Non-meritocrats or choice-reluctant meritocrats? A redistribution experiment in China and France

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Abstract

Recent experimental evidence contends 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, by varying the initial split of payoffs between two real-life workers to redistribute from. We show that, compared to French respondents, Chinese respondents consistently and significantly choose more non-redistribution across both highly unequal and relatively equal status quo scenarios. Additionally, we also find that Chinese respondents do differentiate between merit- and luck-based inequalities, and do not redistribute less than the French, excluding the individuals who engage in non-redistribution choices. Chinese respondents are also as reactive as the French towards scenarios with noisy signals of merit, such as inequalities of opportunities. Ultimately, we contend that the reluctance to make an active choice is indicative of 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 Chinese individuals' reluctance to make a choice is particularly pronounced among those from families of working-class and farming backgrounds, while it is absent among individuals whose families have closer ties to the private sector.

Contents

1 Introduction: the Unmeritocratic & Inequality-loving Chinese?

How much should a society 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 merito-cratic 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 used 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, 2021), 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. (2021), where this spectator experiment was implemented in 60 countries across the globe. The authors conclude 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.

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[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.

The country that draws our attention in this branch of literature is China. Not only does it implement one of the highest levels of inequalities among all countries in the Almås et al. (2021) study, it is 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, Falch, et al., 2022), 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 (N. Y. Chen et al., 2022).

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 7th 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 to bear the responsibility for this change and potentially to generate 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 reluc-

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

[3]In Almås et al. (2020) and Almås et al. (2021), the default option is 12 monetary pieces for the

tant to make **any** changes to the distribution, regardless of the source of inequality, it would appear as if 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 vary the initial split between the winner and the loser. For half of the sample, we ask 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 that the Chinese participants choose 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) suggests 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 the society to have a head start, as long as he or she is competent at 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 has as much merit as in the **merit** scenario, attributing more resources to him or her comes 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.

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winner and 0 for the loser.

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

France is selected as a comparison group because it has a similar tradition of meritocratic selection of elites as that in China but is the polar opposite of China when it comes to reluctance to make a choice in redistribution.

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) implement "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 do not deviate away from 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 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.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we recapitulate the relevant literature and discuss our contributions. We explain our hypotheses in detail, 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 (or a lack thereof) political agency, 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 show that many preferences and habits of thoughts often assumed by Westerners as 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, 2021; Cappelen, Falch, et al., 2022), 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, Aguiar et al. (2013) and Konow et al. (2020) further show 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 show that making the choice to not redistribute more salient significantly increases 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.

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[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, Mollerstrom, et al. (2022); Madland and Strømland (2022); Cappelen et al. (2023); Lobeck (2023); Bartling et al. (2023); Z. Huang et al. (2023), for instance, have recourse to such a design.

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 differences between the East and the West (For example, Nisbett (2004); Cai et al. (2011)) 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's 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; N. Y. Chen et al., 2022). The paper that comes the closest to ours is Almås et al. (2022), which also tries 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 demonstrates that private entrepreneurs are more likely to enter politics in areas with weak market

infrastructures, while the latter shows 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 the Ancient Greek culture explain its debate culture compared to Ancient China's emphasis on agriculture.

3 Hypotheses and Contexts

3.1 Hypotheses

Choice Reluctance One thing that attracts our attention in existing redistribution spectator experiments run in China, is how Chinese respondents do not redistribute much in either the luck-based inequality scenario or in the merit-based inequality scenario. In other words, the lack of difference between the two scenarios seems to be driven by extremely low levels of redistribution in both scenarios.

Starting from these observations, we suspect that Chinese respondents appear to be non-meritocratic and anti-redistribution due to **choice reluctance** - in other words, due to **reluctance to make any change that deviates from the current state of affairs**.

While research that is based on Western subjects rarely observes choice reluctance (Fischbacher et al., 2023), we believe that this effect might be at play in the Chinese sample for three main reasons. First of all, individual agency is not valued that strongly in cultures with a collectivist focus such as the Chinese one Nisbett (2004). Secondly, commercial survey companies documented that the Chinese audience is likely to respond positively to any questions and cares about the social desirability of its answers (International, 2017). Finally and perhaps most importantly, the Chinese public rarely participates in the policy-making process of any sort, be it voting, activism, or publicly-engaged policy deliberations. Under the authoritarian context and communist legacy, the government is perceived to be omnipresent and responsible for all: the majority of Chinese citizens consider the government responsible for not only implementing traditional duties of a welfare state such as universal healthcare and education, but also for providing a job to anyone who needs it or guaranteeing a minimum living standard to everyone. (Whyte, 2010). As redistribution is fundamentally

a political topic, they likely consider the subject out of their scope of responsibility or decisional reach.

We propose to test this hypothesis by **varying the initial split**. Apart from the highly unequal initial split where the winner gets 12 monetary pieces and the loser 0 pieces, we randomly assign half of the sample to receive a more equal status quo where the winner gets 7 monetary pieces and the loser 5 pieces. If we observe that Chinese respondents play status quo more often than the French respondents in **both** cases, then we would have reasons to believe that there is a strong choice reluctance to shape Chinese respondents' decisions, casting doubt on the idea that they truly prefer unmeritocratic and anti-redistribution policies. On the contrary, if they truly wish to implement a low level of redistribution, they should adjust downward from the 7/5 split instead of sticking to the status quo in that case as well.

Deontological versus Consequentalist Meritocracy   Another possible explanation for the behavior of Chinese respondents is put forward by the political philosophy literature: Mulligan (2022) calls the Western meritocracy "deontological", where it is insisted that the reward must be proportional to merit and that this principle should be an end in itself. Meanwhile, the type of meritocracy developed in imperial China has a utilitarian flavor (which Mulligan dubs "consequentialist" meritocracy), because meritocracy is taken as a means to increase social welfare rather than an end in itself: putting the most capable person on top of the hierarchy is expected to generate positive benefits for the society as a whole.

Those two different rationales would lead to a similar attempt to set up meritocratic systems selecting the most capable but will produce different solutions if:

- There is an inequality of opportunity. Deontological meritocrats would want to reward people according to "pure" individual merit, while a consequentialist meritocrat would prefer rewarding a more skilled individual even if the skill difference is attributable to a headstart, e.g. private tutoring.

- There is a trade-off between total surplus and rewarding individuals proportionally to their merit. For a consequentialist meritocrat, meritocracy exists to

produce a higher surplus; if there is a conflict between the meritocratic mean and the end of a higher surplus, then the end should trump the mean.

Such utilitarian motives could help explain the low redistribution levels by Chinese respondents observed in previous experiments: since such spectator games are one-shot experiments where respondents simply decide on a bonus (rather than, for instance, selecting workers to be promoted), consequentialist meritocrats have no real reason to distribute bonuses proportionally to merit: their choices will leave the total surplus unaffected.

Our main test of this hypothesis is to introduce a **a trade-off between total surplus and proportional reward to merit**: we introduce a scenario where the winner is as deserving – from a deontological point of view – as in the merit condition, but where distributing more to him or her will lead to a loss in total surplus. If the Chinese respondents are indeed consequentialist meritocrats while French respondents are deontological meritocrats, we imagine that the Chinese respondents will be less willing to destroy surplus to reward the deserving winner than their French counterparts.

As additional tests, we also introduce scenarios with inequalities of opportunities where one of the workers gets certain assistance or hindrance in the task; we expect the Chinese respondents to redistribute less in these situations if they are indeed consequentialist meritocrats. We describe in detail these scenarios in section 4.1.1.

Libertarianism Finally, an alternative explanation for Chinese respondents' lack of redistribution when inequality derives from luck could be that they are libertarian, in the sense that they do consider all sources of income as fair. To test this hypothesis, a lottery that distributes rewards due to pure luck with no human agency might not be the best proxy. In a lottery, the parties involved have the same starting point (no head start for either party) and they have both accepted the rule where reward will be allocated by luck. Moreover, pure luck is rather fair in the sense that it is impartial.

To further test for libertarianism among our Chinese respondents, we consider situations with more **complex signals of merit**: situations involving luck-based inequalities of opportunities, an error in reporting the winner or the loser in the reward

allocation, and also situations where the winner has more merit than the loser by a very slim margin. If our Chinese respondents are true libertarians who regard all the sources of inequality as fair, they would not make a difference between these situations, pure luck or merit, and redistribute similar amounts overall. On the other hand, if they do make a difference in the amount redistributed in each scenario that seems to correlate with the level of merit involved, then the Chinese respondents are not completely indifferent to the sources of the inequalities, and pure lottery luck might just be a special case.

3.2 Subject Selection

We choose elite university students as respondents, as they are the group directly concerned with meritocracy – and to whom meritocratic selection is the most salient. If even the elite university students in China behave unmeritocratically, then the rest of society might be even less adherent to the meritocratic ideal. In addition, elite university students are relatively easy to reach logistically and have similar lifestyles and backgrounds, thus facilitating cross-country comparison as well.

While the goal is to compare China to a Western country that is supposed to have a "standard" form of meritocratic preferences, we acknowledge that there is no such thing as a neutral control group. Under the context of elite education, however, the Franco-Chinese comparison is particularly interesting because they have a similarly merit-based elite selection system (thus potentially similar approach to meritocracy), but opposite tendency to adhere to the status quo. The French education system is renowned for its elitist characters and exam-based selection procedures (*concours*). In this sense, it resembles more the selection procedure in China and could lead to similar attitudes toward meritocracy among students compared to countries where the admission procedure is more based on a comprehensive assessment of the student's application. However on the other hand, in contrast to the Chinese students, French students are historically much more politically active and are accustomed to collective action.[6] They have a strong desire to make change and are very unlikely to

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[6]Particularly, a part of our experiment was run during protests against the retirement age reform proposed by President Emmanuel Macron. From January onwards, the youth - high school and university students - was particularly mobilized in this protest, blocking high schools and uni-

submit to the status quo, which makes them an interesting comparison group with respect to the Chinese audience.

