similar splits in almost all scenarios. On the other hand, with the 7/5 split, removing the status quo players enlarges the France-China gap in almost all scenarios: under this close-to-equal distribution, French respondents deviated from the status quo almost exclusively to implement the 6/6 equal split, while the Chinese respondents generally deviated to

[15] We exclude the **inefficiency** scenario from this analysis as it is not directly comparable to the others due to a change in total surplus.

[16] This implies that the merit scenario serves well as a common benchmark. It is also worth mentioning that a large number of French respondents chose 6/6 even under the 7/5 split, illustrating their high sense of agency.

implement a more unequal split. Interpreting those results is difficult, owing to a possible differential selection bias among French and Chinese status quo challengers. Status quo challengers are a selected sub-sample, consisting of respondents *sufficiently unhappy with the status quo* to deviate. If, as we conjecture, Chinese respondents have a higher mental cost of status quo deviation compared to French respondents, then Chinese status quo challengers were, among Chinese respondents, *extremely unhappy* with the status quo while French status quo challengers might only have been *slightly unhappy* with the status quo, making it difficult to conclude from this observation that Chinese respondents are on average as meritocratic as French respondents.

6 Mechanism

In the previous section, we have shown that the Chinese respondents displayed stronger choice reluctance compared to the French respondents, which might be mistaken as a preference for large inequalities or an absence of meritocratic concerns. We are naturally interested in the source of this choice reluctance: what drives the reluctance to actively alter the status quo among our Chinese respondents?

We suggest that choice reluctance might at least partially be driven by a lack of (political) **agency**—in other words, the choice-reluctant do not wish (or do not dare) to exert power and be responsible for a certain decision. In the context of an authoritarian political regime and Confucian cultural system praising conformity, our Chinese respondents might not be comfortable with making a decision with real-world consequences and resort to the status quo instead. They might also want to avoid making an inadequate, bold, or confrontational choice.

We lend evidence to this mechanism by looking at who played the status quo among the Chinese respondents and how they behaved in other sections of the survey.

While Chinese respondents were significantly more likely to play the status quo compared to French respondents, status quo play did not uniformly apply to all Chinese respondents. On the contrary, we believe it is strongly related to whether Chinese respondents are comfortable with exerting power and affecting (and thus being responsible for) a decision concerning others.

As a first step, we regress an indicator equal to one for status quo play on the set of control variables to explore the characteristics of the status quo players. In Table 3, we report the correlations between demographics, education, and experimental attributes with a dummy representing playing the status quo (Columns 1 and 2) and the sum given to the loser if not playing the status quo (Column 3 and 4). Each observation is a respondent times scenario pair; the explanatory variables are the whole set of controls listed in Section 5.2, along with a vector of scenario dummies and a dummy for the unequal status quo treatment. Errors are clustered at the respondent level. We run the regressions separately for the Chinese and French samples. Summary statistics of the dependent variables are reported at the bottom of the table: overall, 34% of total redistributive decisions made by the Chinese respondents adhered to the status quo, while only 16% of the decisions made by the French respondents corresponded to the status quo.

Parent Occupation The most striking result is that status quo play is strongly correlated with parent occupation for the Chinese sample—but not for the French sample. Respondents whose parents have more contact with the market economy—small business owners, managers, intellectuals and having clerical jobs as opposed to farmers, workers, and intermediate professions—were significantly less likely to play the status quo.[17] More interestingly, as shown in Column 3, the same factors do not correlate with a higher or lower amount of redistribution if the respondents move away from the status quo. That is to say, this sub-group of Chinese respondents does not seem to necessarily prefer to redistribute more (or less), but rather were just more likely to make a change.[18]

[17] In China, farmers (or agricultural workers) and normal factory workers are the least likely to be exposed to the private economy, because these are the sectors most heavily regulated under the planned economy before the 1978 economic reforms, with designated work units and cooperatives, etc. In the post-reform period, although commercialization of agriculture has gradually gained momentum, the extent of market economy penetration cannot be compared to that experienced by people in more business-oriented sectors, such as commerce, industry, real estate, etc.

[18] Additionally, Table 19 in Appendix reports the same analysis on the Chinese data only using the job category from CGSS, which is more suited to the Chinese context. The reference category is still agriculture—we see in this table that children with a parent in almost any other job category were less likely to play the status quo than the children of agriculture workers, workers, and public servants. Public servants children represent a very small share of the sample (5 out of 337 respondents, 0.88%), too small to draw a significant conclusion. However, they did seem to play the status quo more often which is consistent with the political agency mechanism, since public servants could be expected to be the sub-population the most adherent to the system.

	Playing Status-Quo		Sum Loser if not SQ	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Chinese	French	Chinese	French
Demographics				
Age	-0.020**	0.002	0.022	0.072
	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.050)	(0.045)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.037	0.021	0.216	0.159
	(0.030)	(0.024)	(0.166)	(0.144)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Agriculture				
Small business & commerce/service	-0.202***	0.082	-0.221	-0.869**
	(0.050)	(0.097)	(0.257)	(0.437)
Management & professional	-0.135**	-0.014	-0.186	-0.613
	(0.053)	(0.087)	(0.256)	(0.385)
Intermediate professions	-0.129	0.047	0.062	-0.571
	(0.095)	(0.092)	(0.313)	(0.450)
Clerical	-0.136**	-0.014	-0.251	-0.199
	(0.054)	(0.095)	(0.254)	(0.412)
Blue collar worker	-0.005	0.046	-0.230	-0.351
	(0.057)	(0.099)	(0.343)	(0.471)
Retired		0.019		-0.957
		(0.125)		(0.584)
Education				
Lived abroad	-0.154**	-0.002	0.486	0.291
	(0.072)	(0.034)	(0.439)	(0.195)
Privileged high school	-0.022	0.001	0.448**	0.077
	(0.034)	(0.025)	(0.189)	(0.154)
Non-exam admission	-0.013	-0.027	0.465	-0.091
	(0.067)	(0.030)	(0.308)	(0.210)
Experiment Behavior				
Claim: understand research goals	0.010	0.004	0.059	0.015
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.040)	(0.039)
Claim: comply to research goals	0.023**	0.002	0.078	0.036
	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.052)	(0.041)
Log duration (seconds)	0.039	-0.006	0.268	-0.020
	(0.081)	(0.012)	(0.409)	(0.103)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	2,359	1,631	1,549	1,366
N Respondents	337	233	337	233
Mean DepVar	0.34	0.16	4.39	5.06
Sd DepVar	0.47	0.37	2.43	2.23

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 3: Determinants of Status Quo Play (Columns 1 and 2) and Amount Given to Loser for Non Status Quo Players (Columns 3 and 4)

Notes: Each observation is a respondent × scenario pair. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that the respondent played SQ in this scenario in columns (1) and (2), and the sum attributed to the loser in (3) and (4). The standard errors are clustered on the respondent level.

Existing literature strongly suggests that private market players do not fear political agency. They might be more adventurous and innovative to begin with, as those are prized traits for entrepreneurship (Frese & Gielnik, 2014). Moreover, they are also more comfortable with getting politically involved to defend their own interests. For example, the survey experiment by Kao et al. (2022) showed that, in exchange for a reform that would raise taxes, Chinese entrepreneurs prefered political representation while the rest of the population demanded public services. Li et al. (2006) further showed that Chinese entrepreneurs were more likely to enter politics in areas with worse market-supporting institutions. On a related note, Nisbett (2004) argued that greater reliance on trade or hunting as opposed to farming might help explain the greater political agency in Ancient Greece in contrast to Ancient China and that the temporary decrease in trade and increase in farming in medieval Europe plausibly helps explain the subsequent temporary decrease in political agency across Europe: farming, in contrast to other activities such as trade or hunting, requires a high degree of coordination with one's neighbors and local authorities, leaving little space for agency.

We conjecture that respondents who grew up with a private sector parent were exposed to those values throughout their upbringings and were therefore much less hesitant to deviate from the status quo in our spectator games. This is particularly evident in the case of small business owners, who need to make their own decisions and are completely responsible for their activities. Their children were the least likely to play the status quo: a child of a small business owner was 20 percentage points less likely to play the status quo than a child of an agricultural worker, and the difference is significant at 1%.

Experimenter Demand Questions Intriguingly, another strong predictor of status quo play is a positive answer to the question "I have done exactly what the experimenters wanted". Chinese respondents who played the status quo were more likely to claim that they were complying with the researchers' goal, even though they did not claim to **understand** the researchers' goal significantly better, as captured by the answer to the question "I understand the researchers' goals".[19]

[19] Although we added those questions to control for possible experimenter demand effects, it is highly unlikely that the status quo play we measure reflects experimenter demand: that would mean

We plot the distribution of the answers to those two questions in Figures 6.1 and 6.2.[20] On average, Chinese respondents were actually slightly more confident than French respondents that they understood researchers' goals, with a higher mass at 9-10, although they were also more likely to select 0. The starkest contrast can be found in answers to the question about compliance with the intentions of the researchers: while about 15% of the French respondents claimed that they have at least answered a little against the researchers' expectations (34 out of 228 respondents), only 4.7% of the Chinese respondents claimed to have done so. In Figure 6.2, there is a clear discontinuity at 0 for the Chinese sample. We thus argue that positive answers to the compliance question reflect social desirability or a hesitance to admit having deviated from an authority's (the researchers) will. This is consistent with the hypothesis of agency deficit: overall, the Chinese respondents who were hesitant to say that they acted against the researchers' goal—those who "played a good student"—were also more likely to be afraid of making a redistributive choice, and to refrain from taking action by choosing the status quo.

By contrast, consistently across scenarios, a share of the French sample exhibits "rebellious" behaviors by splitting the gain at 6/6 or even giving more to the loser than to the winner.

Reluctance to Act, not Libertarianism Alternatively, the status-quo-playing Chinese respondents could simply be libertarians, i.e., consider all sources of income inequalities as equally fair.

However, the status quo play we observe in the Chinese sample cannot be entirely explained by libertarianism. Indeed, if the population is divided among meritocrats,

that respondents thought that we wanted them to play the status quo—especially that we wanted them to play the status quo in all scenarios. However, experimenter demand went in the opposite direction as we strongly insisted on the fact that we were interested in what the respondents personally thought would be the right choice. Additionally, we included all demographic questions at the end of the questionnaire to avoid cultural priming. Answers to the open question on the goal of the experiment (see Section 8.6) thus never explicitly evoke cultural thinking nor exhibit any correlation with status quo play, but instead suggest that respondents understood the experiment's goal as being to study how to distribute earnings in light of different fairness concerns.

[20] In the question on compliance to the research goals, we allowed respondents to choose "I do not understand the research goals at all (thus cannot decide whether I am doing what the researchers wanted)". To account for this missing value problem, this option is coded as 0 in the regression and we control for an indicator variable for choosing this option. The regression results are similar if we code it as 99 instead or drop these respondents from the analysis.

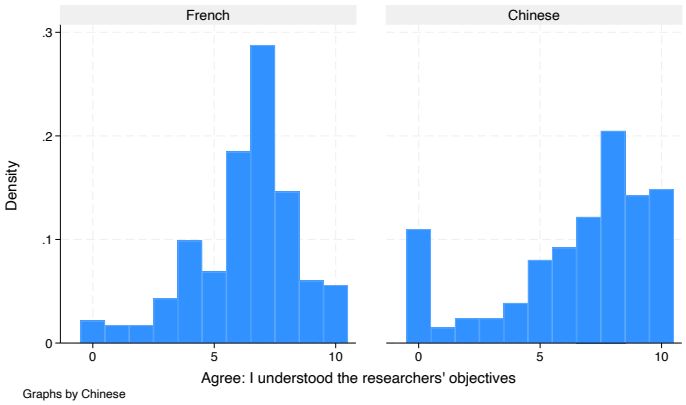


Figure 6.1: Answer Distribution: "I understand the researchers' goals" (0-10)

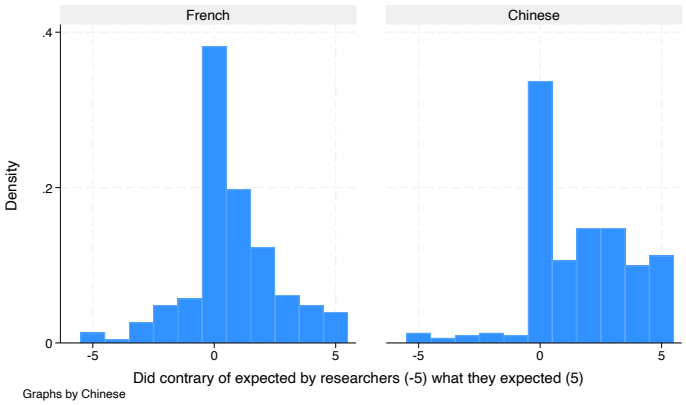


Figure 6.2: Answer Distribution: "I deliberately did exactly what you expected (5) / the exact opposite of what you expected (-5) "

libertarians, and the choice-reluctant, only the last two groups could be observed to adhere to the status quo in *all* scenarios: meritocrats should react to the changes in the differences in merit across scenarios and accordingly alter the redistribution split they implement.[21] Given the randomization we implemented, there should be comparable numbers of libertarians in the equal and unequal status quo conditions. However, the number of Chinese respondents *always* playing the status quo was significantly lower in the unequal status quo relative to the equal status quo condition (Column 1 of Table 12). This difference could only be rationalized by a deliberate trade-off: the choice-reluctant respondents stuck to the status quo as long as the status quo did not appear *too unfair* to them. Additionally, the libertarianism explanation is at odds

[21]Due to censoring of the choices which can be implemented, it is possible that some meritocrats would always implement the unequal split as they would sometimes want to give more than 12 pieces to the winner. However, in the absence of the choice-reluctant, this would lead to a higher number of respondents who always play the status quo (all libertarians and a fraction of meritocrats) in the unequal status quo condition than in the equal status quo condition (only libertarians), the opposite of what we observe.

with the fact that always playing the status quo is positively correlated with claiming that one conformed to the researchers' goals (Column 2 of Table 12 in Appendix) and negatively with claiming that one was unaffected by those goals (Column 3), while it is positively correlated with having a farmer parent (Column 4). If status quo players truly were libertarians, one would rather expect them to have a private sector parent and to argue that they had not been influenced by the researchers' goals.

More Reluctance than Upward Mobility Another potential story could be that the Chinese status quo play is driven by the experienced upward mobility of respondents. Given the fast economic growth which has marked the past four decades in China, respondents could be wired to be averse to changing the status quo due to contentment with the status quo they *experienced*, which has been a significant improvement in their living standards—such contentment could be especially pronounced among students of farming or working class background attending elite universities whom we find were particularly likely to stick to the status quo.

To probe the upward mobility explanation, we use respondents' university and family background to examine whether status quo play correlates with proxies for social mobility (Tables 13, 14, 15 in Appendix). Status quo play was most pronounced among students attending better-ranked (above median) universities, which could be suggestive of a social mobility explanation. Ultimately, however, father's education is not predictive of respondents' status quo play behavior at all, even though it should in principle be a better proxy for socio-economic status than father's occupation—by contrast, the significant correlation between father occupation and status quo play we previously documented is robust to the inclusion of controls for father education and university characteristics. We further interact university ranking with both father's education and occupation : if status quo play were driven by the experience of upward mobility, we would expect that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds (fathers with lower education and lower socio-economic occupations such as farming) currently attending higher-ranked universities should have displayed significantly more status quo play. However, we do not find any evidence of such heterogeneous relationships in Tables 14 and 15 in the Appendix.