3.3 The French Context

For this experiment, we recruited students from two types of French higher education institutions. First, undergraduate students of Sciences Po Paris and, in a later phase, students from Classes Préparatoires and other Grandes Écoles to achieve greater representativeness of French elite university students as well as a greater similarity to the composition of the Chinese sample.

The French higher education system includes certain institutions called "Grandes Écoles": while, historically, most French universities used to be non-selective, under the principle that higher education should be available to all, Grandes Écoles are highly-selective institutions designed to train scientific, political and business elites. Most French Grandes Écoles recruit students through a competitive exam. In the case of Sciences Po, which was created in 1840 with the explicit aim of training French political elites, this exam takes place in the last year of high school and was ultimately replaced by an admission procedure based on academic and extracurricular records completed by an interview in 2021.[7] However, for the vast majority of French Grandes Écoles, prospective students must first enroll in a two-year long "Classe Préparatoire", a selective course in which they intensively prepare for the admission exams to Grandes Écoles.[8]

Most Grandes Écoles were founded in the 18th century with the aim of training highly skilled public servants – Sciences Po was, in turn, founded in 1872 with the aim of training a new generation of political elites in response to France's loss of war against Prussia. This contributed to transforming the aristocratic French Ancien Régime so-

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versities: https://www.publicsenat.fr/actualites/politique/mobilisation-des-jeunes-contre-la-reforme-des-retraites-il-y-a-des-generations-d

[7]Sciences Po Paris has a highly international student body and undergraduate programs focused on different geographical areas. However, while we initially aimed to exploit this within sample cultural variation by recruiting respondents from the Le Havre campus which focuses on Asia, the fraction of non-French respondents was too low to make this variation exploitable.

[8]Well-ranked students who failed to be admitted in a highly-ranked Grande École may be permitted to study in Classe Préparatoire for a third year, called "khube" or "5/2", to attempt the competitive exams again.

ciety by facilitating the emergence of a highly educated and powerful bourgeoisie. The initial motivation for the creation of Grandes Écoles was utilitarianism and the idea of selecting civil servants based on merit directly was inspired by the utilitarian Chinese *keju* system of imperial examination. However, their development was concomitant with the Enlightenment which promoted deontological meritocratic ideals and ultimately contributed to the French Revolution in 1789 as the newly-powerful bourgeoisie started contesting the aristocratic organization of the Ancien Régime society.

The French education system encourages critical thinking as a key skill early on, with students starting to take essay-based exams before high school. As such, the ability to debate and stand for one's opinion is seen as an important source of pride. This is also true of French Grande École students, although their role is often paradoxical: as future elites, they benefit from a system which they nonetheless often denounce as non-meritocratic due to inequalities of opportunities.[9] Last but not least, French students have historically been highly politicized, frequently taking part in protest movements. In particular, students played a key role in the "May 68" movement, the largest protest movement of the 20th century in France which led to the dissolution of the French parliament.

3.4 The Chinese Context

The Chinese sample respondents are recruited from selective elite universities which used to receive labels of being part of the "Project 985" and the "Project 211" respectively, which are comparable to our French Grande École sample in terms of the selectivity of the universities.[10] The overwhelming majority of - if not all - students admitted to any university underwent the highly selective National College Entrance

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[9]For instance, in 2022, a group of Grande École students from "Agro ParisTech" made the headlines by calling, during their graduation ceremony, their peers to refuse the jobs for which they were trained and instead get directly politically involved. Similarly, Sciences Po students and the local branch of the largest French student union - UNEF - were key supporters of the internal reform of the admission procedure which marked the end of exam-based selection to enter the school.

[10]These two projects were established in the late 1990s to improve education quality and raise research standards in China. Announced in 1995 and 1998 respectively, Both programs expired in 2014 but the labels attached to universities remain. Both 985 and 211 universities are considered elite universities by the general public in China, with the 985 universities being even more elitist.

Exam (NCEE, or *Gaokao* in Chinese).[11] Students and the general public in China consider the *Gaokao* as a quintessential symbol of meritocracy because everyone is supposedly evaluated on the same baseline and receives offers based only on their scores, and students from underdeveloped regions can indeed change their fate by taking the exam. However, it is also common knowledge that *Gaokao* reproduces social inequalities due to unequal access to education resources and admission quotas by province: the urban, Han, male, and rich students are significantly over-represented in elite colleges (Wang et al., 2013). Overall, the Chinese public still considers *Gaokao* the only relatively fair competition in the society despite its flaws (Howlett et al., 2022). Finally, some additional mechanisms are providing "discounts" or even total exemption from the *Gaokao*.[12] However overall, only an absolute minority of students who access elite universities benefit from these reductions and special programs, and in our sample, we observe only 7% of the respondents who benefited from these preferential policies.

4 Experiment Set-up

4.1 Main Design: Third-Party Spectator Game

Our design mainly follows the spectator game design widely used in the literature to elicit fairness ideals (in particular, we build on the design in Almås et al. (2020) and Almås et al. (2021)). We invite respondents to make real-stake redistribution choices between two real-life workers who have completed a small task. Without any intervention by the respondent, one of the workers (the "winner") gets a higher payment than the other (the "loser"). The selection of the winner is based on either "merit" or "luck": under "merit" scenarios, the worker who completes more tasks is

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[11]The exams featured three main subjects - Chinese, math, and foreign language (normally English) - and three self-selected subjects. Overall, all exam takers take three out of the six auxiliary subjects: history, geography, politics, biology, chemistry, and physics, but the rule of selection and the degree of liberty differs from province to province. Students list out their desired university by order of preference after the exam, and universities admit the number of students planned for each province based on total scores from top to bottom.

[12]While the specific rules vary by province, the overall categories that benefit from the discounts are similar: laureates of Olympiads, students who excelled in arts and sports, students who already passed through some colleges' individual entrance exams, children of ethnic minority or disabled/sacrificed soldier and returning veterans. Besides, students of foreign nationalities pass different admission exams which is considered much easier than the ordinary Chinese student.

the winner. Under "luck" scenarios, the winner is selected randomly. In this way, the researchers can explicitly randomize the source of initial inequality.

We augment this core design in two ways: we test for the reluctance to deviate away from the status quo by randomizing the initial split (which will be implemented if the respondent does not make any redistribution): for half of the respondents, the split is "winner-takes-all": a 12/0 status quo split of total payoffs, while the status quo is a 7/5 payoff split for the other half.[13] We adopt a within-subject design to increase power and randomize the order of questions. Then, we introduce more scenarios besides the standard **luck** and **merit** scenarios – where the differences in merit are more noisy or narrow, such as an inequality of opportunity (the **tutoring** and **obstacle** scenarios), a trade-off between merit and the size of total surplus (the **inefficiency** scenario) an error in the algorithm that reports the winner (the **wrong winner** or **wrong loser** scenarios) or a situation where the two workers have a very small difference in merit (the "marginal winner" scenario).

To incentivize thoughtful responses, we thereafter implement the choices of a randomly drawn sample of 5% of the respondents and make it clear to the respondents that their choices would have approximately 5% chances of being implemented in deciding how to pay actual workers. We insist that if the respondents picked, their choices would be used to decide how to pay 12 workers. After the survey was carried out, we implemented the choices of 5% of the respondents by paying Amazon MTurk workers hired to perform a data entry task (see section 8.3 for further details).[14]

4.1.1 Scenarios

The scenarios section of the questionnaire systematically started with the **merit** and the **luck** scenarios. In the **merit** scenario, respondents were told that one worker had correctly performed more tasks than the other and was therefore designated as the winner. In the **luck** scenario, they were told that one worker had been randomly

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[13]The 12/0 split was chosen for comparability with Almås et al. (2020) which use this split.

[14]To mitigate ethical concerns, each worker was paid a base payment corresponding to the US federal minimum wage and respondents' redistribution choices only concerned bonuses we paid on top of this base payment. Throughout the scenarios, respondents were told that the workers would be paid in "pieces" whose conversion rate with euro or yuan was disclosed at the end of the survey as usually done in cross-country experiments.

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drawn to be the winner. These scenarios were followed by the **inefficiency**, **tutoring**, **obstacle**, **error (wrong winner/wrong loser)** and **marginal winner** scenarios. Differences of these scenarios compared to the **merit** scenario were highlighted via recourse to vignettes as well as bold, uppercase and highlighted words (see screenshots in section 8). Those new scenarios we introduced differed from the **merit** scenario in the following ways:

- **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 which could be split between the two workers.
  This scenario aims to introduce a trade-off between giving rewards proportional to merit and efficiency. We made it clear to respondents that the money not distributed to either worker would be lost.

- **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.

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

- **Error (wrong winner / wrong loser)**: The software meant to designate the winner (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 of only one task.

Among the scenarios, **inefficiency** is the main test to the hypothesis on deontological

and consequentialist meritocrats described in Section 3.1: we expect deontological meritocrats to give more to the winner under **inefficiency** scenario than consequentialist meritocrats. If the Chinese respondents are indeed consequentialist meritocrats, implementing meritocracy for the sake of a higher total surplus, we would expect them to prefer a higher surplus and give less to the winner than the French respondents in this scenario.

The other scenarios present situations with more complex signals of the winner's merit and help us check the potential presence of libertarianism: we expect that if the Chinese respondents are true libertarians and do regard all sources of inequality as legitimate, they would not differentiate redistribution in these scenarios from the **merit** scenarios. On the contrary, if they indeed differentiate their desired amounts of redistribution in these scenarios from the **merit** scenarios, but not in the **luck** scenario, then they are at least partially meritocratic, and the **luck** scenario would be a special case.

4.1.2 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.

4.2 Survey Flow

The survey proceeds as follows. First of all, after agreeing to take the questionnaire, respondents were asked a series of baseline belief and control questions,[15] and then they were presented with the main redistribution scenarios elaborated above. 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.
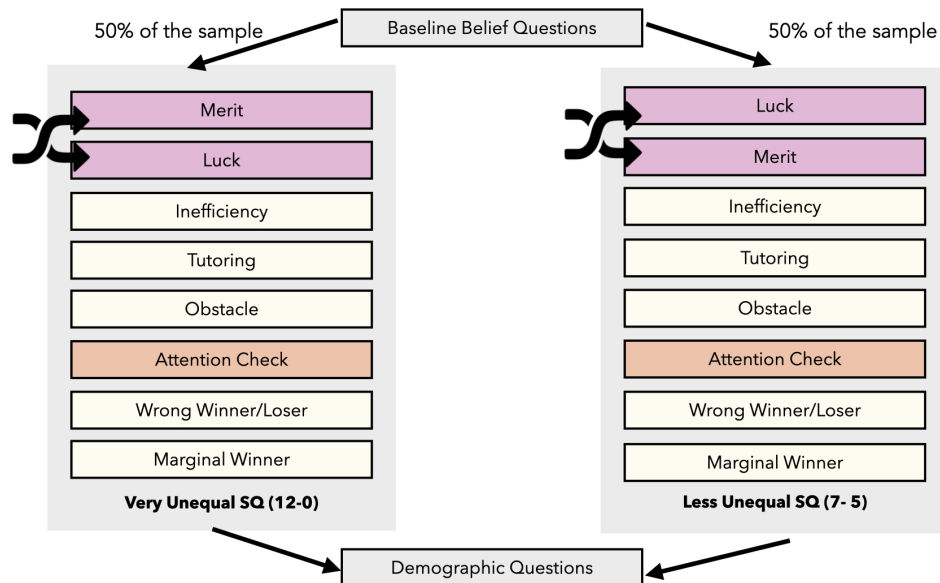
Figure 4.1: Flow Chart of the Survey Procedure

To incentivize the attention of the respondents, we introduced attention checks and conditioned participation payments or enrollment in a prize lottery to pass the attention check.[16] We made it clear at the start of the survey that we would carry out attention checks and that participants failing the attention checks would not be entered in the lottery or remunerated. Participants failing the attention checks were excluded from the analysis.

To mitigate experimenter demand effects and avoid priming respondents to think through a cultural lens when answering the scenario questions, we waited until the end of the questionnaire to ask respondents about their demographic characteristics

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[15]For details on these belief and control questions, please refer to appendix 8.2.2.

[16]Sciences Po students passing the attention checks were enrolled in a prize lottery. Since this was not reproducible for the French Grandes Écoles and Chinese samples as per the regulations of the survey companies with which we worked, attention checks were treated as screening questions for those samples, meaning that participants failing the attention checks were treated as ineligible, and did not receive a participation payment.

as well as their understanding of the experiment's goal.[17]

4.3   Survey Execution

We made four versions of the questionnaire, adapting the language and academic trajectory questions to the respondents: an English and a French version for the Sciences Po sample (to account for the fact that certain international students there are more comfortable with English), a French version for the Grande École sample, and a Chinese version for the Chinese sample.

We distributed the Sciences Po questionnaires to first- and second-year undergraduates at Sciences Po Paris in November 2022 ($19^{th} - 22^{nd}$ November). In December 2022 ($6^{th} - 12^{th}$ December), we partnered with a Chinese survey company to distribute the Chinese questionnaire to students enrolled in their panel of respondents.[18] In March 2023 ($8^{t} - 16^{th}$ March), to increase the size of the French sample as well as to have a sample more comparable to the Chinese sample in terms of age and gender composition, we similarly partnered with Qualtrics to distribute the Grande École questionnaire to higher education students enrolled in their panel of respondents, screening out non-Classe Préparatoire or Grande École students. Ultimately, we implemented the redistribution choices made by our student samples in two waves, by hiring and paying Amazon Mechanical Turk workers from February to April, 2023.[19]

4.4   Sample Descriptives

We yield our final samples with 233 French respondents and 337 Chinese respondents after purging inattentive answers from the raw set of responses (see section 8.2.3 for details). Table 1 describes briefly our final data set. As we expected, the French and Chinese respondents differ demographically, for example, the French sample averages less than 20 years old while the Chinese sample is 21.5 years old; this is coherent with the trait of the group of elite students that we aimed for and we would control for demographic characteristics in all analysis. In the aggregate, the French respon-

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[17]See appendix section 8.2.4 for the questions.

[18]For confidentiality reasons we are unable to disclose the survey company's name, but it is one of the companies authorized by the Chinese government to conduct social surveys within mainland China.

[19]For the detailed execution procedure on Amazon M-Turk please refer to appendix 8.3.

dents come from families of higher socioeconomic categories: 44% of the parents of French respondents are managers and intellectuals while the number is only 29% for the Chinese sample, with 16% of the Chinese sample having parents in agriculture.

Our French sample also appears to be more "privileged" in their education path than the Chinese sample: 15% of French respondents have lived abroad for at least 1 year, while only 5% of the Chinese sample did. 19% of the French respondents accessed their institution with some "discounts" in admission [20] rather than a competitive exam only, while only 7% of the Chinese sample had these means from their *Gaokao*. About 40% of both samples self-reported to be from a privileged high school.[21]

In terms of belief questions, the two samples have a similarly high baseline belief in the statement that the state should be responsible for reducing income gaps. The Chinese sample is understandingly more likely to agree that collective interests should prevail over personal interests; they are also more likely to believe that hard work decides success than the French respondents. Several interesting comparisons stand out: the Chinese respondents are actually more likely to be overconfident in the "I'm better than half of my cohort" question than the French, and the women in the Chinese respondents even answered more confidently than the men, contrary to the French sample and conventional observations. That might be related to their survival in a highly competitive exam, which leads them to believe that they are the best, especially for the women who have beaten higher odds. That being said, the Chinese respondents are more humble in the "I deserve my admission" questions, believing that the others deserve more their admissions than them (while the French are the contrary). We believe that it is related to the significance attached to modesty in Chinese culture, where one is not supposed to boast him- or herself. [22]

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[20]For the Grande École sample, we define this variable as one if the student was admitted *sur dossier* (from an application file that contains the applicants' information, such as cv, transcript or portfolio) only. In Sciences Po, the admission is supposed to be *sur dossier* for the whole cohort of students, so we define this variable by students' affiliation to a "Priority Education Convention", or CEP, through which students from disadvantaged schools have better chances of being admitted. For the Chinese sample, we define the variable as any discount or advantage in *Gaokao*.

[21]For the Grande École sample, we define this variable as having enrolled in tier 1 or tier 2 Classes Préparatoires; for the Sciences Po sample, as a response to the question "Do you think your high school as privileged?", For the Chinese sample, we ask the students whether they are from a privileged high school with a few examples of those schools.

[22]Cai et al. (2011) analyzed that in the Chinese culture, explicit expression of modesty is encouraged but this modesty actually serves to implicitly emphasize the positivity of the self. In other words,

	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'm 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
Experimenter Demand Controls				
Agree: always respect diff. opinion	6.72	2.50	6.45	2.61
Agree: I always accept my errors	6.58	2.14	7.00	2.21
Claim: Understanding to 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
Metadata				
Duration (in seconds)	2601.88	14681.56	1596.68	302.97
Passed Att. Check	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Observations	233		337	

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Finally, the two groups of respondents do not differ greatly in terms of the experimenter demand controls except for the question of whether they have explicitly performed what we (the researchers) expected. Here we observe that the Chinese sample is more likely to say that they acted in accordance with our expectations. We will analyze further this variable in Section 6.1.

5 Experiment Results

5.1 Raw Sums Distributed to the Loser

We report the raw results of the experiment in Table 2 and Graph 5.1. The results reported here are the average sum 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).
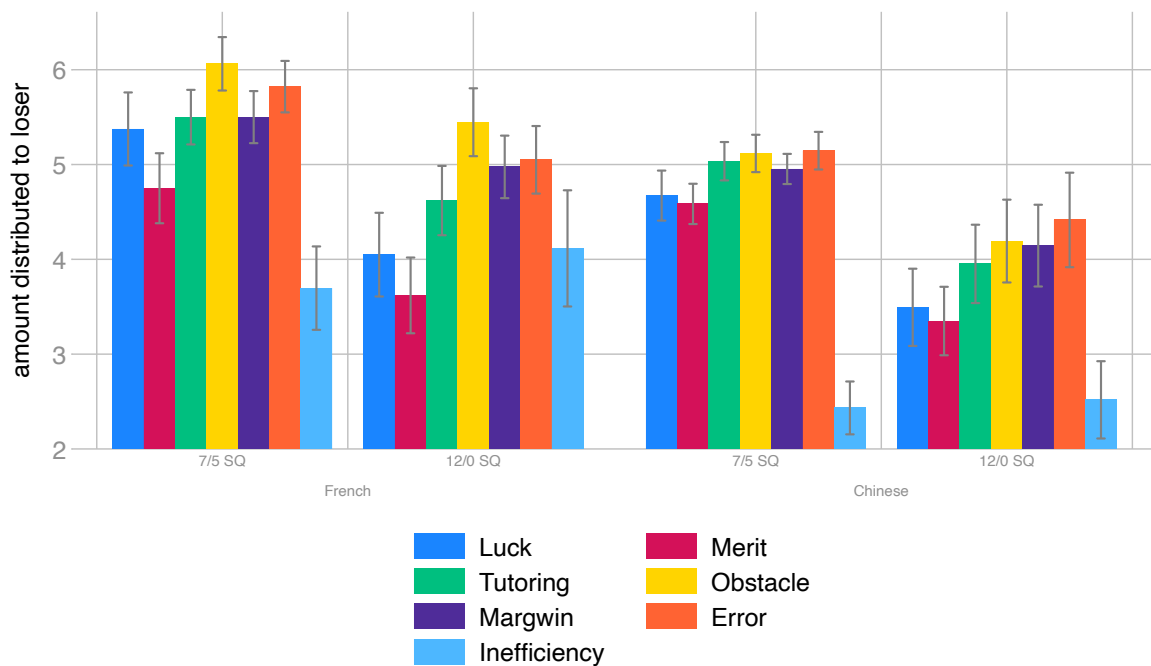
Figure 5.1: Mean Amount Given to the Loser, by Population, Status Quo and Scenarios

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behaving modestly and praising others is implicitly "showing off" one's being a good person.