The correlations between university characteristics and status quo play lend further

support to the agency hypothesis: status quo play was more pronounced among students of science and engineering universities, as well as among students attending universities in Beijing and the north of China. This is consistent with students in engineering universities likely being less preoccupied with socioeconomic issues than students of business- and finance-focused universities; similarly, students in Beijing and its surrounding areas might respond to the politically sensitive environment by exhibiting lower political agency than students in other parts of the country.

Reluctance to Act, not Apathy Finally, status quo play does not seem to be driven by apathy. If the status quo play were the result of some respondents rushing through the questionnaire, the total number of times a respondent selected the status quo split could be expected to be correlated with inattention or fatigue proxies, such as the number of times the respondent selected default answers in other sections of the questionnaire, attention check failures, scenario order (plausibly increasing fatigue), or questionnaire completion speed. Tables 16, 17 and 18 in the Appendix, however, show that status quo play does not exhibit any of the correlations one would expect to see if it were the result of respondents' apathy.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we investigate how different degrees of choice reluctance across countries would affect cross-country comparisons of redistributive preferences through spectator games. We show that even elite university students—the demographic group in China that could be expected to be the most sensitive to meritocracy—may behave as if they do not distinguish between inequalities resulting from pure luck or pure effort—due to strong reluctance to deviate away from the status quo. However, if we compare only the respondents who moved away from the "winner-takes-all" status quo, then Chinese respondents did not behave differently than their French peers. We rule out alternative explanations for the seemingly unmeritocratic preferences of the Chinese: by introducing a trade-off between inefficiency and proportional rewards, we show that Chinese respondents do not seem to hold a utilitarian view of meritocracy—i.e., to only value meritocratic rewards as a means to achieve the end of

larger total surplus. We also reject the possibility that a large part of the Chinese population holds libertarian fairness preferences, for Chinese respondents do not appear to treat scenarios with complex signals of merit (for example, inequality of opportunity) similarly to pure luck and pure effort—if anything, an inequality decided by lottery is perhaps "the most fair" among all unfair situations (other than pure merit).

We call to attention that context-dependency can affect results in spectator games, in the same spirit as Telle and Tjøtta (2023), further emphasizing the implications this has for cross-country comparisons. Status quo dependency, in our paper, could affect the results differently for different populations due to both culture and the habit of political (dis)engagement.

Our research also sheds some light on the "choice of making no choices". We show that in the Chinese case, status quo players were more likely to be from agricultural or workers' families, and they often exhibited a greater desire to behave in a socially desirable way. We relate status quo play to the concept of agency—the capacity to act on something—but not apathy or libertarianism. Our results suggest that respondents make conscious trade-offs between one's reluctance to deviate from the status quo and the distance between one's preferred choice and the status quo.

We want to highlight the importance of agency in survey studies: for a person's choices to reveal his or her preferences, the person in question must first believe that he or she is capable of making a choice at all. Past research using survey experiments has made important progress in accounting for social desirability or experimenter demand biases—adjusting for **dishonest** or **fake** choices; yet researchers cannot do much when there is significant passivity and respondents make **no** choices. Furthermore, insisting on the real-world consequences of the choices—as common practice to incentivize thoughtful answers—could lead to greater reluctance to change if respondents do not wish to bear the responsibility for affecting others' lives. If the choice-reluctant are individuals with little real-world political agency, experiments may fail to give a voice to the voiceless and thereby result in distorted conclusions about a population's preferences, even when carried out on representative samples.

Future research on redistributive preferences will thus have the essential task of eliciting status quo players' true preferences. One possibility would be to elicit choices

in the absence of a default split. We hope that, in the absence of default splits, the spectators would feel more in the right to make a decision and be more willing to share their true preferences. Alternatively, diluting the spectators' perceived individual responsibility and their impression of going against an authority's will—such as presenting the scenario as hypothetical or recourse to list experiments to veil their answers—might further help identify the choice-reluctant's underlying preferences.

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8 Appendices

8.1 Additional Tables

	French		Chinese	
	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev.
Demographics				
Chinese	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Age	19.25	1.96	21.41	1.68
Male	0.41	0.49	0.51	0.50
Parent 1 Job				
Agriculture	0.03	0.17	0.16	0.37
Small business	0.08	0.27	0.15	0.35
Managers, intellectual	0.44	0.50	0.29	0.45
Intermediate profession	0.10	0.30	0.01	0.08
Clerical jobs	0.17	0.37	0.24	0.43
Blue collar jobs	0.06	0.24	0.14	0.35
Retired	0.03	0.18	0.00	0.00
Others	0.03	0.18	0.01	0.11
Without professional activities	0.03	0.18	0.00	0.00
Education				
Lived abroad >= 1 year	0.15	0.35	0.05	0.23
Privileged high school	0.39	0.49	0.41	0.49
Non-exam admission	0.19	0.39	0.07	0.26
Agreeing to the following statements (0-10)				
State responsible reducing income gap	7.65	2.08	7.94	1.92
Luck decides success	6.33	2.21	5.42	2.73
Collective interest over personal	6.43	2.29	7.41	2.06
I am better than 50% of my cohort	5.42	2.40	6.88	1.90
I deserve my status	6.70	2.55	7.36	1.94
I deserve admission	6.53	2.25	5.79	2.92
My colleagues deserve admission	4.97	2.40	6.48	2.83
I always respect diff. opinion	6.72	2.50	6.45	2.61
I always accept my errors	6.58	2.14	7.00	2.21
Experimenter Demand Controls				
Claim: understanding researcher goals (0-10)	6.30	2.13	6.50	3.09
Claim: complying to researcher goals (-5-5)	0.70	1.85	1.65	2.07
Experiment Behavior				
Duration (in seconds)	2601.88	14681.56	1596.68	302.97
Passed attention check	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Observations	233		337	

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Survey Respondents

	7/5 Split (N = 171)	12/0 Split (N = 166)	Difference	P-value
Demographics				
Chinese	1.00	1.00	0.00	.
Age	21.33	21.49	-0.15	0.40
Male	0.51	0.52	-0.01	0.86
Parent 1 Job				
Agriculture	0.15	0.18	-0.03	0.39
Small business	0.13	0.16	-0.02	0.57
Managers, intellectual	0.29	0.30	-0.01	0.86
Intermediate profession	0.01	0.01	-0.00	0.98
Clerical jobs	0.23	0.25	-0.01	0.78
Blue collar jobs	0.18	0.11	0.07	0.08
Retired	0.00	0.00	0.00	.
Others	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.33
Without professional activities	0.00	0.00	0.00	.
Education				
Lived abroad >= 1 year	0.03	0.08	-0.05	0.05
Privileged high school	0.36	0.46	-0.10	0.06
Non-exam admission	0.06	0.08	-0.02	0.48
Agreeing to the following statements (0-10)				
State responsible reducing income gap	7.95	7.93	0.02	0.93
Luck decides success	5.47	5.36	0.11	0.71
Collective interest over personal	7.49	7.33	0.16	0.48
I am better than 50% of my cohort	7.06	6.70	0.35	0.09
I deserve my status	7.40	7.33	0.08	0.71
I deserve admission	5.74	5.84	-0.09	0.77
My colleagues deserve admission	6.61	6.36	0.25	0.41
I always respect diff. opinion	6.51	6.39	0.12	0.68
I always accept my errors	7.14	6.86	0.28	0.24
Experimenter Demand Controls				
Claim: understanding researcher goals (0-10)	6.23	6.77	-0.54	0.11
Claim: complying to researcher goals (-5-5)	1.76	1.54	0.22	0.34
Experiment Behavior				
Duration (in seconds)	1,603.64	1,589.51	14.14	0.67
Passed attention check	1.00	1.00	0.00	.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics, Mean and T-test by Default Split, Chinese Sample

	7/5 Split (N = 112)	12/0 Split (N = 121)	Difference	P-value
Demographics				
Chinese	0.00	0.00	0.00	.
Age	19.46	19.06	0.40	0.12
Male	0.40	0.41	-0.01	0.86
Parent 1 Job				
Agriculture	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.21
Small business	0.06	0.10	-0.04	0.31
Managers, intellectual	0.42	0.46	-0.04	0.51
Intermediate profession	0.09	0.11	-0.02	0.64
Clerical jobs	0.21	0.13	0.07	0.14
Blue collar jobs	0.06	0.06	0.00	0.88
Retired	0.03	0.04	-0.01	0.54
Others	0.04	0.03	0.00	0.91
Without professional activities	0.04	0.03	0.00	0.91
Education				
Lived abroad >= 1 year	0.16	0.13	0.03	0.54
Privileged high school	0.37	0.41	-0.05	0.46
Non-exam admission	0.20	0.18	0.01	0.78
Agreeing to the following statements (0-10)				
State responsible reducing income gap	7.80	7.50	0.30	0.27
Luck decides success	6.21	6.44	-0.23	0.42
Collective interest over personal	6.43	6.43	-0.00	1.00
I am better than 50% of my cohort	5.71	5.17	0.54	0.09
I deserve my status	6.59	6.79	-0.20	0.54
I deserve admission	6.50	6.56	-0.06	0.83
My colleagues deserve admission	5.00	4.95	0.05	0.88
I always respect diff. opinion	6.75	6.69	0.06	0.85
I always accept my errors	6.54	6.61	-0.07	0.81
Experimenter Demand Controls				
Claim: understanding researcher goals (0-10)	6.34	6.27	0.07	0.81
Claim: complying to researcher goals (-5-5)	0.89	0.52	0.37	0.13
Experiment Behavior				
Duration (in seconds)	1,371.82	3,740.45	-2368.63	0.22
Passed attention check	1.00	1.00	0.00	.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics, Mean and T-test by Default Split, French Sample

	French, 7/5		French, 12/0		Chinese, 7/5		Chinese, 12/0	
	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev.
Lottery scenario: sum given to the loser	5.38	2.08	4.05	2.48	4.67	1.76	3.49	2.68
Merit scenario: sum given to the loser	4.75	1.99	3.62	2.24	4.58	1.42	3.35	2.37
Inefficiency scenario: sum given to the loser	3.70	2.37	4.12	3.44	2.43	1.86	2.52	2.68
Tutoring scenario: sum given to the loser	5.50	1.55	4.62	2.05	5.04	1.35	3.95	2.72
Obstacle scenario: sum given to the loser	6.06	1.52	5.45	2.01	5.12	1.31	4.19	2.87
Error scenario: sum given to the loser	5.82	1.47	5.05	2.00	5.15	1.32	4.42	3.28
Marginal win scenario: sum given to the loser	5.50	1.48	4.98	1.85	4.95	1.06	4.14	2.83
Observations	112		121		171		166	

Table 7: Raw Mean and Standard Deviation of Amounts Given to the Loser, by Population, Status Quo and Scenarios

	(1) Luck 12/0 split	(2) Merit 12/0 split	(3) Obstacle 12/0 split	(4) Tutoring 12/0 split	(5) Marginal winner 12/0 split	(6) Error 12/0 split	(7) Inefficiency 6/0 split
Treatment: unequal (resp equal) status quo	.184***	.139***	.139***	.132***	.125***	.129***	.166***
	(.0263)	(.0243)	(.0206)	(.0212)	(.0213)	(.0205)	(.0306)
Constant	.0283	.0283	-6.94e-17	.00707	.0106	.00353	.0848***
	(.0186)	(.0172)	(.0146)	(.0151)	(.0151)	(.0145)	(.0217)
R2	.0798	.0545	.0744	.0641	.0575	.0651	.0492
Mean	.121	.0982	.0702	.0737	.0737	.0684	.168
N respondents	570	570	570	570	570	570	570

Standard errors in parentheses

The dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the respondent played the unequal status-quo, 0 otherwise. Each column corresponds to a different scenario.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 8: Effect of the status quo treatment on the share of respondents playing the unequal status quo split

Notes: One observation is a respondent. The dependent variable is an indicator which is equals to 1 if the respondent played the 12/0 distribution, regardless of the status quo assigned. The treatment variable is an indicator that the respondent is assigned the 12/0 split.

	(1) Luck 7/5 split	(2) Merit 7/5 split	(3) Obstacle 7/5 split	(4) Tutoring 7/5 split	(5) Marginal winner 7/5 split	(6) Error 7/5 split	(7) Inefficiency 5/2 split
Treatment: unequal (resp equal) status quo	-.351***	-.38***	-.256***	-.24***	-.21***	-.299***	-.224***
	(.0348)	(.0354)	(.0358)	(.0382)	(.0409)	(.0369)	(.0408)
Constant	.459***	.502***	.403***	.452***	.576***	.466***	.576***
	(.0247)	(.0251)	(.0254)	(.0271)	(.0291)	(.0262)	(.0289)
R2	.152	.168	.0827	.0648	.0443	.104	.0505
Mean	.282	.311	.274	.332	.47	.316	.463
N respondents	570	570	570	570	570	570	570

Standard errors in parentheses

The dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 if the respondent played the equal status-quo, 0 otherwise. Each column corresponds to a different scenario.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 9: Effect of the status quo treatment on the share of respondents playing the equal status quo split

Notes: One observation is a respondent. The dependent variable is an indicator which is equals to 1 if the respondent played the 7/5 distribution, regardless of the status quo assigned. The treatment variable is an indicator that the respondent is assigned the 12/0 split.

	7/5 Split		12/0 Split	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Sum to Loser	Sum to Loser	Sum to Loser	Sum to Loser
Luck (FR)	5.375***	4.233***	4.050***	2.549*
	(0.197)	(0.678)	(0.225)	(1.531)
Merit (FR)	4.750***	3.608***	3.620***	2.119
	(0.188)	(0.645)	(0.204)	(1.527)
Tutoring (FR)	5.500***	4.358***	4.620***	3.119**
	(0.147)	(0.670)	(0.187)	(1.519)
Obstacle (FR)	6.062***	4.921***	5.446***	3.946***
	(0.144)	(0.675)	(0.183)	(1.518)
Margwin (FR)	5.500***	4.358***	4.975***	3.475**
	(0.140)	(0.654)	(0.168)	(1.525)
Error (FR)	5.821***	4.680***	5.050***	3.549**
	(0.139)	(0.661)	(0.182)	(1.522)
Chinese × Luck	-0.702***	-0.752***	-0.556*	-0.489
	(0.238)	(0.249)	(0.307)	(0.393)
Chinese × Merit	-0.165	-0.215	-0.270	-0.204
	(0.218)	(0.229)	(0.275)	(0.376)
Chinese × Tutoring	-0.465**	-0.515**	-0.668**	-0.601
	(0.180)	(0.208)	(0.282)	(0.382)
Chinese × Obstacle	-0.946***	-0.995***	-1.254***	-1.187***
	(0.176)	(0.193)	(0.288)	(0.389)
Chinese × Margwin	-0.547***	-0.597***	-0.831***	-0.764**
	(0.162)	(0.171)	(0.277)	(0.383)
Chinese × Error	-0.675***	-0.725***	-0.634**	-0.567
	(0.172)	(0.191)	(0.313)	(0.407)
Controls		✓		✓
N Distributions	1,698	1,698	1,722	1,722
N Respondents	283	283	287	287
Mean DepVar	5.15	5.15	4.22	4.22
Sd DepVar	1.57	1.57	2.60	2.60

Table 10: The Chinese versus the French: Amount Given to the Loser

Notes: One observation is a respondent × scenario. The dependent variable is the sum attributed to the loser in the scenario. Luck(FR) represent the regression coefficient of an indicator variable for the luck scenario on the amount; in the absence of a constant them, this represents the average amount attributed by the French respondents in the luck scenario. The Chinese × Luck term represents the difference between amounts attributed by Chinese and French respondents. Controls include an indicator that the respondent received the luck scenario before merit, the age, gender and parent occupation of the respondents, whether he or she lived abroad, went to a privileged high school, received discount in admission process, and the belief questions listed in section 8.4.2.

	7/5 Split		12/0 Split	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Sum to Loser	Sum to Loser	Sum to Loser	Sum to Loser
Luck (FR)	5.568***	3.792***	4.804***	4.226***
	(0.296)	(1.261)	(0.189)	(1.056)
Merit (FR)	4.569***	2.710**	4.132***	3.580***
	(0.324)	(1.229)	(0.185)	(1.052)
Tutoring (FR)	5.636***	3.861***	4.904***	4.370***
	(0.185)	(1.244)	(0.164)	(1.042)
Obstacle (FR)	6.293***	4.555***	5.681***	5.146***
	(0.166)	(1.238)	(0.157)	(1.045)
Margwin (FR)	5.848***	4.009***	5.190***	4.654***
	(0.229)	(1.251)	(0.146)	(1.068)
Error (FR)	6.227***	4.413***	5.134***	4.593***
	(0.191)	(1.250)	(0.175)	(1.062)
Chinese × Luck	-1.276***	-1.410***	-0.127	-0.350
	(0.412)	(0.411)	(0.261)	(0.285)
Chinese × Merit	-0.503	-0.550	0.048	-0.149
	(0.398)	(0.386)	(0.247)	(0.299)
Chinese × Tutoring	-0.547*	-0.655*	0.029	-0.179
	(0.323)	(0.353)	(0.244)	(0.289)
Chinese × Obstacle	-1.034***	-1.147***	-0.368	-0.586**
	(0.278)	(0.306)	(0.243)	(0.294)
Chinese × Margwin	-0.997***	-0.992***	0.022	-0.188
	(0.345)	(0.346)	(0.235)	(0.276)
Chinese × Error	-0.898***	-0.955***	0.504*	0.282
	(0.296)	(0.315)	(0.288)	(0.320)
Controls		✓		✓
N Distributions	889	889	1,456	1,456
N Respondents	233	233	262	262
Mean DepVar	5.28	5.28	4.99	4.99
Sd DepVar	2.16	2.16	2.04	2.04

Table 11: The Chinese versus the French: Amount Given to the Loser Removing Status Quo Players

Notes: One observation is a respondent × scenario. All status quo distributions (respondent × scenario) are removed from the analysis. The dependent variable is the sum attributed to the loser in the scenario. Luck(FR) represent the regression coefficient of an indicator variable for the luck scenario on the amount; in the absence of a constant them, this represents the average amount attributed by the French respondents in the luck scenario. The Chinese × Luck term represents the difference between amounts attributed by Chinese and French respondents. Controls include an indicator that the respondent received the luck scenario before merit, the age, gender and parent occupation of the respondents, whether he or she lived abroad, went to a privileged high school, received discount in admission process, and the belief questions listed in section 8.4.2.

	(1) Always play status-quo	(2) Always play status-quo	(3) Always play status-quo	(4) Always play status-quo
Unequal status-quo	-.107*	-.0825	-.0859	-.111**
	(.0437)	(.0444)	(.0446)	(.0417)
Claimed conformed to researchers' goals		.176***		
		(.0456)		
Claimed unaffected by researchers' goals			-.156**	
			(.0472)	
Service				-.435***
				(.124)
Small Shopkeeper				-.456***
				(.079)
Private Enterprise Owner				-.459***
				(.0898)
Clerical				-.328***
				(.0722)
Public Servant				-.111
				(.179)
Management				-.34***
				(.0791)
Army, Police				-.5
				(.273)
Professionals				-.292**
				(.104)
Worker				-.16*
				(.0799)
Others				-.528**
				(.198)
R2	.0175	.059	.0472	.156
Mean	.205	.202	.202	.205
N respondents	337	312	312	337

Standard errors in parentheses

Chinese sample only. In column 4, the excluded category is Farmer

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 12: Correlation between always playing the status quo and treatment condition, parent occupation and answers in the type of experimenter demand effect question (Chinese sample)

Notes: Chinese sample only. One observation is a respondent. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that the respondent has **only** played the status quo in all scenarios.

	(1) Play SQ	(2) Play SQ	(3) Play SQ
Demographics			
Age	-0.012	-0.016*	-0.017**
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.065**	-0.063**	-0.059*
	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.030)
Univeristy Type, Ref. Cat. = Science and Engineering			
General	-0.079*	-0.070*	-0.068*
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Other miscellaneous	-0.168***	-0.155***	-0.151***
	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.045)
University Region, Ref. Cat. = Center			
North	0.129*	0.135**	0.115*
	(0.070)	(0.068)	(0.065)
Beijing	0.120**	0.131***	0.113**
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.046)
Univeristy Rank, Ref. Cat. = Rank Below Median			
Rank above median	0.095***	0.083**	0.080**
	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Father Education, Ref. Cat. = Primary or Less			
College and below	0.083	0.070	0.058
	(0.080)	(0.086)	(0.076)
Secondary	0.015	0.019	0.012
	(0.080)	(0.086)	(0.076)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Agriculture			
Small business & commerce/Service	-0.325***	-0.293***	-0.263***
	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.050)
Clerical	-0.268***	-0.224***	-0.200***
	(0.058)	(0.055)	(0.054)
Public servant	-0.292**	-0.222*	-0.169
	(0.131)	(0.133)	(0.137)
Management & professional	-0.242***	-0.200***	-0.167**
	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.066)
Blue collar worker	-0.101	-0.092	-0.074
	(0.061)	(0.059)	(0.057)
Education			
Lived abroad	-0.044	-0.074	-0.072
	(0.056)	(0.063)	(0.065)
Privileged high school	0.011	0.006	-0.014
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Non-exam admission	-0.048	-0.043	-0.054
	(0.057)	(0.053)	(0.055)
Experiment Behavior			
Claim: understand research goals (0-10)			0.007
			(0.007)
Claim: comply to research goals (-5-5)			0.020**
			(0.008)
Scenario Controls	✓	✓	✓
Belief Controls		✓	✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	2,345	2,345	2,345
N Respondents	335	335	335
Mean DepVar	0.34	0.34	0.34

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 13: Detailed Determinants of Status Quo Play (Chinese Sample Only)

Notes: Chinese sample only. One observation is a respondent × scenario. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that the player played SQ in the scenario. "Scenario Controls" refer to scenario fixed effect while "belief controls" refer to the set of belief questions listed in section 8.4.2.

	(1) Play SQ	(2) Play SQ	(3) Play SQ
Demographics			
Age	-0.011	-0.014	-0.015*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.058*	-0.055*	-0.050*
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.029)
Univeristy Type, Ref. Cat. = Science and Engineering			
General	-0.074*	-0.064	-0.060
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Other miscellaneous	-0.164***	-0.153***	-0.153***
	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.045)
University Region, Ref. Cat. = Center			
North	0.133*	0.137**	0.117*
	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.064)
Beijing	0.125***	0.135***	0.115**
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.046)
Univeristy Rank, Ref. Cat. = Rank Below Median			
Rank above median	0.197	0.088	0.090
	(0.186)	(0.190)	(0.173)
Father Education, Ref. Cat. = Primary or Less			
College and below	0.097	0.078	0.063
	(0.096)	(0.102)	(0.094)
Secondary	0.032	0.022	0.012
	(0.096)	(0.103)	(0.094)
Father Education & University Rank			
College and below × Rank above median	-0.052	-0.018	-0.017
	(0.169)	(0.175)	(0.162)
Secondary × Rank above median	-0.038	0.005	0.005
	(0.167)	(0.176)	(0.163)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Agriculture			
Small business & commerce/Service	-0.240***	-0.254***	-0.230***
	(0.071)	(0.067)	(0.063)
Clerical	-0.282***	-0.275***	-0.250***
	(0.076)	(0.071)	(0.069)
Public servant	-0.086	-0.122	-0.053
	(0.179)	(0.131)	(0.120)
Management & professional	-0.178*	-0.166*	-0.121
	(0.096)	(0.091)	(0.088)
Father Occupation & University Rank			
Small business & commerce/Service × Rank above median	-0.162*	-0.084	-0.069
	(0.098)	(0.095)	(0.092)
Clerical × Rank above median	0.040	0.102	0.100
	(0.110)	(0.106)	(0.104)
Public servant × Rank above median	-0.285	-0.134	-0.159
	(0.241)	(0.220)	(0.214)
Management & professional × Rank above median	-0.135	-0.093	-0.121
	(0.132)	(0.124)	(0.120)
Education			
Lived abroad	-0.054	-0.084	-0.079
	(0.061)	(0.066)	(0.070)
Privileged high school	0.018	0.015	-0.005
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Non-exam admission	-0.042	-0.038	-0.043
	(0.058)	(0.054)	(0.056)
Experiment Behavior			
Claim: understand research goals (0-10)			0.008
			(0.007)
Claim: comply to research goals (-5-5)			0.018**
			(0.008)
Scenario Controls	✓	✓	✓
Belief Controls		✓	✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	2,345	2,345	2,345
N Respondents	335	335	335
Mean DepVar	0.34	0.34	0.34
Sd DepVar	0.48	0.48	0.48

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 14: Detailed Determinants of Status Quo Play with Interactions (Chinese Sample Only)

Notes: Chinese sample only. One observation is a respondent × scenario. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that the player played SQ in the scenario. "Scenario Controls" refer to scenario fixed effect while "belief controls" refer to the set of belief questions listed in section 8.4.2.

	(1) Play SQ	(2) Play SQ	(3) Play SQ
Demographics			
Age	-0.011	-0.014	-0.015*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.058*	-0.055*	-0.050*
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.029)
Univeristy Type, Ref. Cat. = Science and Engineering			
General	-0.074*	-0.064	-0.060
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Other miscellaneous	-0.164***	-0.153***	-0.153***
	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.045)
University Region, Ref. Cat. = Center			
North	0.133*	0.137**	0.117*
	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.064)
Beijing	0.125***	0.135***	0.115**
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.046)
Univeristy Rank, Ref. Cat. = Rank Below Median			
Rank above median	0.035	0.004	0.021
	(0.161)	(0.170)	(0.158)
Father Education, Ref. Cat. = Primary or Less			
College and below	0.097	0.078	0.063
	(0.096)	(0.102)	(0.094)
Secondary	0.032	0.022	0.012
	(0.096)	(0.103)	(0.094)
Father Education & University Rank			
College and below × Rank above median	-0.052	-0.018	-0.017
	(0.169)	(0.175)	(0.162)
Secondary × Rank above median	-0.038	0.005	0.005
	(0.167)	(0.176)	(0.163)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Small Business & Service			
Agriculture	0.240***	0.254***	0.230***
	(0.071)	(0.067)	(0.063)
Clerical	-0.042	-0.022	-0.019
	(0.048)	(0.050)	(0.051)
Public servant	0.153	0.131	0.177
	(0.172)	(0.123)	(0.114)
Management & professional	0.062	0.087	0.109*
	(0.066)	(0.064)	(0.064)
Father Occupation & University Rank			
Agriculture × Rank above median	0.162*	0.084	0.069
	(0.098)	(0.095)	(0.092)
Clerical × Rank above median	0.203***	0.186**	0.170**
	(0.073)	(0.074)	(0.074)
Public servant × Rank above median	-0.123	-0.050	-0.089
	(0.230)	(0.207)	(0.203)
Management & professional × Rank above median	0.027	-0.009	-0.051
	(0.100)	(0.095)	(0.094)
Education			
Lived abroad	-0.054	-0.084	-0.079
	(0.061)	(0.066)	(0.070)
Privileged high school	0.018	0.015	-0.005
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Non-exam admission	-0.042	-0.038	-0.043
	(0.058)	(0.054)	(0.056)
Experiment Behavior			
Claim: understand research goals (0-10)			0.008
			(0.007)
Claim: comply to research goals (-5-5)			0.018**
			(0.008)
Scenario Controls	✓	✓	✓
Belief Controls		✓	✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	2,345	2,345	2,345
N Respondents	335	335	335
Mean DepVar	0.34	0.34	0.34
Sd DepVar	0.48	0.48	0.48

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 15: Detailed Determinants of Status Quo Play with Interactions (Chinese Sample Only) - Different Parental Occupation Baseline

Notes: Chinese sample only. One observation is a respondent × scenario. The dependent variable is an indicator variable that the player played SQ in the scenario. "Scenario Controls" refer to scenario fixed effect while "belief controls" refer to the set of belief questions listed in section 8.4.2.

	(1) Default answer (experimenter demand)	(2) Default answer (type experimenter demand)	(3) Total default answers (beliefs)
Total SQ play (scenarios)	-.0198*	-.00382	-.035
	(.00921)	(.00543)	(.0247)
R2	.0136	.00148	.00594
Mean	.312	.0801	.97
N respondents	337	337	337

Standard errors in parentheses
Chinese sample only.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 16: Correlation between total status quo play across all scenarios default answers in other sections (Chinese sample)
Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Chinese sample only. Total SQ play is defined as the number of scenarios for which a respondent chooses the status quo.

	(1) Attentive	(2) Log of questionnaire duration
Total SQ play (scenarios)	.0125	.00187
	(.00671)	(.00353)
R2	.00858	.000706
Mean	.843	7.36
N respondents	400	400

Standard errors in parentheses
Chinese sample only, including respondents who were excluded from the analysis due to a lack of attention.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 17: Correlation between total status quo play across all scenarios and inattention proxies (Chinese sample)
Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Chinese sample only, including respondents who were excluded from the analysis due to a lack of attention. Total SQ play is defined as the number of scenarios for which a respondent chooses the status quo.

	(1) Status quo play
Scenario ordering	-.00053
	(.00381)
R2	4.62e-06
Mean	.416
N respondents	337
N respondents x scenarios	2359

Standard errors in parentheses
Chinese sample only. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 18: Correlation between status quo play and a scenario's ordering (Chinese sample)
Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Chinese sample only. Each observation is a respondent $\times$ scenario pair. The dependent variable is scenario ordering, which is defined as a scenario's order of appearance in the questionnaire (e.g. 1 for the first scenario) shown to the respondent).

	(1) SQ Playing	(2) Sum Loser if no SQ
Service	-0.218*	-0.538
	(0.091)	(0.386)
Small Shopkeeper	-0.257***	-0.353
	(0.055)	(0.301)
Private Enterprise Owner	-0.296***	-0.353
	(0.060)	(0.387)
Clerical	-0.198***	-0.450
	(0.059)	(0.288)
Public Servant	-0.068	0.056
	(0.208)	(0.420)
Management	-0.150*	-0.412
	(0.067)	(0.340)
Army, Police	-0.192*	-0.084
	(0.081)	(0.328)
Professionals	-0.130	-0.152
	(0.091)	(0.377)
Worker	-0.054	-0.357
	(0.061)	(0.372)
Others	-0.299*	0.150
	(0.128)	(1.134)
Controls	✓	✓
Respondents	2,359.00	1,549.00
Mean DepVar	0.34	4.39
Sd DepVar	0.47	2.43

Standard errors in parentheses

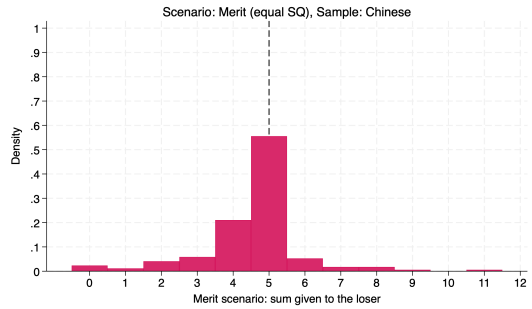
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 19: Status Quo Play and Sum Given To the Loser By Father Job Category in the Chinese Sample

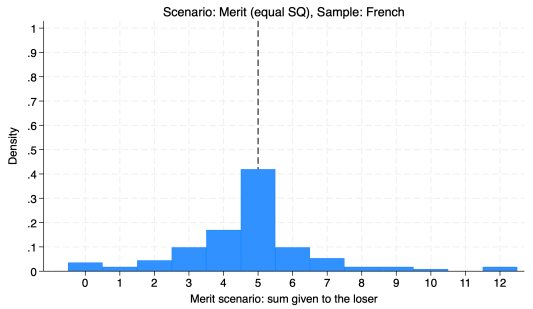
Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Chinese sample only. Each observation is a respondent $\times$ scenario pair. The dependent variable in the first column is an indicator variable that equals to one if the respondent played the status quo in a scenario, for the second column it is the total amount attributed to the loser, excluding status quo players and the inefficient scenarios. The standard errors are clustered on the respondent level.