	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 2: Raw Mean of Amounts Given to the Loser, by Population, Status Quo and Scenarios

The French-Chinese Gap To begin with, we observe that the French respondents redistribute 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 distribute 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 give significantly less to the loser. In this scenario, initial differences between the winner and the loser are identical to the **merit** scenario but, **giving more to the winner is costly** (money is destroyed), introducing a trade-off between deontological and utilitarian motives. The fact that Chinese respondents are willing to destroy more money to give more to the deserving winner contradicts our hypothesis about consequentalist meritocracy, 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. Previous research defines the luck-merit gap as the difference between the amount redistributed to the loser under the **merit** and the **luck** scenarios. Coherent with the existing literature, we noticed that French respondents redistribute significantly more in the **luck** scenario than in the **merit** scenario; meanwhile, this gap is not significant for the Chinese sample.[23] 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 redistribute more than in the **merit** scenario, but also more than in the **luck** scenario. Instead of treating these scenarios as a middle

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[23]Compared to barely significant in Almås et al. (2021). 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. (2021), the authors find that, among Chinese respondents, giving respondents the **merit** scenario instead of the **luck** scenario increases 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 give on average 0.11 more pieces to the loser of the **luck** scenario compared to the loser of the **merit** scenario.

ground between pure merit and pure luck as Akbaş et al. (2019) suggests,[24] Both French and Chinese respondents appear to think that a rigged race is worse than no race. Similar results are obtained for the **marginal winner** scenario (where we inform respondents that the loser performed almost as well as the winner) and the **error** scenario (where we inform respondents that the software picking the winner/loser might have picked the wrong worker).[25]

Impact of Different Initial Split   Results from the status quo randomization, however, strongly alarm us against interpreting the results above at face value. We observe that the status quo has a significant impact on the final amount distributed to the loser – for each scenario, respondents in the unequal status quo condition give significantly less to the loser than those in the equal status quo condition. This phenomenon alone shows the strength of the framing effect and lends support to 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 have, compared to French respondents, a strong tendency to stick to the status quo (hereafter "status quo play").

5.2   Choice Reluctance Among Chinese Respondents

In accordance with our hypothesis (in section 3.1), Chinese respondents are much more likely to stick to the initial split in both 7/5 and 12/0 status quo conditions, and for 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 stick 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 starker

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[24]In Akbaş et al. (2019) the authors elicit redistributive preferences in three situations where 1) final payoff is generated by pure luck (pure luck) 2) final payoff is 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 have the choice to choose the lottery (inequality of opportunity). They found that in the inequality of opportunity scenario, some respondents redistribute as though the payoff were generated by pure luck, others distribute as though the inequality were generated by pure choice and the rest redistribute intermediate values.

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

for certain scenarios (histograms for the other scenarios can be found in the appendix section 8.1.1). This mass on the status quo point could not have been completely reflective of respondents' true desired distribution: Since the initial distributions are randomly assigned and the respondent is not informed about this randomization, it is highly unlikely that the group of respondents who were 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.

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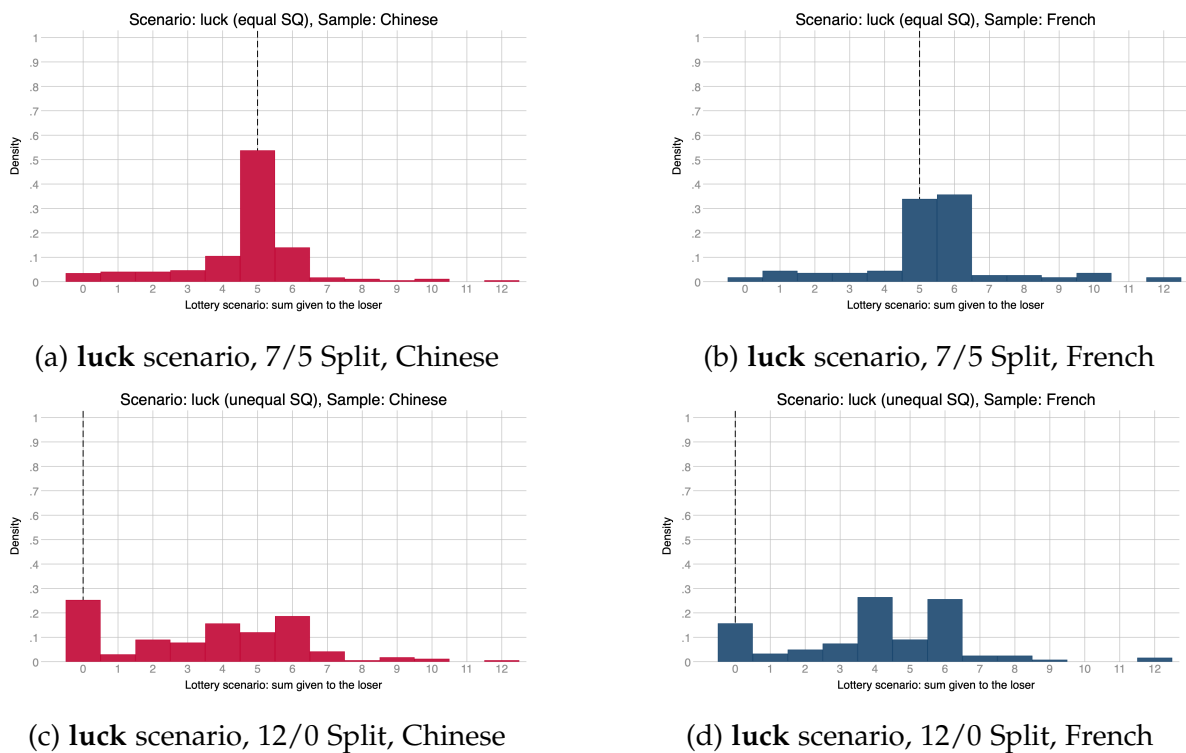
Figure 5.2: Examples of Adherence to Status Quo among Chinese Respondents: Chinese Respondents (Red) Play more status quo than French Respondents (Blue) in Both status quos

To further parse out the effect of demographics, background factors, and experiment metadata (such as attentiveness and time spent on the questionnaire), we run the following regression:

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

where SQ_{ij} is a dummy indicating that respondent i has played status quo (did not move away from the initial split) in scenario j. $Chinese_i$ is a dummy indicating that the respondent is Chinese and $UneqSQ_i$ indicates that the respondent is 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 experiment metadata (experiment duration and experimenter demand controls). Standard errors are clustered at respondent's level.

	(1) SQ	(2) SQ	(3) SQ
Chinese	0.228***	0.197***	0.159***
	(0.030)	(0.036)	(0.055)
12/0 SQ	-0.208***	-0.208***	-0.228***
	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.051)
12/0 SQ × Chinese	-0.108***	-0.100**	-0.080
	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.060)
Claim: Understand Research Goals		0.014***	0.013*
		(0.005)	(0.007)
Claim: Comply to Research Goals		0.001*	0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Log Duration Second		-0.004	-0.024
		(0.013)	(0.021)
Controls		✓	✓
Luck & Merit Only			✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	3,990	3,955	1,130
N Respondents	570	565	565
Mean DepVar	0.27	0.27	0.33
Sd DepVar	0.44	0.44	0.47

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 3: Chance of Playing status quo in All Scenarios and Both Initial Distributions

Table 3 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. Even controlling for individual characteristics, Chinese respondents are more likely to play status quo than the French as

shown by Table 3; averaging over all scenarios and status quo conditions, status quo play is 16 percentage points higher in the Chinese sample – after accounting for differences in individual characteristics. Choice reluctance cannot be entirely explained by apathy: respondents are significantly more likely to deviate from the status quo when the initial split is unequal: the 12/0 initial split leads to an about 20 percent lower chance to play status quo, which implies that the level of inequality in the beginning clearly factors into one's decision to play status quo. Chinese respondents actually react more strongly to an unequal status quo: they reduce further their chance of status quo playing by about 10 percentage points compared to French respondents.

Reassuringly, status quo playing does not seem to originate from time-saving either, as the chance of status quo playing is not correlated with (log of) survey duration in seconds. Intriguingly, there are some correlations between the experimenter demand questions and status quo playing. We will further analyze this result in section 6.1 when we discuss the identity of the status quo players and the potential mechanisms behind status quo playing.

5.3 Chinese Respondents are Meritocratic, Absent Choice Reluctance

We now revisit the luck-merit gap 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 Chinese sample would appear to be non-meritocratic even if Chinese respondents' 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 methodology to bring preliminary answers: we compare analysis performed on the whole sample to analysis performed after dropping status quo players.