8.2 Additional Graphs and Figures

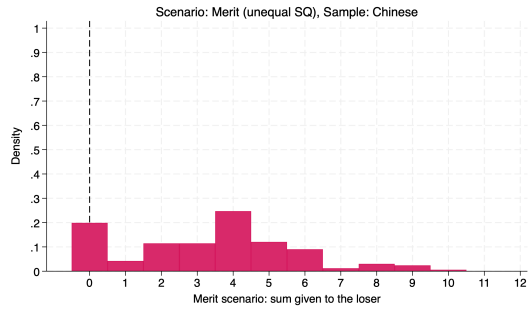
8.2.1 Frequency Distributions of Sum Given To Losers Under Different Scenarios



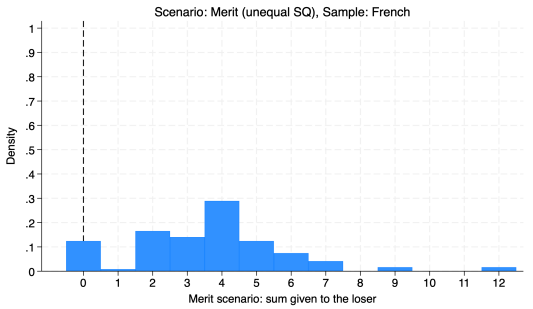
(a) **Merit** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese



(b) **Merit** scenario, 7/5 Split, French

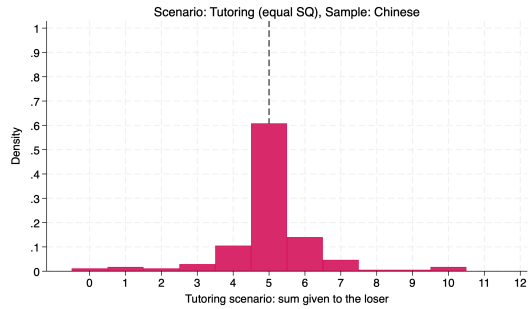


(c) **Merit** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese

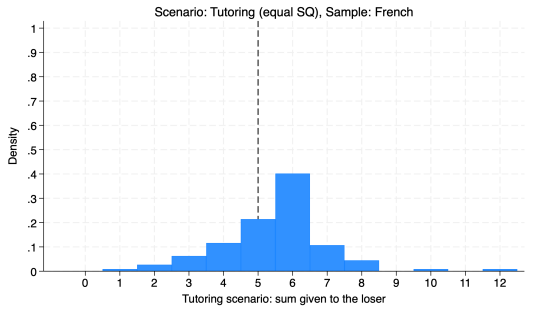


(d) **Merit** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

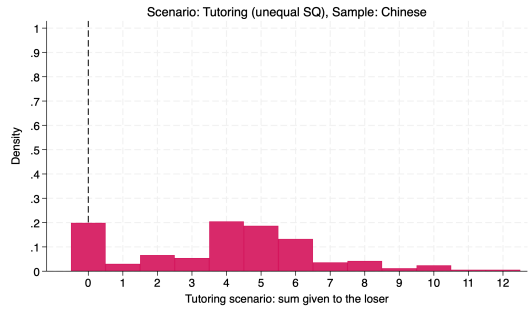
Figure 8.1: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Merit Scenario



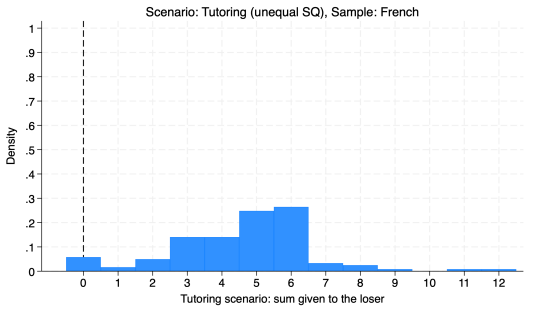
(a) **Tutoring** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese



(b) **Tutoring** scenario, 7/5 Split, French

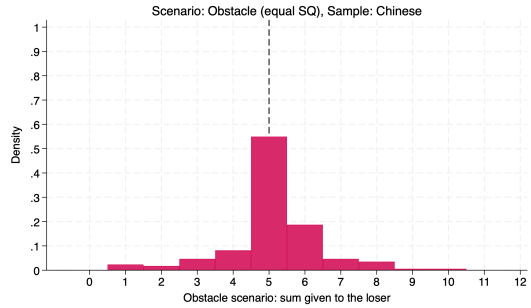


(c) **Tutoring** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese

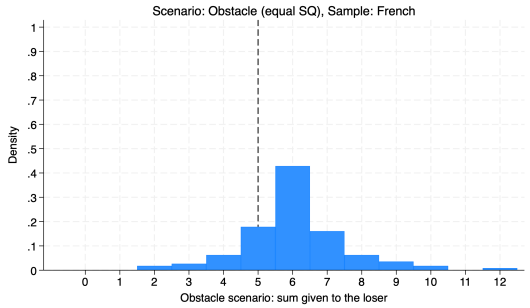


(d) **Tutoring** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

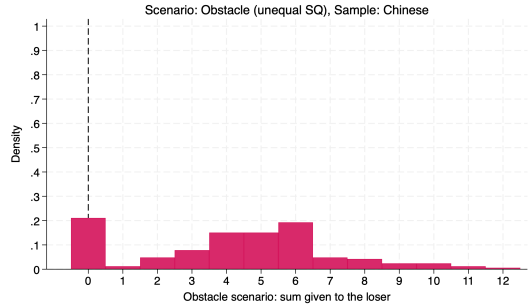
Figure 8.2: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Tutoring Scenario



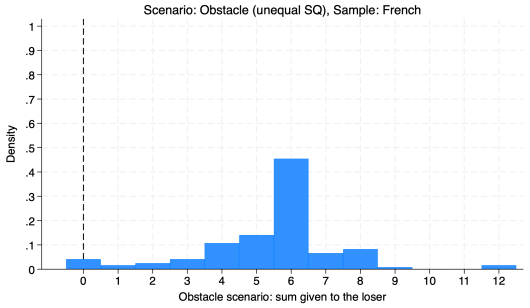
(a) **Obstacle** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese



(b) **Obstacle** scenario, 7/5 Split, French

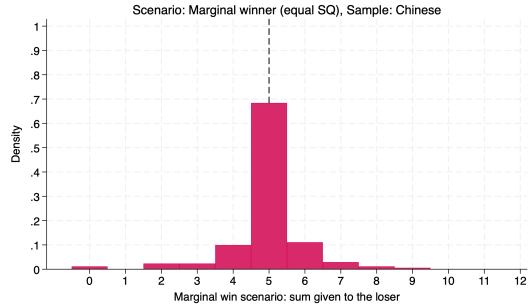


(c) **Obstacle** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese

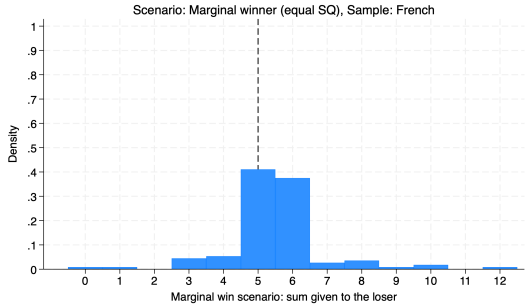


(d) **Obstacle** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

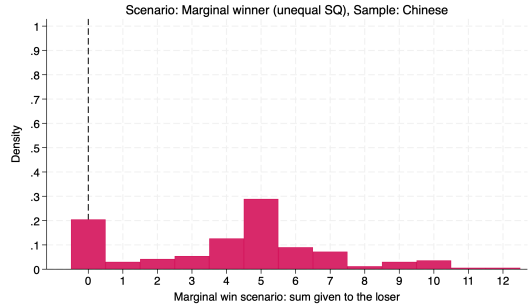
Figure 8.3: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Obstacle Scenario



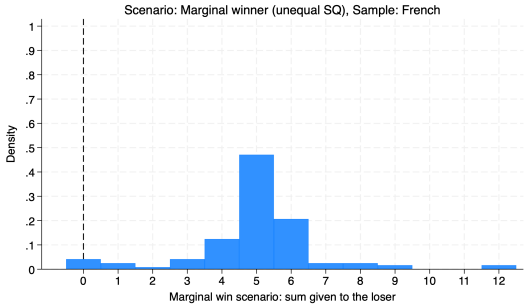
(a) **Margwin** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese



(b) **Margwin** scenario, 7/5 Split, French

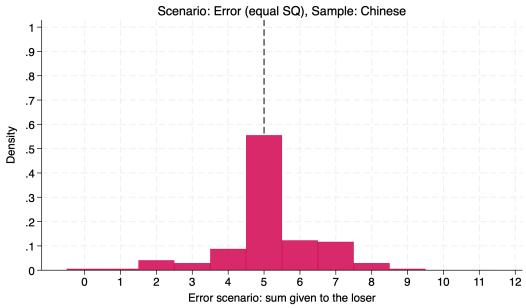


(c) **Margwin** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese

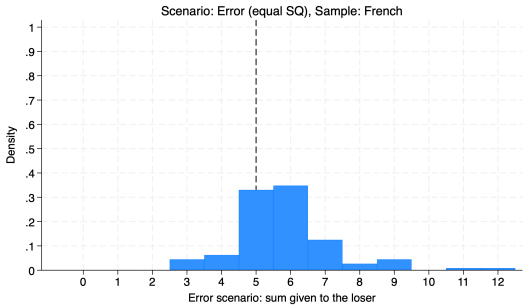


(d) **Margwin** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

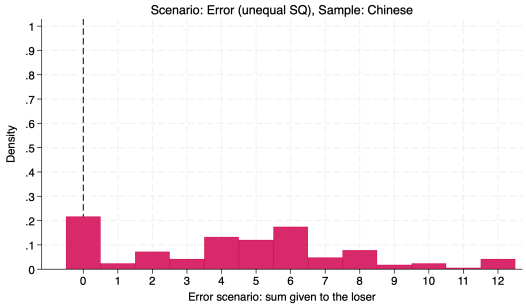
Figure 8.4: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Margwin Scenario



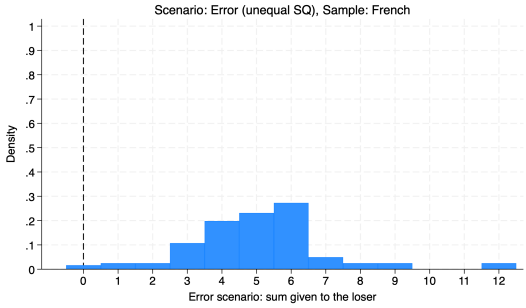
(a) **Error** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese



(b) **Error** scenario, 7/5 Split, French

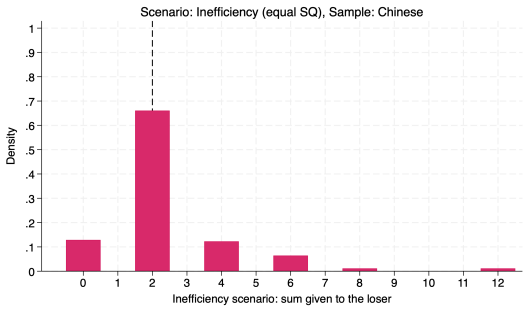


(c) **Error** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese

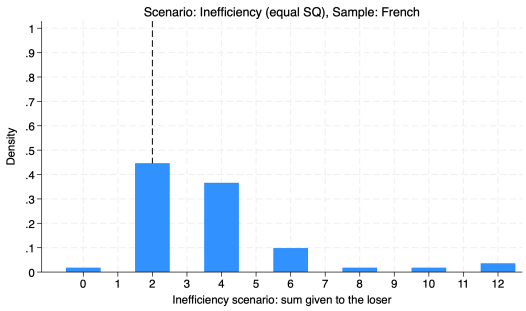


(d) **Error** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

Figure 8.5: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Error Scenario

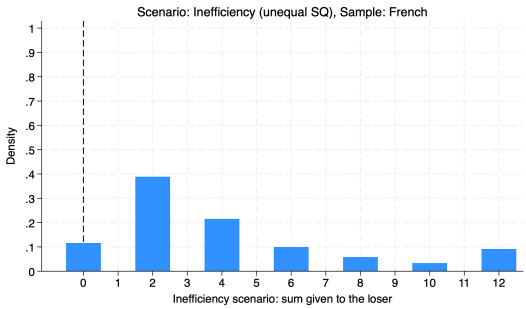


(a) **Inefficiency** scenario, 5/2 Split, Chinese



(b) **Inefficiency** scenario, 5/2 Split, French

(c) **Inefficiency** scenario, 6/0 Split, Chinese



(d) **Inefficiency** scenario, 6/0 Split, French

Figure 8.6: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Inefficiency Scenario

8.3 Additional Details on Subject Selection

8.3.1 French Elite Higher Education Institutions

The French sample included students from Sciences Po Paris as well as students enrolled in *Classes Préparatoires* and other *Grandes Écoles*. The French system of elite higher education is structured around these highly selective institutions, which historically have trained the country's political, administrative, and economic elites.

Grandes Écoles operate largely outside the standard university framework and typically admit students through competitive national entrance exams following two years of intensive preparation in *Classes Préparatoires*. These preparatory classes are themselves selective and are hosted by public high schools across the country. Students often specialize in science, economics, or humanities tracks and prepare for targeted *concours* depending on the *Grande École* they aim to enter. Top-ranked students who do not succeed on their first attempt may repeat a third year of preparation, commonly known as "khûbe" or "5/2".

Sciences Po Paris, one of the most prominent French institutions for training future political and administrative elites, historically used a written entrance exam in the final year of high school. Since 2021, however, its admissions process has shifted to a more holistic selection procedure that considers academic records, personal essays, and interviews. While Sciences Po has a relatively international student body, our sample was restricted to programs primarily composed of French nationals to maintain comparability.

8.3.2 Chinese Elite Universities

The Chinese sample was drawn from universities previously designated under the national "Project 985" and "Project 211" initiatives. These projects were launched in the late 1990s to strengthen the quality of higher education and scientific research, and they remain widely recognized markers of institutional prestige. Although the official programs ended in the mid-2010s, the labels continue to signal elite status.