Of course, a fraction of status quo players may *genuinely* prefer the status quo. However, the randomization of the status quo we implemented enables us to conclude that it is a rather small fraction. We show this by looking at the share of respondents who play a status quo split (12/0 or 7/5 under most scenarios - and 6/0 or 5/2 under the inefficiency scenario) under the other status quo split. We run the following regression:

$$SplitPlaying_i^k = \beta_0 + \beta_1 UneqSQ_i + \epsilon_{ij}$$

where $SplitPlaying_i^k$ refers to playing the split $k = \{12/0, 7/5\}$ by respondent i and $UneqSQ_i$ refer to the respondent i being assigned to the 12/0 initial split. 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 as the effect of receiving the unequal status quo on the chance of playing this specific split.

A 12/0 split almost *never* reflects the respondents' underlying preferences: the constant term in table 4 is systematically several orders of magnitudes smaller than the coefficient on the unequal status quo condition, meaning that, across scenarios, choosing the 12/0 (or, for the inefficiency scenario, 6/0) split can almost entirely be explained by receiving this split as a status quo. In turn, estimates in table 5 indicate that receiving the equal status quo condition explains more than half or almost half (for the marginal winner and inefficiency scenarios) of the choice of a 7/5 split (or, for the inefficiency scenario, 5/2). Thus, the unequal split and, to a lesser extent, the equal split we chose as status quo **do not appear to act as natural focal point**, meaning that status quo play seldom reflects an intrinsic preference for the status quo split.

A caveat to this procedure is that status quo players are not a random subsample of the populations of interest. Thus, by dropping them, we necessarily introduce a selection bias. Furthermore, this selection bias is likely to be correlated with respondents' underlying preferences: respondents whose preferred split is close to the status quo split may have a greater tendency to stick to the status quo than those whose pre-

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ferred split is much further. [26] This could introduce some differential selection bias between the Chinese and the French sample as Chinese respondents are more reluctant to deviate from the status quo. For this reason, in this section, we do not pretend to make any comparison between the Chinese and the French samples, as we acknowledge the possible differential selection biases between the two samples. We will delve into the factors driving status quo play in section 6.1 and estimate such a model in which we attempt to leverage the information contained in status quo play - at the cost of behavioral and parametric assumptions - in Appendix 8.4 and for now, focus on the part of the sample that did deviate away from the status quo.

	(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	-2.64e-16	.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 4: Effect of the status quo treatment on the share of respondents playing the unequal status quo 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 5: Effect of the status quo treatment on the share of respondents playing the equal status quo split

Results Figures 5.3 and 5.4 show the average sum 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 luck-merit gap for the French population but not for the Chinese one. However,

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[26]Indeed, a visual inspection of the histograms of the sum given to the loser suggests that part of the mass which, in a status quo condition, would have been on a split adjacent to the status quo is, in the other status quo condition, "aspired" by the status quo.

after removing the status quo players in Figure 5.4, the luck-merit gap significantly enlarges especially for the 12/0 status quo.
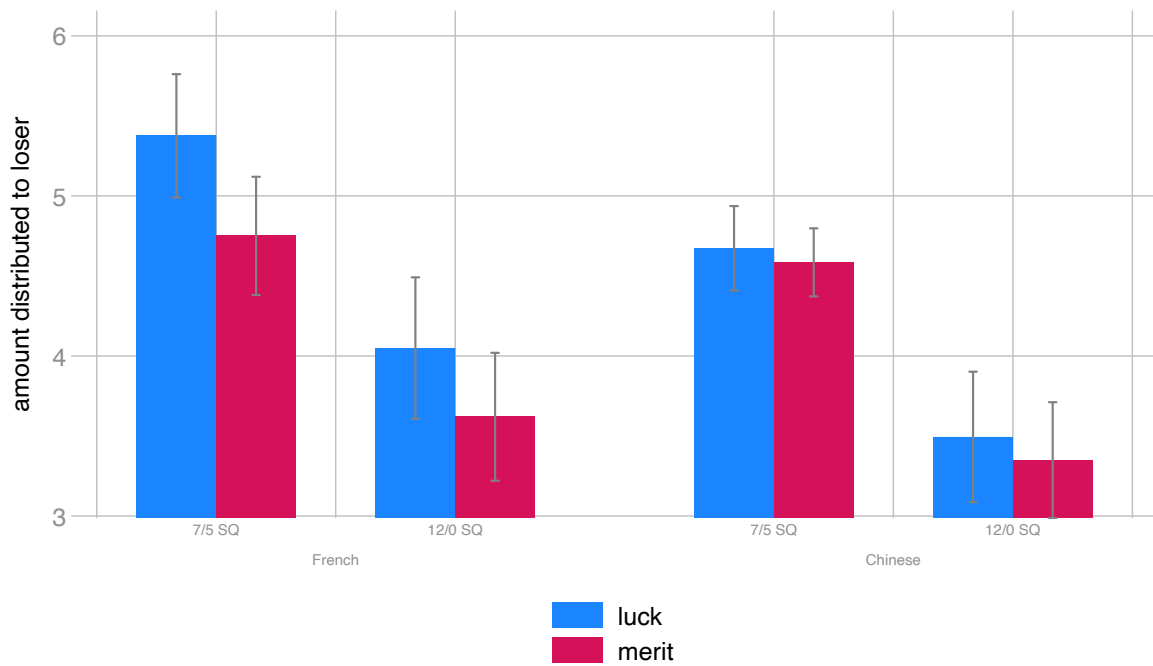

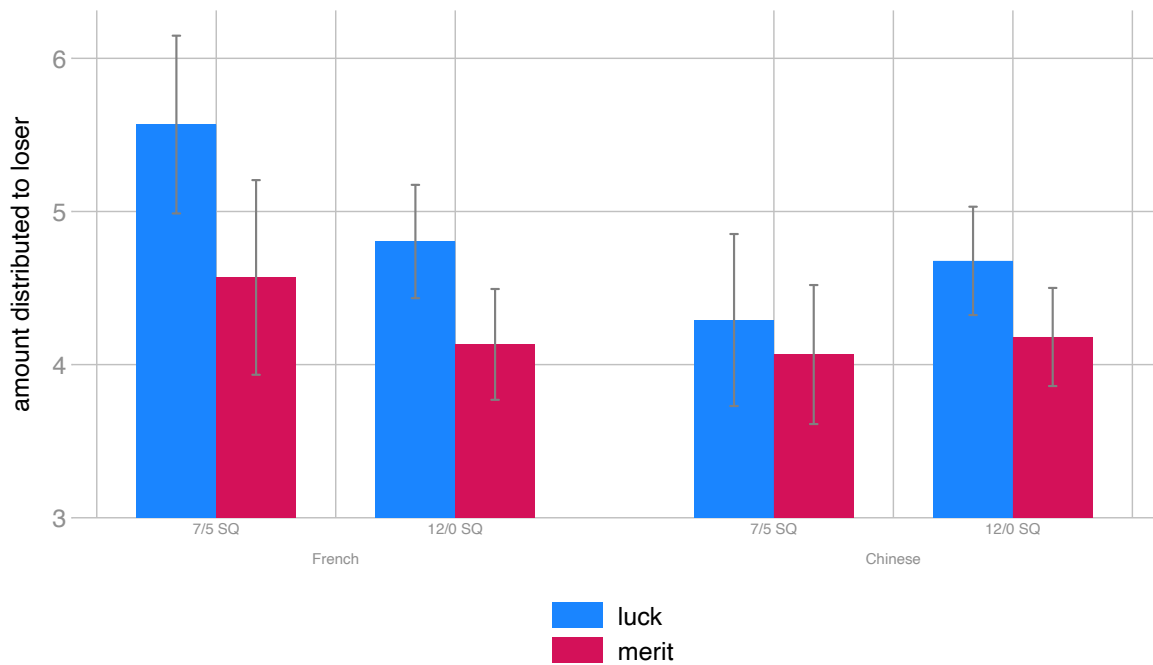Figure 5.3: The Meritocratic Gap, With Status Quo Players

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:

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

where $SumLoser_{ij}$ is the amount distributed to the loser. We do not specify a constant in the model but rather calculate the intercept for the French and Chinese respondents separately with the dummies $French_i$ and $Chinese_i$. 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 metadata 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 retained the status quo, and the sub-sample where we remove all respondents who had played any type of status quo. [27]

The results are reported in Table 6. With the whole sample (in columns 1 and 2), we can see that 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 is 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 as 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.

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

	Full Sample		Without SQ Distributions		Without SQ Players	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
French	4.687***	2.197**	5.125***	2.632**	4.971***	1.709
	(0.156)	(1.055)	(0.167)	(1.179)	(0.182)	(1.287)
Chinese	4.092***	1.286	4.527***	1.588	4.587***	0.973
	(0.127)	(1.183)	(0.157)	(1.333)	(0.163)	(1.460)
Merit × French	-0.524***	-0.539***	-0.827***	-0.891***	-0.676***	-0.676***
	(0.173)	(0.178)	(0.197)	(0.197)	(0.199)	(0.202)
Merit × Chinese	-0.116	-0.116	-0.388**	-0.365**	-0.395**	-0.395**
	(0.111)	(0.112)	(0.170)	(0.170)	(0.169)	(0.172)
Controls		✓		✓		✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	1,140	1,130	759	753	622	622
N Respondents	570	565	448	444	311	311
Mean DepVar	4.19	4.21	4.51	4.52	4.50	4.50
Sd DepVar	2.24	2.24	2.17	2.17	2.11	2.11

Standard errors in parentheses

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

Table 6: The Meritocratic Gap when Removing Status Quo Players

It seems then that the Chinese respondents are indeed meritocratic in the aggregate when we remove the status quo players. For those who stick to the status quo, we would like to develop a structural model that allows us to extrapolate their true preferences. Such a model would unfortunately only be viable with heavy and somehow arbitrary assumptions. In part 8.4 of the appendix, we present such a model and estimation results, highlighting the assumptions we had to make and the caveats associated.