Admission to these universities is based on students' scores on the National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*), which evaluates performance in Chinese, mathemat-

ics, a foreign language (typically English), and three additional elective subjects chosen from humanities or sciences depending on regional policies. Admission decisions are largely determined by provincial quotas and university-specific cutoff scores. The *Gaokao* is commonly viewed as one of the few remaining mechanisms of relatively fair competition in China, even as its implementation reproduces structural inequalities related to geography, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

A small share of students—about 7% in our sample—benefit from preferential admission schemes. These include exemptions or bonus points for students with exceptional performance in Olympiads, arts or sports; students from minority ethnic groups; and children of military personnel or returning veterans. Students of foreign nationalities are often evaluated through separate and less competitive admissions processes, but we exclude such cases from our sample to ensure comparability.

8.4 Additional Information on the Experiment Design

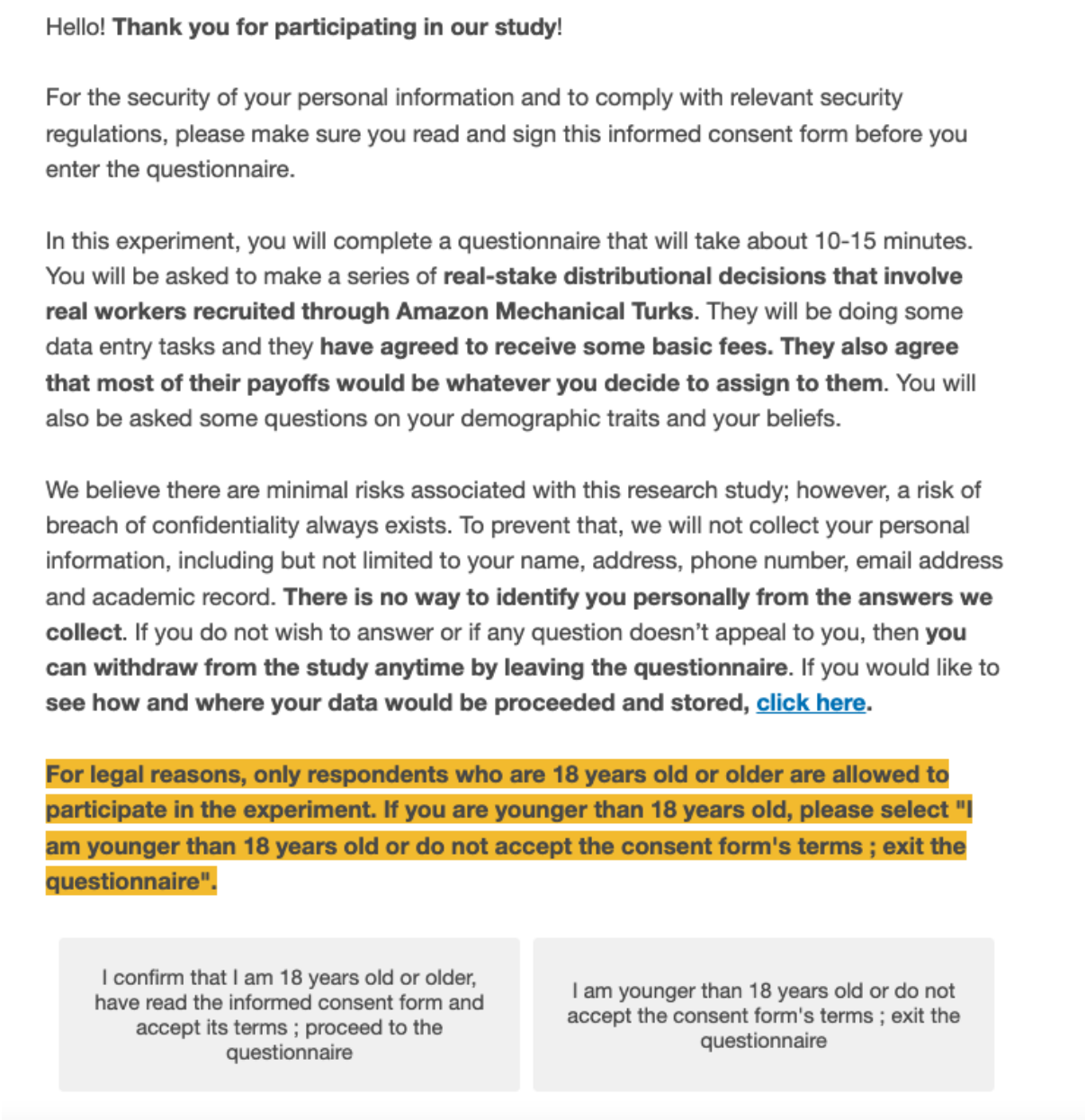
8.4.1 Beginning of Survey: Consent Form and Comprehension Check

At the start of the survey, the respondents were asked to read and agree to the consent form. For the sake of valid consent, participants below 18 years old were forbidden from participating. Figure 8.7 below provides an example of the consent form. They would then answer a series of belief elicitation and control questions before entering into the redistribution scenarios. The first scenario was followed by a comprehension check in which the respondent was asked what bonuses the winner and loser would receive if his/her choice is implemented. If the respondent made a mistake, the correct answer was displayed with an explanation, and the respondent was invited to answer the scenario question again. Attention check questions were inserted into the scenario section to ensure continued attention.

8.4.2 Belief Questions

The respondents were asked for their opinions on a series of topics before entering into the redistribution scenarios. They were invited to indicate on a scale of 1-10 to what extent they agreed with the following statements:

1. The government is responsible for reducing the income gap between the rich


Hello! **Thank you for participating in our study**!

For the security of your personal information and to comply with relevant security regulations, please make sure you read and sign this informed consent form before you enter the questionnaire.

In this experiment, you will complete a questionnaire that will take about 10-15 minutes. You will be asked to make a series of **real-stake distributional decisions that involve real workers recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turks**. They will be doing some data entry tasks and they **have agreed to receive some basic fees. They also agree that most of their payoffs would be whatever you decide to assign to them**. You will also be asked some questions on your demographic traits and your beliefs.

We believe there are minimal risks associated with this research study; however, a risk of breach of confidentiality always exists. To prevent that, we will not collect your personal information, including but not limited to your name, address, phone number, email address and academic record. **There is no way to identify you personally from the answers we collect**. If you do not wish to answer or if any question doesn't appeal to you, then **you can withdraw from the study anytime by leaving the questionnaire**. If you would like to **see how and where your data would be proceeded and stored, click here.**

For legal reasons, only respondents who are 18 years old or older are allowed to participate in the experiment. If you are younger than 18 years old, please select "I am younger than 18 years old or do not accept the consent form's terms ; exit the questionnaire".

I confirm that I am 18 years old or older, have read the informed consent form and accept its terms ; proceed to the questionnaire

I am younger than 18 years old or do not accept the consent form's terms ; exit the questionnaire

Figure 8.7: Example of the Consent Form (French Survey– English Version)

and the poor.

2. Success in the society I live in today is largely decided by luck and privilege instead of personal effort or talent.
3. I deserve my position in society.
4. I am doing better than most (50%) people in my cohort.
5. One must prioritize collective interests whenever pursuing one's personal interests threatens collective interests.
6. I always accept others' opinions, even when they don't agree with my own.
7. I always admit my mistakes openly and face the potential negative consequences.

Among the belief questions, statement 1 (government responsibility in reducing income gap) is considered the traditional proxy to measure demand for redistribution. [22] Statement 2 measures the belief about whether success in the world is due to luck or effort. Statements 3 and 4 measure the subjective position of the given respondents in his or her cohort and also serve as proxies of overconfidence for control purposes. Student subjects tended to systematically be overconfident in their ability and overconfidence was especially pronounced among men. Statement 5 proxies for belief in collectivism. 6 and 7 are "social desirability controls" as suggested by Larson (2019): we expect that people who are more likely to have social desirability bias would also be more likely to respond to these questions positively.

8.4.3 Attention Checks

We carried out two types of attention checks. In one ("apple attention check"), the screen displayed a blue apple and asked respondents to type in the apple color, with a footnote indicating that respondents should enter another word (e.g. "orange") to pass the attention check. In the second attention check ("missing word attention check"), we displayed a long text describing the experiment and asked respondents to fill in a missing word, indicating in a footnote the word they must enter to be consid-

[22] For example, the World Value Survey and the US General Social Survey used this question. For academic examples see Alesina and La Ferrara (2005); Corneo and Grüner (2002)

ered attentive. The Chinese and French Grande École samples were only submitted to the first attention check. In the French Sciences Po sample however, to limit the risk that communication of the attention check responses across respondents would make it impossible to screen inattentive respondents, we randomized the number of attention checks (1 or 2) to which respondents were submitted, the answers they were asked to provide (e.g. “orange", “dog", etc), as well as the position of the attention checks. Attention checks were systematically carried out in the scenarios section, after the baseline **luck** and **merit** scenarios, in order to catch any lack of attention resulting from fatigue.

As the “missing word attention check" proved more difficult than the “apple attention check" (89% of Sciences Po respondents who were asked the apple attention check passed the apple attention check while only 81.6% of those who were asked the missing word attention check passed the missing word attention check), we however decided, to ensure comparability across samples, to count as “attentive" all Sciences Po respondents who had passed at least one attention check.

84.25% of the Chinese respondents passed the attention check, 88.75% of Sciences Po respondents passed some attention check, and 48.35% of French Grande École respondents passed the attention check.

Besides relying on the attention checks, we excluded respondents below the 5^{th} percentile of survey duration (255 seconds) as well as those who provided some low-quality answers when asked to type responses.[23]

8.4.4 Experimenter Demand, Open Questions and Demographics

Respondents were also asked a series of questions aimed at gauging possible experimenter demand effects. They were asked to indicate on a scale from 0 (“I have no clue what the experiment is about") to 10 (“I have completely understood what you are trying to test") to what extent they felt that they had understood the goal of the

[23]Low-quality answers include replying “23456" when asked for their age or replying “Non" (No), “Moi" (I), “O", “Mère" (Mother) when asked in a comprehension check question to indicate the sums workers would receive if their response was implemented.
Reassuringly, passing the attention check was negatively correlated to providing a low-quality answer with $p = 0.000$ and either uncorrelated with the log of survey duration or, in the case of the French Grande École sample, positively correlated with the log of survey duration with $p = 0.029$.

experiment. If a respondent answered more than 0, this was followed by two more questions. First, by an open text question in which they were asked to indicate what they believed to be the goal of the experiment (allowing for “NA" answers). Second, respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed that their answer had been influenced by the way researchers expected them to answer, from -5 (“I knew what you expected me to answer, and I answered the complete opposite") to 5 (“I knew what you expected me to answer, and I made sure I answered the way you expected").

Demographic questions were asked after those experimenter demand effect questions—we chose to insert demographic questions at the very end of the survey to avoid creating experimenter demand effects by “priming" respondents to think in a cultural lens after being asked about the countries where they had lived.

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender and age.[24]

They were additionally asked a series of questions aimed at gauging their cultural backgrounds: whether they were born outside France (respectively China) and, if yes, where; whether they lived or studied at least one year outside France and, if yes, where; how would they classify their cultural background (e.g. West European, East Asian, etc).[25]

Respondents were additionally asked to indicate their parents' occupations.[26] We used the occupation categories customarily used by French and Chinese statistical services, respectively the INSEE and the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), so that they would be familiar to the respondents.

Respondents were asked a series of questions aimed at gauging their educational tra-

[24] Although we allowed for non-binary gender or non-responses, we used a dummy for male in the regression analysis to avoid collinearity issues as only 8 respondents indicated non-binary or prefer not to answer.

[25] To preserve the respondents' anonymity, respondents had to select broad geographic aggregates whenever asked to indicate where they were born, had lived, or studied.

[26] The French sample was asked for both parents' occupations under the labels of “parent 1" and “parent 2", allowing for “does not apply" while the Chinese sample was only asked for father's occupation as is customary in Chinese surveys. The French sample was asked for parents' current occupation while the Chinese sample was asked for their parents' occupation when they were 14. Given the prevalence of permanent contracts in France, we however do not expect that this discrepancy should introduce substantial measurement differences between the two samples, aside from the larger fraction (3%) of French respondents with retired parents.

jectories and, in particular, to what extent they had been exposed to highly selective environments. French respondents were therefore asked to indicate their program (for Sciences Po students, in which campus they studied and which undergraduate program they were enrolled in; for Grande École students, whether they studied in Classes Préparatoires and if yes, which type of Classe Préparatoires). To gauge the selectivity of a respondent's educational environment, Sciences Po students were asked whether they would say that the high school where they studied prior to enrolling in Sciences Po was "very selective" while Grande École students were asked to indicate in which Classe Préparatoire or Grande École they studied, where Classes Préparatoires and Grandes Écoles were grouped into three tiers based on selectivity.[27] To gauge exposure to competitive exams, Sciences Po students were asked to indicate the admission procedure through which they had been admitted to the institution and whether they had taken any competitive exam (and if yes, which one), while Grande École students were asked to indicate which Grande École competitive exams they had taken where exams were divided in three tiers based on the selectivity of the Grande École.

8.5 Implementation of Respondents' Choices

We randomly drew the responses of 5% of the respondents and implemented their decisions with bonuses paid to workers hired on the Amazon Mechanical Turk online platform.

The workers were asked to perform a series of Wikipedia searches and data entry tasks. Specifically, they were asked to search for a series of famous individuals' Wikipedia pages and enter those individuals' year of birth, profession, and father's profession.[28] Workers were given 4 minutes to answer as many questions as possible.[29] To guarantee variation in task performance, the number of questions was

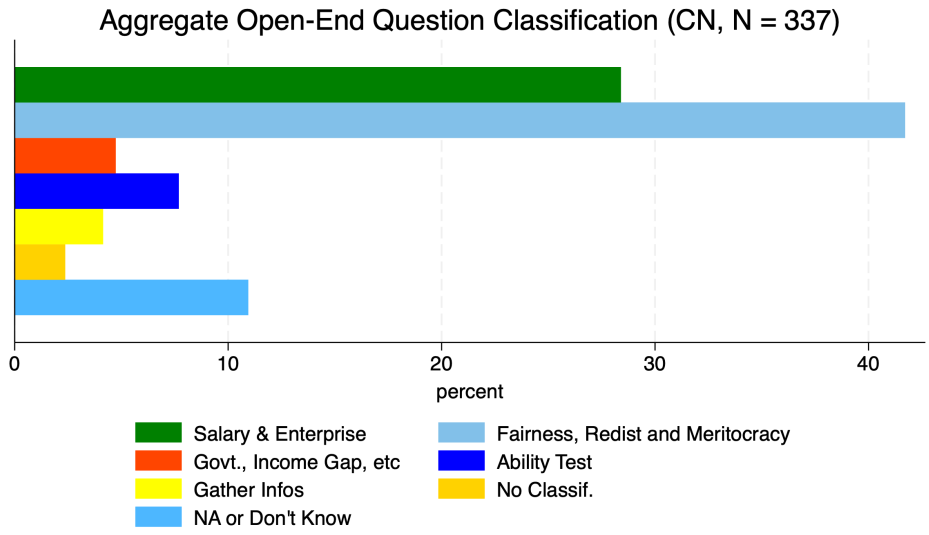
[27] As additional measures of selectivity, Grande École students were asked to indicate whether they were enrolled in / had studied in a "star" Classe Préparatoire—in which the students who achieve the highest marks in the first year of Classe Préparatoire can enroll—and whether they did "khube"—which corresponds to doing a third year of Classe Préparatoire to attempt to get admitted in a more selective Grande École and is only offered to high performing students.

[28] Those individuals were extracted from the compilation of Wikipedia pages by Laouenan et al. (2022). To make sure that the Wikipedia page would be easy to find, we only include North American individuals born during or after the 20^{th} century.