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, not only do the Chinese respondents hardly distinguish between the **luck** and **merit** scenario, but the amounts they gave to the loser were also one of the lowest among all participating countries. We are similarly concerned about the possibility that this apparent taste for high inequality might be driven by choice reluctance. Mechanically, if the status quo is a winner-take-all situation (the 12/0 split), the tendency to stick to the status quo would appear to be a low desired level of equality. This would lead one to overestimate the gap between the Chinese public's desired level of inequality and that of other countries' citizens (here French). Inversely, if the status quo is closer to equality (the 7/5 split), choice reluctance would lead us to underestimate the France-China gap.

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 metadata. We run the following regression:

$$SumLoser_{ij} = \beta_0 \textbf{Scenario}_{\textbf{j}} + \beta_1 \textbf{Scenario}_{\textbf{j}} \times Chinese_i + \beta_2 \textbf{X}_{\textbf{i}} + \epsilon_{ij}$$

given to the loser by respondent i under scenario j. The vector **Scenario$_\textbf{j}$** consists of dummies for the 6 scenarios but the **inefficiency** scenario,[28] and the terms

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[28]We exclude the **inefficiency** scenario from this analysis as it is not directly comparable to the

Scenario$_j$ × *Chinese$_i$* is a vector of scenarios dummies interacted with a dummy for Chinese respondent. The coefficients on this vector capture the size of the China-France gap for the corresponding scenario. **X$_i$** is the vector of control variables already used in section 5.2. The standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

Table 7 reports the China-France gap in the whole sample and Table 8 reports the China-France gap after dropping the status quo distributions. The first thing to notice is that, even in the full sample, the French-Chinese gap is more likely to be significant in the 7/5 initial split. For the 12/0 initial split, the gap is not significant for the **luck**, **merit** and **error** scenarios after controlling for individual characteristics, and only marginally significant for the **tutoring** scenario. This is partially driven by a large number of French respondents choosing the 6/6 equal split, even when the 7/5 split is directly adjacent to the equal split (in other words, "close enough"). Then, we noticed that consistent with raw results in 5.1, the Chinese-French gap is not significant under merit for both 12/0 and 7/5 split - it seems that Chinese and French respondents hold a similar baseline belief on how much the higher-performing worker deserves under **merit** scenario.

When we remove the status quo distributions in Table 8, we first notice that 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 choose 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 would deviate from the status quo almost exclusively to implement the 6/6 equal split, while the Chinese respondents generally deviate to 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 are, among Chinese respondents, *extremely unhappy* with the status quo while French status quo challengers might only be *slightly un-*

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others due to a change in total surplus.

happy with the status quo, making it difficult to conclude from this observation that Chinese respondents are on average as meritocratic as French respondents.

| | 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***	4.211***	4.050***	2.596*
	(0.197)	(0.664)	(0.225)	(1.536)
Merit (FR)	4.750***	3.586***	3.620***	2.167
	(0.188)	(0.634)	(0.204)	(1.532)
Tutoring (FR)	5.500***	4.336***	4.620***	3.167**
	(0.147)	(0.659)	(0.187)	(1.523)
Obstacle (FR)	6.062***	4.899***	5.446***	3.993***
	(0.144)	(0.660)	(0.183)	(1.523)
Margwin (FR)	5.500***	4.336***	4.975***	3.522**
	(0.140)	(0.643)	(0.168)	(1.530)
Error (FR)	5.821***	4.658***	5.050***	3.596**
	(0.139)	(0.647)	(0.182)	(1.527)
Chinese × Luck	-0.702***	-0.745***	-0.556*	-0.530
	(0.238)	(0.246)	(0.307)	(0.389)
Chinese × Merit	-0.165	-0.208	-0.270	-0.245
	(0.218)	(0.228)	(0.275)	(0.372)
Chinese × Tutoring	-0.465**	-0.507**	-0.668**	-0.642*
	(0.180)	(0.207)	(0.282)	(0.376)
Chinese × Obstacle	-0.946***	-0.988***	-1.254***	-1.228***
	(0.176)	(0.189)	(0.288)	(0.387)
Chinese × Margwin	-0.547***	-0.589***	-0.831***	-0.805**
	(0.162)	(0.168)	(0.277)	(0.380)
Chinese × Error	-0.675***	-0.718***	-0.634**	-0.608
	(0.172)	(0.190)	(0.313)	(0.404)
Controls		✓		✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	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

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 7: The Chinese versus the French: Amount Given to the Loser

| | 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***	3.646***	4.804***	4.048***
	(0.296)	(1.225)	(0.189)	(1.061)
Merit (FR)	4.569***	2.570**	4.132***	3.403***
	(0.324)	(1.201)	(0.185)	(1.059)
Tutoring (FR)	5.636***	3.713***	4.904***	4.191***
	(0.185)	(1.212)	(0.164)	(1.048)
Obstacle (FR)	6.293***	4.413***	5.681***	4.965***
	(0.166)	(1.203)	(0.157)	(1.051)
Margwin (FR)	5.848***	3.866***	5.190***	4.474***
	(0.229)	(1.219)	(0.146)	(1.072)
Error (FR)	6.227***	4.270***	5.134***	4.411***
	(0.191)	(1.217)	(0.175)	(1.070)
Chinese × Luck	-1.276***	-1.390***	-0.127	-0.261
	(0.412)	(0.406)	(0.261)	(0.282)
Chinese × Merit	-0.503	-0.528	0.048	-0.062
	(0.398)	(0.384)	(0.247)	(0.296)
Chinese × Tutoring	-0.547*	-0.629*	0.029	-0.093
	(0.323)	(0.353)	(0.244)	(0.286)
Chinese × Obstacle	-1.034***	-1.130***	-0.368	-0.495*
	(0.278)	(0.302)	(0.243)	(0.291)
Chinese × Margwin	-0.997***	-0.984***	0.022	-0.094
	(0.345)	(0.343)	(0.235)	(0.275)
Chinese × Error	-0.898***	-0.935***	0.504*	0.382
	(0.296)	(0.314)	(0.288)	(0.319)
Controls		✓		✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	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

Standard errors in parentheses

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

Table 8: The Chinese versus the French: Amount Given to the Loser Removing Status Quo Players

6 Mechanism

In the previous section, we have shown that Chinese respondents display stronger choice reluctance compared to French respondents, which might be mistaken as a preference for high 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?

In this section, we first discuss the mechanism of status quo playing. We interpret this correlation in light of the notion of political **agency**.

Agency could be defined as *"the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power"*.[29] In the context of our spectator game, deviating from the status quo is a display of agency. This would imply taking an active step, making a decision, and being responsible for the impact of this decision. In comparison, not moving away from the status quo might be perceived as exonerating the respondent of this agency, since the status quo was chosen by the researchers who would therefore bear the responsibility of the decision.

We suggest that choice reluctance might be driven at least partially by a lack of (political) **agency** - in other words, the choice-reluctant do not wish (or does not dare) to exert power and be responsible for a certain decision. In the context of an authoritarian political regime and Confucian cultural system, 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 by not choosing at all.[30]

We do this by looking at who plays the status quo among the Chinese respondents and how they have behaved in other sections of the survey. We also provide evidence that status quo playing is not due to apathy. Then, we discuss the answer to the open-ended question: what do the respondents consider to be the goal of the experiment? We discuss the differences in understanding the same experiment by the French and

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[29]Definition comes from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agency

[30]For instance, the equal split favored by the French respondents may be perceived as too confrontational by the choice-reluctant.

Chinese respondents, and how that would potentially affect our results. [31]

6.1 Mechanism: Who Play Status Quo in the Chinese Sample?

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

We lend evidence to this mechanism by showing who the most likely to play the status quo among the Chinese respondents, and how they behave in the other parts of the survey. To begin with, we show that the respondents whose parents have higher contact with the market economy play status quo less frequently; this is consistent with the agency mechanism for private entrepreneurs who have been documented to have higher political agency than the rest of the Chinese population. Then, we show that those who played the status quo also claim that they understand the experiment better and that they are deliberately doing what the experimenters wanted. Finally, we show that status quo playing is not likely to be driven by apathy, for status quo players appear to be as attentive as status quo challengers and do not seem to play more status quo in other questions (experimenter questions and belief questions).

As a first step, we regress a dummy equal to one for status quo play on the set of control variables to explore the characteristics of the status quo players. In Table 9, we report the correlations between demographic, education, and experimental metadata factors with a dummy representing playing status quo (columns 1 and 2) and the sum given to the loser if not playing 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

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[31]Lack of agency in our context is to be distinguished from preference falsification, or "lying". While preference falsification refers to deliberately appearing to hold a set of preferences to satisfy a social norm, lack of agency in our case is unwillingness to decide at all.

redistributive decisions made by the Chinese respondents adhere to the status quo, while only 16% of the decisions made by the French respondents correspond to the status quo.

Parent Occupation   The most striking result is that status quo playing 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, intellectual and clerical jobs as opposed to farmers, workers, and intermediate professions – are significantly less likely to play status quo.[32]

More interestingly, as shown by column 3, these respondents with a parent in the private economy do not redistribute less or more when they 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 are just more likely to make a change.[33]

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 getting politically involved to defend their own interests. For example, the survey experiment by Kao et al. (2022) shows that, in exchange for a reform that would raise taxes, Chinese entrepreneurs prefer political representation while the rest of the population demands public services. Li et al. (2006) further show that Chinese entrepreneurs are more likely to enter politics in areas with worse

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[32]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.

[33]Additionally, Table 17 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 are less likely to play 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 do seem to play 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	-0.018**	0.000	0.024	0.085*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.049)	(0.045)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.030	0.025	0.231	0.153
	(0.031)	(0.025)	(0.165)	(0.146)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Agriculture				
Small Business & Commerce/Service	-0.217***	0.078	-0.237	-0.847*
	(0.051)	(0.097)	(0.261)	(0.450)
Management & Professional	-0.149***	-0.019	-0.198	-0.600
	(0.054)	(0.088)	(0.260)	(0.399)
Intermediate Professions	-0.170	0.041	-0.054	-0.550
	(0.107)	(0.093)	(0.322)	(0.463)
Clerical	-0.149***	-0.020	-0.258	-0.174
	(0.055)	(0.096)	(0.258)	(0.425)
Blue Collar Worker	-0.013	0.040	-0.242	-0.324
	(0.058)	(0.100)	(0.343)	(0.485)
Retired		-0.006		-0.766
		(0.129)		(0.617)
Education				
Lived Abroad	-0.149**	0.001	0.528	0.284
	(0.071)	(0.034)	(0.450)	(0.194)
Privilege High School	-0.020	0.003	0.446**	0.064
	(0.034)	(0.026)	(0.189)	(0.156)
Admission No Exam	-0.007	-0.023	0.492	-0.144
	(0.067)	(0.031)	(0.311)	(0.211)
Experiment Behavior				
Claim: Understand Research Goals	0.018***	0.004	0.088**	0.016
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Claim: Comply to Research Goals	0.001**	0.003	0.006	0.032
	(0.001)	(0.009)	(0.004)	(0.041)
Log Duration (Seconds)	0.069	-0.012	0.365	-0.026
	(0.082)	(0.011)	(0.404)	(0.105)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
N Respondents × Scenarios	2,359	1,596	1,549	1,338
N Respondents	337	228	337	228
Mean DepVar	0.34	0.16	4.39	5.08
Sd DepVar	0.47	0.37	2.43	2.24

Standard errors in parentheses

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

Table 9: Determinants of Status Quo Playing (Columns 1 and 2) and Amount Given to Loser for Non Status Quo Players (Columns 3 and 4)

market-supporting institutions. On a related note, Nisbett (2004) argues 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 are 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 are the least likely to play status quo: a child of a small business owner is 20 percentage points less likely to play status quo than a child of an agricultural worker and the effect is significant at 1%.

Experimenter Demand Questions Intriguingly, other strong predictors of status quo playing are positive answers to the question "I understand the researchers' goals". and "I have done exactly what the experimenters wanted". Chinese respondents who play the status quo are more likely to claim that they understand and comply with the researchers' goal, while this is not the case with the French respondents. Originally, we added those two questions to control for possible experimenter demand effects. However, we have reasons to believe that it is highly unlikely that the status quo play we measure reflects experimenter demand since that would mean that respondents **thought that we wanted them to play status quo** - especially that we wanted them to play status quo in all scenarios. [34]

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[34]Apart from that, we also think that this SQ playing behavior is unlikely to be true experimenter demand for the following reason: First, at the start of the scenario section, we strongly insisted on the fact that we were interested in what the respondents *personally thought* would be the right choice. Then, respondents' answers about the goal of the experiment show that most understood the experiment's goal as being to study how to distribute earnings in light of different fairness concerns (see section 6.2). Additionally, we included all demographic questions at the end of the questionnaire to avoid cultural priming, and answers to the open question never explicitly evoke cultural thinking. Finally, a large body of existing literature has shown that experimenter demand effects are often very small if

We plot the distribution of the answers to those two experimenter demand questions in Figure 6.1 and 6.2. The Chinese respondents are actually slightly more confident they understand researchers' goals, at an average of 6.5 out of 10 while the French average 6.3. But the starkest contrast can be found in answers to the question about complying with the intention of the researchers: while about 15% of the French respondents claim that they have at least answered a little against the researchers' expectations (34 out of 228 respondents), only 4.7% of the Chinese respondent claim so. The pattern is particularly evident in Figure 6.2, where there is a clear discontinuity at 0 for the Chinese sample while the distribution is close to symmetric around 0 for the French sample. We thus argue that positive answers for the experimenter demand questions represent more of a hesitance to claim that they have deviated from an authority's (the researchers) will. This is consistent with the hypothesis of agency deficit: overall, the Chinese respondents who are hesitant to say that they do not understand the experiment or that they acted against the researchers' goal - those who "play a good student" - are also more likely to be afraid of making a redistributive choice, and more likely to pass on their turn by playing status quo.

On the contrary, a sizable share of the French respondents claimed to have acted against our will; indeed, 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 Apathy   One may be tempted to think that choice reluctance could simply reflect apathy – reluctance to take the time of deviating from the pre-selected default answer – rather than a lack of political agency. In the following, we however review evidence inconsistent with such an explanation.

If status quo play in the scenarios section were simply driven by apathy, one would expect it to be positively correlated with status quo play in non-scenario questions: status quo players would be similarly apathetic throughout the questionnaire, selecting only neutral answers. If status quo play were a sign that respondents are rushing

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at all existent. Additionally, status quo playing is *does not display any correlation* with the respondents' reported understanding of the experiment's aim, only with their self-reported compliance with the experiment's aim.
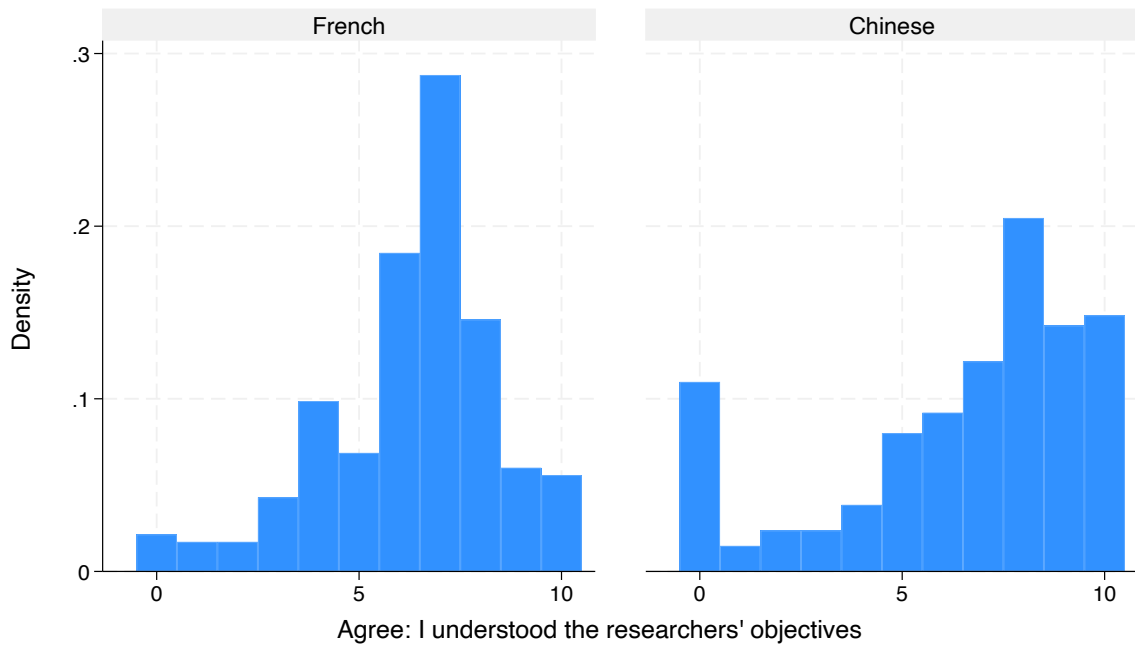
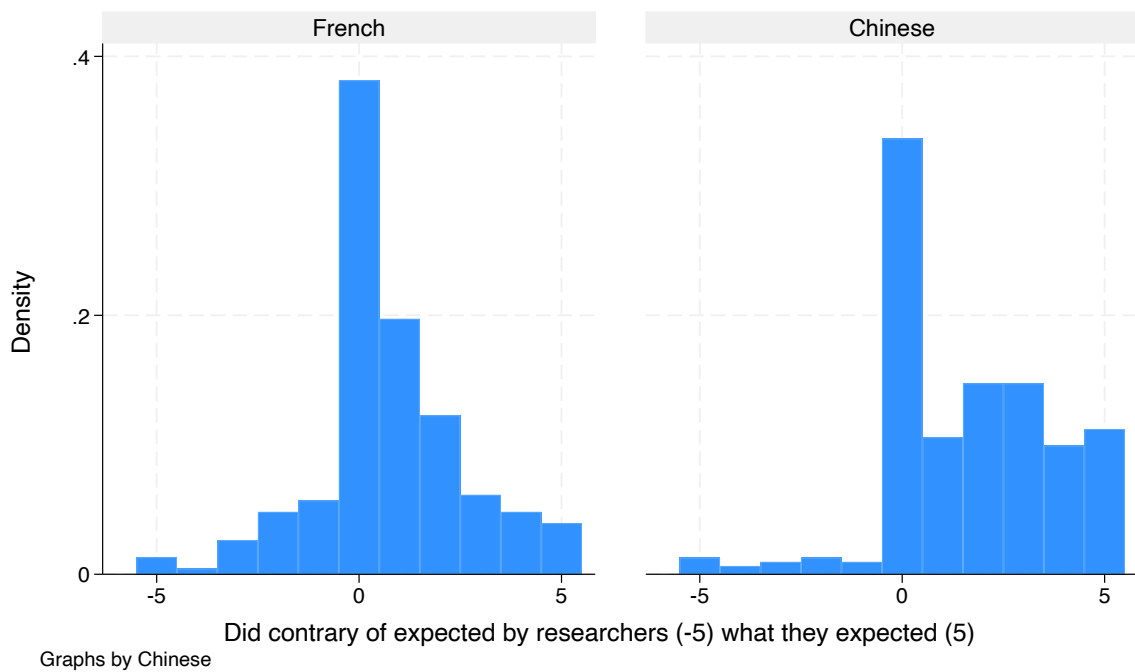Figure 6.1: Answer Distribution: "I understand the researchers' goals" (0-10)

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

through the questionnaire, one would additionally expect it to be negatively correlated with the survey completion duration and inattention measures. Tables 10 and 11 however show that it is not the case: the total number of times a respondent plays the status quo across all scenarios is never positively correlated with any of those apathy proxies.