[29] To ensure informed consent, workers could spend any time on the consent form and instructions,

Figure 8.8: Open-End Question Answer Classifications (Aggregate)

(a) Chinese Sample



(b) French Sample

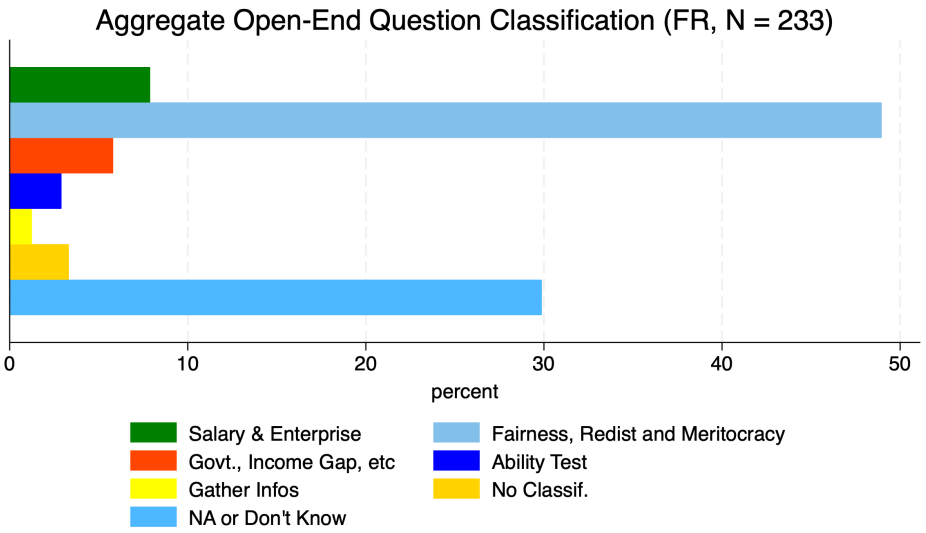
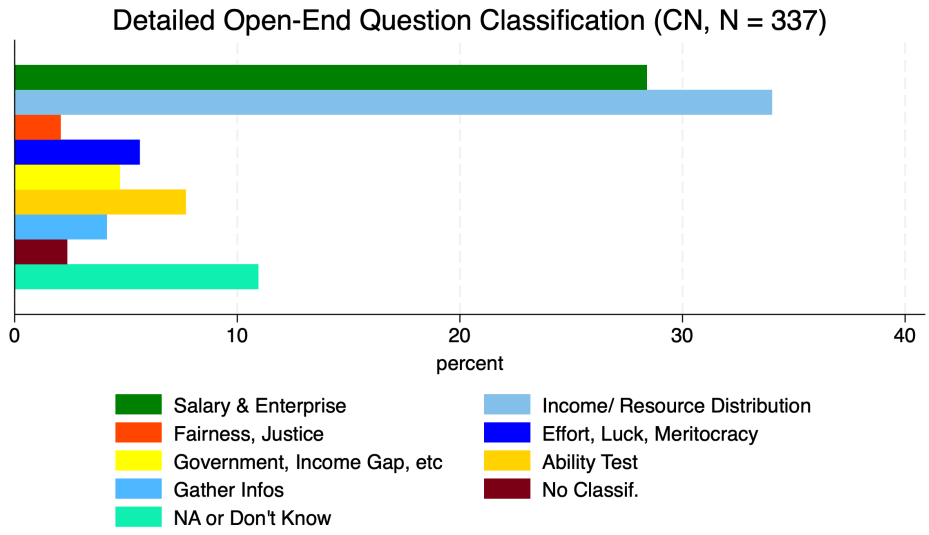


Figure 8.9: Open-End Question Answer Classifications (Dis-aggregate)

(a) Chinese Sample



(b) French Sample

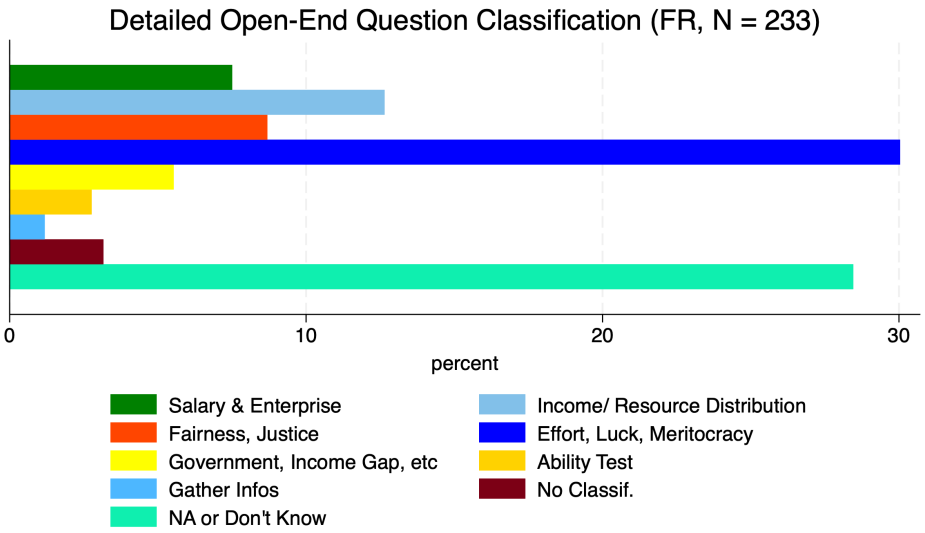
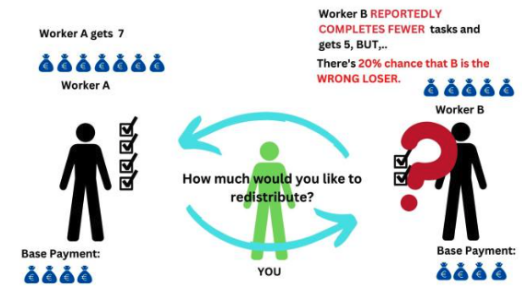


Figure 8.10: Screenshot of the Chinese and French Surveys

(a) Screenshot of French Survey



In this scenario, the researchers use a software to find out who has correctly completed more tasks. However, **the software will sometimes pick the WRONG LOSER**: with 20% of chances, the worker it reports to be "loser" actually **correctly completed MORE tasks**. If no redistribution is made, the worker reported to have correctly completed more tasks gets a reward of **7**, the other gets a reward of **5**.

If you want us to redistribute the rewards, move the slider to indicate how much we should give to the worker REPORTED TO HAVE correctly completed FEWER tasks.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reward for the worker reported to have completed fewer tasks (the other worker will get 12 minus this amount)

→

(b) Screenshot of the Chinese Survey

G15_1. In this scenario, researchers asked a software to report who completed more tasks correctly. However, the **software sometimes reports an error about the loser** : There is a 20% chance that the person it says loses (worker B) does not actually lose: he actually completes more tasks correctly.

The "loser" worker B reported by the software received a bonus of 5 yuan, and the other worker A received a bonus of 7 yuan.

If you wish to redistribute, please choose from the options below how much bonus we should give to worker B, the "loser" reported by the software.

0
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12

54%

previous page Next page

chosen in such a way that it would have been very difficult to answer all questions, and respondents were told to skip any question they could not answer.

All workers who submitted reasonable answers were paid a base payment corresponding to the US federal minimum wage given the duration of the tasks section, and allowing for 2 extra minutes to read the consent form and instructions.[30] Bonus payments chosen by survey respondents were paid on top of this base payment.

In total, we hired 426 workers who provided us with reasonable answers to the worker's survey. This number is calculated based on the most initial respondent sample we intended to collect, which is 400 Chinese respondents + 160 Sciences Po Paris students + 150 French Grande École students. 5% of these respondents were selected, and the splits they chose were implemented, namely six pairs including the merit, luck, inefficiency, obstacle, tutoring, and wrong winner/loser scenarios.[31]

Workers were randomly allocated to one of three possible questionnaires, namely the tutoring questionnaire, where they received some tutoring on shortcuts to searching for the relevant information of the celebrities online, the obstacle questionnaire, where the worker was asked to solve some additional unnecessary questions, and the default questionnaire, which was the most standard version with celebrity information searching only.[32]

In total, 31 out of the 426 workers were randomly allocated to a tutoring questionnaire, 35 of them were allocated an obstacle questionnaire and 360 of them were allocated a default questionnaire.[33]

before a timer started when they entered the tasks section of the questionnaire.

[30] By "reasonable answers", we mean that we would reject a worker's response if he/she answers all the questions incorrectly, or if the format of the answer is completely wrong (not in digits for the "year of birth" variable, for instance), etc. Once we rejected some of the responses, we re-launched the survey batch on Amazon M-Turk to re-fill the worker response quota we needed to allocate the bonus.

[31] The **marginal winner** scenario was only implemented if that scenario from the respondent was randomly paired with a worker pair where worker A won over worker B by exactly one more correct answer, which was quite rare. We will talk more about this in the following decision rules. Additionally, 5% of 710 respondents gives us a non-integer number, hence in the end we randomly selected **36** respondents in total, whose decisions were then implemented.

[32] The additional questions were simple mathematical operations such as additions, subtractions, etc.

[33] The number of tutoring questionnaires is slightly lower than our initial objective due to random sampling error of the Qualtrics software, as in principle it should occupy 1/6 of the total questionnaires to be administered, which means that in practice a few respondents' **tutoring** scenarios were randomly dropped from being implemented.

While workers did not interact with one another while completing the tasks, they were paired after the tasks were completed to implement respondents' choices. Each worker who had been allocated to the obstacle or tutoring questionnaire was randomly paired with a worker allocated to the default questionnaire (forming an "obstacle" or "tutoring" scenario), while the rest of the workers allocated to the default questionnaire were randomly paired with one another. The remaining pairs were then randomly allocated across the **merit**, **luck**, **inefficiency**, **wrong winner/wrong loser** scenario with equal probability.[34]

In the **luck** scenario, the script we wrote randomly assigned the winner status to one of the two workers. In the **wrong winner/wrong loser** scenario, with 5% chances, the script randomly assigned the winner status to the worker who had correctly performed fewer tasks. In the remaining scenarios, the script we used assigned the winner status to the worker who had correctly performed the most tasks.

On an additional note, in the **obstacle** and **tutoring** scenarios, to avoid confusion, participants were told that the worker who had received the obstacle (the tutoring) had lost (won). To avoid deception, we therefore only implemented respondents' choices when this was actually the case in the randomly matched worker pair. Otherwise, in the **obstacle** scenario, if the worker who received the obstacle questionnaire solved exactly the same number or more correct tasks than the worker who received the default questionnaire, he/she automatically obtained the entirety of the bonus. In the **tutoring** scenario, if the worker who received the tutoring questionnaire solved exactly the same or fewer correct tasks than the worker with the default questionnaire, the tutoring-questionnaire worker automatically got zero, and the default-questionnaire

[34]Sometimes the total number of remaining worker questionnaires/pairs cannot be equally divided into four groups with integer numbers, hence sometimes one or two more worker pairs were randomly allocated one of these four scenarios, as we implemented the random draw separately on the Chinese-Sciences-Po sub-sample and the French Grande-École sub-sample, which explains for instance why in Table 20 the **luck** scenario has a slightly higher number of workers than the other scenarios.
Given that the randomization of the worker's questionnaire is not exactly balanced across the default, tutoring and obstacle types, some respondents' tutoring/**obstacle** scenarios could not be implemented (which we randomly selected to be dropped), and the other scenarios, whether they be **merit**, **luck**, or **inefficiency** scenario decisions, were randomly selected to be implemented twice.
Second, given that the **marginal winner** scenario's correspondence, in reality, was quite rare, when it actually occurred (such that one standard questionnaire worker was paired with another standard questionnaire worker who had correctly completed only one more task), we randomly dropped one scenario of the respondent (among the **merit**, **wrong winner/loser** and **inefficiency** scenarios), and implemented his/her **marginal winner** scenario instead.

worker got the entirety of the bonus.

The following table gives some descriptive statistics on the numbers of the different scenarios that were implemented, with the figures on the types of worker questionnaires administered as well.

Table 20: Distribution of Workers Across Scenarios and Worker Questionnaire Types

Scenario Type	Number of Workers	Percentage Share	Qtn of Worker A	Qtn of Worker B
Wrong Winner / Loser	64	15.02%	Default	Default
Inefficiency	70	16.43%	Default	Default
Luck	74	17.37%	Default	Default
Marginal Winner	20	4.69%	Default	Default
Merit	66	15.49%	Default	Default
Obstacle	70	16.43%	Default	Obstacle
Tutoring	62	14.55%	Default	Tutoring
Total	426			

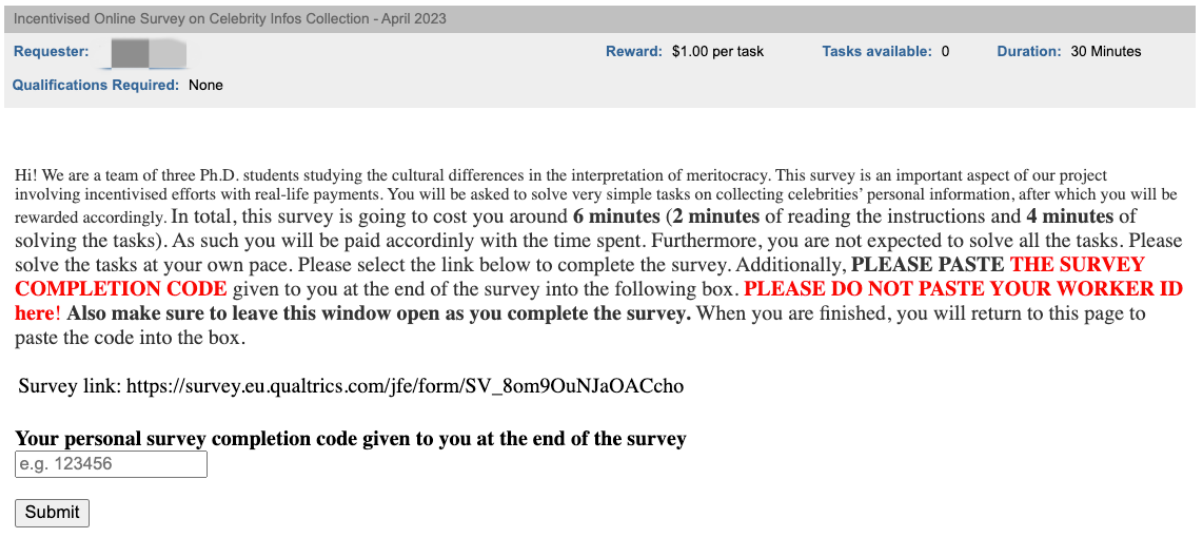


Figure 8.11: A Screenshot of the Batch for the Link to the Worker's Survey Published on Amazon M-Turk

8.6 Context Dependency: How Respondents Understood the Experiment

To further explore how respondents understood the questionnaires, we leverage the answers to the open-ended question we asked at the end of the survey. Interestingly,

we think that the status quo bias exhibited by Chinese respondents could be closely related to the context-dependent understanding of the scenarios.

In the open-ended question, we asked respondents what they thought was the main objective of this experiment. We grouped the answers from both the Chinese and French samples into comparable categories. We manually classified the open-ended questions into five main categories, plus one "un-classified" category, and a last category for the respondents who didn't provide any answer or explicitly stated they didn't know.

In the first main category, respondents interpreted the experiment as being related to worker salary and enterprises—very concrete settings. Those answers usually included mentions of how to better design the overall salary distribution schedule within a company, how to allocate bonuses most efficiently among employees, etc. The second category pertains to understanding the experiment as one about (re)distribution of resources, fairness concerns, and meritocratic reasoning about the returns to effort versus luck, etc. This category is the broadest of all, and its subcategory on meritocratic reasoning is the most closely related to the true objective of our survey. The third category touches upon interpreting the experiment as a reflection of broader societal issues related to income or wealth inequality in a society, and how governments should design redistribution policies. The fourth category encompasses answers in which the respondents understood the experiment as a way to measure their innate abilities or IQ. The last category involves responses arguing that the experiment was designed to gather opinions and information from the public.

A summary of the distribution of these categories can be found in Figure 8.8. First of all, the French sample exhibits a higher share of non-responses compared to the Chinese sample: non-responses correspond to 30% of the French answers but only 10% of the Chinese answers. Second, rather strikingly, compared to the French sample, a much higher share of Chinese respondents interpreted the experiment as being related to an enterprise setting, invoking salary and bonus distribution from the managers to workers: this represents 30% of the answers in the Chinese sample, against less than 10% of the answers in the French sample. Thirdly, respondents who understood the experiment as being related to redistribution, fairness, and meritocracy

constitute the largest groups in both populations, representing 40 to 50% of the responses in the respective samples.

Since the category "Fairness, Redistribution and Meritocracy" itself is quite broad, we further sub-divide it into narrower sub-categories related to "fairness/justice concerns", "pure redistribution of income or wealth concerns", "meritocracy concerns (proportionality of rewards to the effort, ability, luck, etc.)"[35] An interesting pattern emerges from this sub-category analysis (see Figure 8.9): the French sample was disproportionately more likely to interpret the experiments as being about meritocratic concerns—this concerns 30% of the French respondents, against only around 5% of the Chinese respondents. The Chinese respondents were in turn much more likely to comprehend the experiment more purely as one about the distribution of income or resources among individuals, without invoking meritocratic principles or other abstract principles. Thus, French respondents exhibited a greater tendency to invoke abstract principles, while Chinese respondents appeared to mainly understand the experiment in highly concrete terms. Interestingly, this echoes Nisbett (2004)'s theory that, while Westerners seek to use abstract principles to guide their daily-life choices, East Asians are instead reluctant to have recourse to such abstract principles and instead seek to understand the precise context in which they are asked to take a decision. Nisbett (2004) relates this to conformism: while Westerners are comfortable simplifying possibly complicated contexts, East Asians insist on the importance of taking all circumstances into account and on the possible dangers of over-simplification, and tend to refrain from exerting agency for fear of the possibly unexpected consequences of their decisions.

Furthermore, among respondents falling into the "Income/Resource Distribution" sub-category, it was much more frequent for the Chinese respondents to use words such as "reasonable" and "appropriate", as opposed to more principle-level descriptions such as "fair" or "just" on the distributional patterns of resources. Interestingly, this echoes Nisbett (2004)'s claim that East Asians, influenced by Confucianism, have a greater tendency to attempt to find a reasonable "middle way" whenever faced with

[35]Given the intertwined nature of these sub-categories, more often than not, a few of them appear simultaneously in a respondent's answer. As such the shares reported in Figure 8.8 and Figure 8.9 involve some overlaps (one answer being classified into two or three categories), but overlaps are quite rare.

two conflicting alternatives, while Westerners attempt to elicit and defend the "right" alternative—possibly radicalizing themselves in the face of contradiction—and use abstract principles to defend their choice.

8.7 Model of Distribution Choice Under Deviation Cost

As mentioned in Section 5.4, comparisons of French and Chinese respondents' choices before and after dropping status quo players are difficult to interpret: on the one hand, status quo play may not always reflect a preference for the status quo split but, on the other hand, a large share of Chinese respondents played the status quo and there could be a risk of a differential selection bias between the French and the Chinese status quo challengers. Status quo play may however contain some information on the preference of status quo players. In the following, we consider a model in which each respondent is assumed to have an idiosyncratic mental cost of deviating from the status quo and only deviate if this cost is lower than the distance between his/her preferred distribution and the status quo. Thus, in this model, a respondent may deviate from the status quo despite a high mental cost of deviation, provided that the status quo appears to him/her as *sufficiently unfair*.

A simpler model would have consisted in assuming that a fraction of respondents are intrinsically status quo players who always play the status quo while others always play their preferred distribution. However, several things suggest that this is not the case. First, if one compares the unequal status quo histograms to the equal status quo histograms, the extra mass at the status quo may seem to be mass "sucked" from neighboring data points, suggesting that a fraction of respondents who would have implemented a distribution close to the status quo if they were not told about the status quo are "sucked" by the status quo. Additionally, it is not true that status quo players *always* played the status quo: in the French sample, among respondents who played the status quo at least once, almost none always plays the status quo, while, among Chinese status quo players, only about a third systematically played the status quo.[36]

The idea at the heart of our identification is the following: although it may seem a

[36]Note that this is the case in both the unequal and the equal status quo conditions.

priori difficult to know whether a characteristic, e.g. being Chinese, is associated with greater status quo play owing to a larger share of Chinese respondents *intrinsically* preferring the status quo or, instead, due to higher deviation costs, the fact that we randomized the status quo splits should provide some variation helping to disentangle the two. First, while a lower preference for an unequal split should be associated with higher status quo play in the unequal status quo condition, it should be associated with more frequent deviations in the equal status quo condition, provided that a small fraction of respondents preferred giving at least as much to the loser as to the winner. Second, the share of equal status quo respondents (respectively unequal status quo respondents) choosing to give 0 or small sums (respectively 5 or neighboring sums) to the loser could be used as a counterfactual approximation for the share of respondents who truly preferred this status quo.

For identification and parsimony purposes, our model relies on some parametric assumptions. Rather than an attempt to exactly model respondents' choices, this model should be understood as an approximation complementing previous results. Additionally, one risk with such a model is to settle on a local minimizer of the loss function. To verify that this did not seem to be the case, we estimated the loss function for 10,000 randomly drawn vectors of parameters and plotted the resulting loss functions against the parameters. The resulting graphs can be found in Appendix Section 8.7.1. While, reassuringly, none of the graphs exhibits multiple local minima, certain graphs appear to be very flat, suggesting that there might be little variation helping to identify the corresponding parameters.

A respondent's choice is therefore assumed to be determined by a system of two equations which we estimate by MLE: her preferred distribution equation (hereafter preference equation) and her deviation cost equation.[37].

Formally, denoting y_{is} the sum given to the loser by individual i in scenario s, we assume that y_{is} is defined as:

$$y_{is} = \begin{cases} min\{max\{0, y_{is}^*\}, 12\} & if \quad |y_{is}^* - y_{is}^{SQ}| > deviation\, cost_{is} \\ y_{is}^{SQ} & otherwise \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

[37]The likelihood function is reported in Section 8.7

where: $y^*_{is} = \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is}$ **(preference equation)** and $deviation\,cost_{is} = \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma + v_{is}$ **(deviation cost equation)**

To estimate the parameters of interest (β, γ and the variances of the error terms which we treat as nuisance parameters), we therefore look for a vector of parameters maximizing the following sample pseudo-log-likelihood:

$$\sum_{i,s} 1\{y_{is} \in (y^{SQ}_{is}, 12)\} log\Big(f_u(y_{is} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta) F_v(\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is} - y^{SQ}_{is} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma \mid u_{is})\Big)$$
$$+1\{y_{is} \in (0, y^{SQ}_{is})\} log\Big(f_u(y_{is} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta) F_v(y^{SQ}_{is} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta - u_{is} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma \mid u_{is})\Big)$$
$$+1\{y_{is} = y^{SQ}_{is}\} log\Big(\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f(u_{is})\big(1 - F_v(|\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is} - y^{SQ}_{is}| - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma|u_{is})\big)du + f_u(y^{SQ}_{is} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta) F_v(-\mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma \mid u_{is})\Big)$$
$$+1\{y_{is} = 12\} log\Big(\int_{12-\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta}^{\infty} f(u_{is})\big(F_v(\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is} - y^{SQ}_{is} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma|u_{is})\big)du\Big)$$
$$+1\{y_{is} = 0, SQ = eq\} log\Big(\int_{-\infty}^{-\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta} f(u_{is})\big(F_v(y^{SQ}_{is} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta - u_{is} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma|u_{is})\big)du\Big)$$

We model respondents' preferred sum (y^*_{is}) to give to the loser as depending on a set of scenarios dummies interacted with culture (French or Chinese) dummies, as well as on the status quo sum interacted with culture to allow for culture-specific anchoring strength.[38] Additionally, the preference equation is assumed to depend on a normally distributed error term whose variance is allowed to differ across the two samples. This normality assumption reflects the fact that, if it were not for the status quo peaks, the distributions of the sum given to the loser would be unimodal and approximately symmetric (see, for instance 5.2). One restriction we impose for identification is that the anchoring strength be independent of the scenario. For parsimony, we also assume that the error variance is the same for all scenarios. In turn, we assume that the deviation cost depends linearly on culture dummies interacted, and on the interaction between a Chinese and a private sector parent dummy. The deviation cost is additionally assumed to depend on a normally distributed error term with a possibly culture-specific variance. While we have no basis to assume a normally distributed error term, note that this assumption is not as restrictive as it may seem: our model of deviation cost allows for approximating a multi-modal distribution of deviation costs across respondents as the culture dummies and the

[38] Indeed, a visual inspection of the histograms in Appendix 8.2.1 suggests that shifting the status quo shifts the location of the distribution of choices implemented by French respondents.

interaction of the Chinese dummy with the private sector parent dummy shift the location of the deviation cost distribution. As typically assumed, the error terms of the two equations are assumed to be independent of the explanatory variables used in the model. For parsimony, we do not model autocorrelation of the error term at the individual level, but to account for clustering, have recourse to a block-bootstrap procedure to compute confidence intervals and p-values.

In the following, we report estimates obtained after estimating the model with all scenarios, then with only the **merit** and **luck** scenarios for parsimony. For comparison, we also report estimates obtained when imposing a deviation cost of zero, i.e., that all respondents implement their preferred distribution.

First, to establish a benchmark, Table 21 reports estimates obtained when imposing a deviation cost of 0, i.e., when assuming that all respondents implement their preferred distribution.[39] For parsimony and comparability with previous literature, we only considered the **luck** and **merit** scenarios. Thus, the coefficients in front of the Chinese (respectively French) dummies correspond to the average sum that Chinese (respectively French) respondents would prefer to give to the loser in the **luck** scenario, while the coefficient on the interaction between Chinese (respectively French) and Merit corresponds to the difference between what Chinese (respectively French) respondents would on average give to the loser in the **merit** scenario compared to the **luck** scenario, i.e., minus the "Merit premium". The estimated Chinese "Merit premium" (0.131) is more than three times smaller than the estimated French "Merit premium" (0.408) and non-significant—while the latter is significant at 5%. This is consistent with the raw differences in Table 7. Note, however, that the coefficient on Chinese $\times$ Status Quo sum (0.262) is significant at 0.1% and nearly identical to the coefficient on French $\times$ Status Quo sum (0.268).

These results should be compared with those in Table 22, where the same preference equation was estimated without imposing a deviation cost of 0. The coefficient on Chinese $\times$ Merit (-0.387) is nearly three times as large as that in Table 21 and significant at 5%: in this model, Chinese respondents appear to have on average a

[39]Note that this model is nested in the model considered in this section. This is equivalent, in the previously described model, to assuming that all coefficients in the deviation cost equation are zero and that the mean and variance of the errors in the deviation cost equation are zero for both samples.

preferred merit premium of 0.387—note that this is 1.6 times larger than previous literature's estimate of approximately 0.24 (back-of-the-envelope calculations based on a visual estimation of the treatment effect reported in Almås et al. (2025)). Thus, in line with previous results, comparing those two tables suggests that assuming no deviation cost is conducive to seriously underestimating the Chinese merit premium. By contrast, the coefficient on Chinese $\times$ Status Quo sum is more than three times smaller than that in Table 21 and only significant at 5%. In turn, the coefficient on the French $\times$ Status Quo term remains large (0.186) and significant at 0.1%. This suggests—corroborating visual inspections of the histograms—that while the status quo mainly influenced Chinese respondents through status quo bunching, this effect was weaker among French respondents but the latter were influenced by the status quo in that shifting the initial split accordingly shifted the location of what French respondents considered desirable.

Explanatory variables	Preferred loser bonus
French	4.074***
	[3.776,4.441]
French x Merit	-0.408*
	[-0.740,-0.082]
French x Status Quo sum	0.268***
	[0.187,0.331]
French x Merit x Luck First	-0.156
	[-0.603,0.208]
Chinese	3.495***
	[3.170,3.810]
Chinese x Merit	-0.131
	[-0.401,0.137]
Chinese x Status Quo sum	0.262***
	[0.199,0.328]
Chinese x Merit x Luck First	-0.038
	[-0.334,0.327]
N. respondents x scenarios	1140
N. bootstrap samples	400

Table 21: Preference equation (only luck and merit, no deviation cost)

Table 23 reports the estimates of the deviation cost equation, estimated jointly with the preference equation reported in Table 22. The intercept (-6.711) is negative and significant at 0.1%, implying that less than 50% of French respondents are estimated as having a positive deviation cost. In turn, the coefficient on Chinese is positive, larger in magnitude, and also significant at 0.1%: among Chinese respondents without a private sector father, the median deviation cost is estimated to be 1.784. In turn, the coefficient on Chinese $\times$ private sector father is negative and significant at 0.1%, meaning that, among Chinese respondents with a private sector father, only a small fraction is estimated as having a positive deviation cost. Back-of-the-envelope cal-

Explanatory variables	Preferred loser bonus
French	4.639***
	[4.347,4.975]
French x Merit	-0.638***
	[-0.985,-0.304]
French x Status Quo sum	0.186***
	[0.115,0.257]
French x Merit x Luck First	-0.027
	[-0.456,0.494]
Chinese	4.437***
	[4.133,4.692]
Chinese x Merit	-0.387*
	[-0.695,-0.075]
Chinese x Status Quo sum	0.074*
	[0.015,0.135]
Chinese x Merit x Luck First	0.076
	[-0.263,0.452]
N. respondents x scenarios	1140
N. bootstrap samples	400

Table 22: Preference equation (only luck and merit)

culations relying on the estimated variances and normality assumptions imply that, while 58% of Chinese respondents without a private sector father are estimated to have a positive deviation cost, this only concerns 33% of Chinese respondents with a private sector father and 25% of French respondents.

Explanatory variables	Deviation cost
Intercept	-6.711***
	[-7.368,-4.324]
Chinese	8.495***
	[5.820,9.525]
Chinese x private sector father	-5.784***
	[-7.651,-2.532]
N. respondents x scenarios	1140
N. bootstrap samples	400

Table 23: Deviation cost equation (only luck and merit)

Tables 24 and 25 report estimates for the preference and deviation cost equations estimated jointly when considering all scenarios.[40] Those tables corroborate the findings of Tables 22 and 23. In the preference equation, almost all estimated Chinese merit premia are positive and significant—the only exception is the **inefficiency** scenario which can be explained by the smaller pie to be divided between the winner and loser in this scenario. In particular, the coefficient capturing the average difference between what Chinese respondents would prefer to give to the loser of the **luck** scenario compared to the loser of the **merit** scenario (0.350) is significant at 1%. By contrast, the coefficient on "Cn: Status Quo sum" (0.032) is no longer significant while that on "Fr: Status Quo sum" remains large (0.144) and significant at 0.1%, corroborat-

[40]While the **luck** scenario was used as a baseline in previous tables, the preference equation estimated treats the **merit** scenario as a baseline for better comparability with other scenarios.

ing previous findings. The estimates of the deviation cost equations are reassuringly similar to those obtained when restricting attention to the **merit** and **luck** scenario in Table 23—back-of-the-envelope calculations imply that an estimated 66% of Chinese respondents without a private sector father have a positive deviation cost, while this concerns only 40% of Chinese respondents with a private sector father and 23% of French respondents.

Explanatory variables	Preferred loser bonus
Fr: Merit	4.040***
	[3.853,4.327]
Fr premium: Luck	0.652***
	[0.355,0.941]
Fr premium: Marginal winner	1.009***
	[0.717,1.239]
Fr premium: Obstacle	1.498***
	[1.207,1.740]
Fr premium: Tutoring	0.789***
	[0.497,1.004]
Fr premium: Inefficiency	0.255
	[-0.239,0.691]
Fr premium: Error	1.135***
	[0.820,1.363]
Fr: Status Quo sum	0.144***
	[0.092,0.190]
Cn: Merit	4.154***
	[3.911,4.390]
Cn premium: Luck	0.350**
	[0.111,0.577]
Cn premium: Marginal winner	0.812***
	[0.577,1.022]
Cn premium: Obstacle	0.930***
	[0.719,1.159]
Cn premium: Tutoring	0.709***
	[0.502,0.904]
Cn premium: Inefficiency	-0.652**
	[-0.984,-0.279]
Cn premium: Error	1.162***
	[0.872,1.455]
Cn: Status Quo sum	0.032
	[-0.022,0.080]
N. respondents x scenarios	3990
N. bootstrap samples	402

Table 24: Preference equation (all scenarios)

Explanatory variables	Deviation cost
Intercept	-5.439***
	[-6.508,-4.898]
Chinese	8.617***
	[7.779,9.999]
Chinese x private sector father	-5.131***
	[-7.445,-3.164]
N. respondents x scenarios	3990
N. bootstrap samples	402

Table 25: Deviation cost equation (all scenarios)

8.7.1 Simulated Loss Functions

Figure 8.12: Loss function for different parameter values (only luck and merit; no deviation cost)

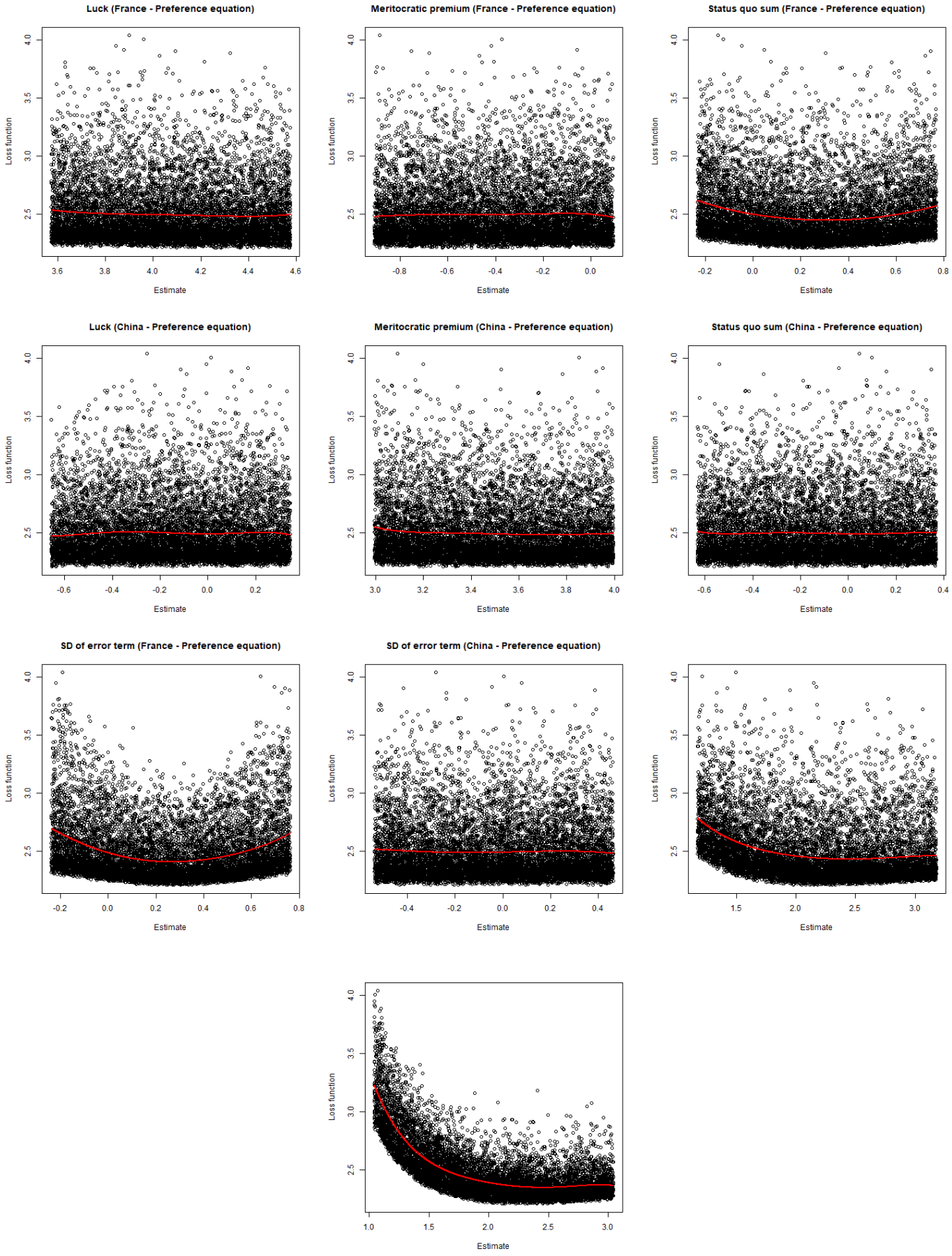


Figure 8.13: Loss function for different parameter values (only luck and merit)

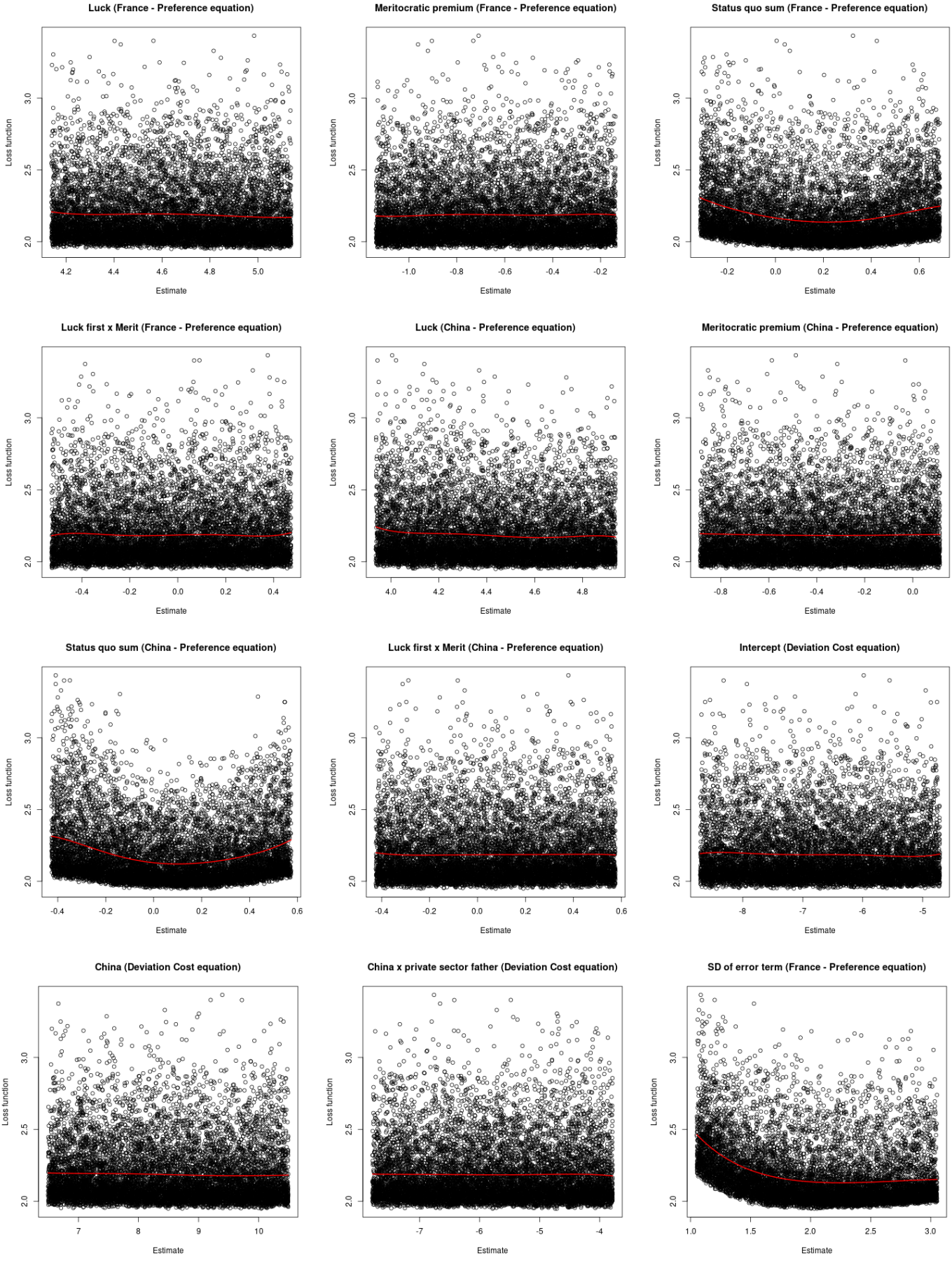


Figure 8.14: Loss function for different parameter values (only luck and merit) cont.

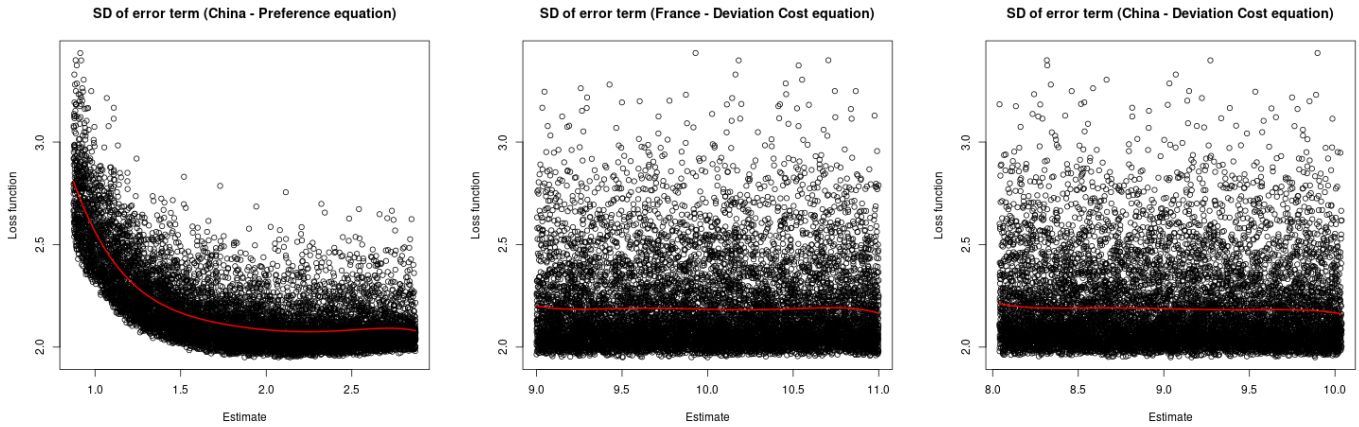


Figure 8.15: Loss function for different parameter values (all scenarios considered)

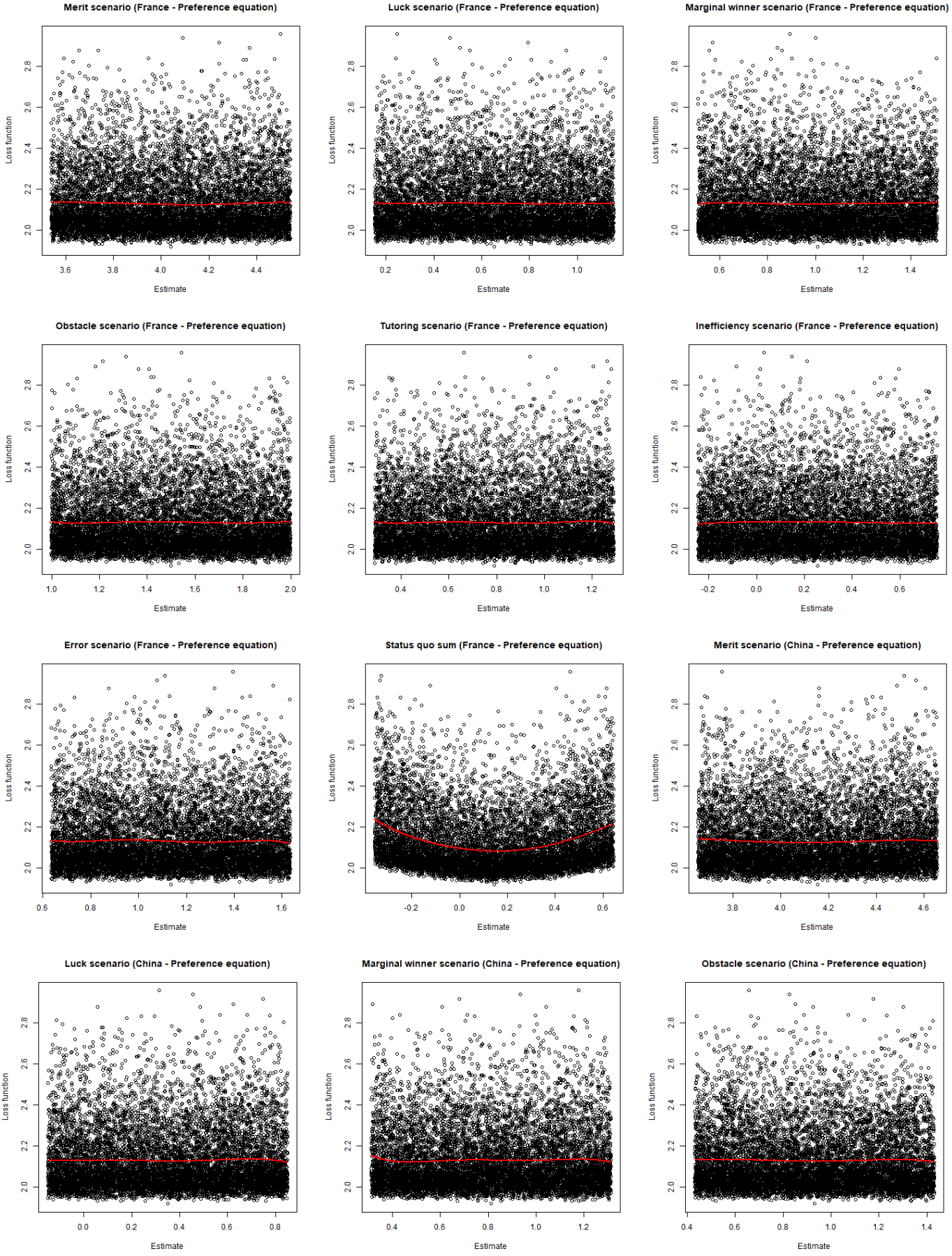


Figure 8.16: Loss function for different parameter values (all scenarios considered) cont.