	(1) Default answer (experimenter demand)	(2) Default answer (type experimenter demand)	(3) Total default answers (beliefs)
Total SQ play (scenarios)	-.0208*	-.00382	-.035
	(.00977)	(.00543)	(.0247)
R2	.0144	.00148	.00594
Mean	.337	.0801	.97
N respondents	312	337	337

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

Table 10: Correlation between total status quo play across all scenarios default answers in other sections (Chinese sample)

	(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 11: Correlation between total status quo play across all scenarios and inattention proxies (Chinese sample)

	(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 12: Correlation between status quo play and a scenario's ordering (Chinese sample)

Additionally, if status quo play were a sign of apathy, one would expect it to increase as respondents advance through the questionnaire, as a result of increasing tiredness. To show that this is not the case, Table 12 reports estimates when regressing a status quo play dummy equal on a variable recording the order in which scenarios appeared in the questionnaire (taking value 1 for the merit - respectively luck - scenario and 2 for the luck - respectively merit - a scenario for respondents who had the merit - respectively luck - scenario first, etc). Reassuringly, status quo play appears uncorrelated with scenario ordering.

Reluctance to Act, not Libertarianism   Given that Chinese respondents do not distinguish between luck-based inequalities and merit-based inequalities in their redistribution decisions, Almås et al. (2021) claims that a very large share of Chinese respondents is libertarians, i.e. regarding 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, 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.[35]   Given the randomization we implement, there should be comparable numbers of libertarians in the equal and unequal status quo conditions. However, column 1 of table 13 highlights that the number of Chinese respondents *always* playing the status quo is significantly lower in the unequal status quo relative to the equal status quo condition. This difference could only be rationalized by the presence of the choice-reluctant who stick to the status quo as long as the status quo does not appear *too unfair* to them.

Columns 2 to 4 provide further evidence: just like playing the status quo in a given scenario, always playing the status quo is positively correlated with claiming that

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[35]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 tokens to the winner. However, in the absence of the choice-reluctant, this would lead to a higher number of always status quo players (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.

one conformed to the researchers' goals (column 2) 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 the fraction of status quo players truly were libertarians, one would rather expect them to have a private sector parent and to argue not having been influenced by the researchers' goal.

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

More Reluctance than Upward Mobility Another potential story could be that Chinese status quo play is driven by the experienced upward mobility of respondents. There is already a large body of experiment work showing that experienced upward mobility significantly decreases support for redistribution. 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 witnessed significant improvement in their living standards. Such a story could seem even more likely given that most of the status quo playing is driven by respondents with parents working in the agricultural sector, for whom attending elite universities in China is a signal of significant upward social mobility.

To rule out this potential upward mobility story, we resort to other detailed background variables, in particular those on the universities attended by the respondents. Specifically, we code the regions of the university, the university type (whether it is a science engineering centered university, general or other miscellaneous[36]), as well as the specific rank of the universities.

Results including these more detailed background variables are reported in Table 14, where we perform the same type of empirical analysis as in Table 9. First of all, it is interesting to observe that students who attend universities with a science and engineering focus are significantly more likely to play the status quo than students who attend universities with a more business and commerce focus. Students in engineering universities might possibly be less preoccupied with socio-economic issues than students attending business- and finance-focused universities, which could also be indicative of lower political agency. On the other hand, students attending better-ranked universities (above the median) and universities located in Beijing and the north of China in general are also more likely to play the status quo. We think this could be a result of a mix of both upward mobility and political conformity, where attending better universities indicates a respondent most probably has experienced greater upward mobility, while the fact that students in universities in Beijing and its surrounding areas are more status quo preserving could be suggestive of diminished political agency in a more politically sensitive environment.

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[36]Other types of universities here include those with a focus on business, economics, commerce, pharmaceuticals, normal (education) studies, etc.

Rather strikingly, the father's education, which in principle should be a better proxy for socio-economic background than the father's occupation, and hence a better proxy for intergenerational mobility, especially in our context where respondents are all attending relatively better-ranked universities in China, is not predictive of respondents' status quo playing behavior at all. Furthermore, the significant effects of the father's occupation documented previously are robust to the inclusion of these additional explanatory variables. Such contrasting effects between the father's education and the father's occupation lend more support to a political agency story than to the experience of upward mobility.

Ultimately, a more concrete test of the social mobility hypothesis would be whether the sub-group that has experienced the greater upward social mobility also displays greater status quo playing. In order to test this, we interact university ranks with both father's education and occupation. If the upward mobility story were to hold, we would expect that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds (fathers with lower education and lower socio-economic status occupations such as farming) currently attending higher-ranked universities should display significantly more status quo playing. However, we do not find evidence of such heterogeneous relationships in Table 15. In Table 16, replacing the baseline father's occupation (agriculture) with that of the small business, commerce, and service sector, we find that only the significantly positive effect of having a father working in the agricultural sector on status quo playing remains. Furthermore, there is no evidence of heterogeneous effects of agricultural background across school ranks.

All in all, although we do not provide definitive evidence that the upward mobility mechanism is not at play, we contend that political conformity and diminished agency of respondents are much more important in driving the widespread status quo playing behavior in the Chinese sample than experienced upward mobility.

6.2 Context Dependency: How Respondents Understood the Experiment

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

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Play SQ	Play SQ	Play SQ
Demographics			
Age	-0.012	-0.016*	-0.016*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.065**	-0.063**	-0.053*
	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Univeristy Type, Ref. Cat. = Science and Engineering			
General	-0.079*	-0.070*	-0.065
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Other Miscellaneous	-0.168***	-0.155***	-0.154***
	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.045)
University Region, Ref. Cat. = Center			
North	0.129*	0.135**	0.118*
	(0.070)	(0.068)	(0.066)
Beijing	0.120**	0.131***	0.125***
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.047)
Univeristy Rank, Ref. Cat. = Rank Below Median			
Rank Above Median	0.095***	0.083**	0.082**
	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.034)
Father Education, Ref. Cat. = Primary or Less			
College and Below	0.083	0.070	0.060
	(0.080)	(0.086)	(0.083)
Secondary	0.015	0.019	0.014
	(0.080)	(0.086)	(0.083)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Agriculture			
Small Business & Commerce/Service	-0.325***	-0.293***	-0.281***
	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.051)
Clerical	-0.268***	-0.224***	-0.214***
	(0.058)	(0.055)	(0.054)
Public Servant	-0.292**	-0.222*	-0.202
	(0.131)	(0.133)	(0.138)
Management & Professional	-0.242***	-0.200***	-0.184***
	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.067)
Blue Collar Worker	-0.101	-0.092	-0.085
	(0.061)	(0.059)	(0.058)
Education			
Lived abroad	-0.044	-0.074	-0.062
	(0.056)	(0.063)	(0.066)
Privilege High School	0.011	0.006	-0.011
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Admission No Exam	-0.048	-0.043	-0.050
	(0.057)	(0.053)	(0.055)
Experiment Behavior			
Claim: Understand Research Goals			0.014**
			(0.006)
Claim: Comply to Research Goals			0.001
			(0.001)
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 14: Detailed Determinants of Status Quo Playing (Chinese Sample Only)

	(1) Play SQ	(2) Play SQ	(3) Play SQ
Demographics			
Age	-0.011	-0.014	-0.014
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.058*	-0.055*	-0.045
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.029)
Univeristy Type, Ref. Cat. = Science and Engineering			
General	-0.074*	-0.064	-0.057
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Other Miscellaneous	-0.164***	-0.153***	-0.156***
	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.045)
University Region, Ref. Cat. = Center			
North	0.133*	0.137**	0.123*
	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.065)
Beijing	0.125***	0.135***	0.128***
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.047)
Univeristy Rank, Ref. Cat. = Rank Below Median			
Rank Above Median	0.197	0.088	0.058
	(0.186)	(0.190)	(0.184)
Father Education, Ref. Cat. = Primary or Less			
College and Below	0.097	0.078	0.049
	(0.096)	(0.102)	(0.098)
Secondary	0.032	0.022	-0.005
	(0.096)	(0.103)	(0.098)
Father Education & University Rank			
College and Below × Rank Above Median	-0.052	-0.018	0.022
	(0.169)	(0.175)	(0.169)
Secondary × Rank Above Median	-0.038	0.005	0.050
	(0.167)	(0.176)	(0.170)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Agriculture			
Small Business & Commerce/Service	-0.240***	-0.254***	-0.240***
	(0.071)	(0.067)	(0.064)
Clerical	-0.282***	-0.275***	-0.259***
	(0.076)	(0.071)	(0.069)
Public Servant	-0.086	-0.122	-0.095
	(0.179)	(0.131)	(0.120)
Management & Professional	-0.178*	-0.166*	-0.132
	(0.096)	(0.091)	(0.088)
Father Occupation & University Rank			
Small Business & Commerce/Service × Rank Above Median	-0.162*	-0.084	-0.082
	(0.098)	(0.095)	(0.094)
Clerical × Rank Above Median	0.040	0.102	0.094
	(0.110)	(0.106)	(0.105)
Public Servant × Rank Above Median	-0.285	-0.134	-0.143
	(0.241)	(0.220)	(0.219)
Management & Professional × Rank Above Median	-0.135	-0.093	-0.129
	(0.132)	(0.124)	(0.121)
Education			
Lived abroad	-0.054	-0.084	-0.072
	(0.061)	(0.066)	(0.070)
Privilege High School	0.018	0.015	-0.001
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Admission No Exam	-0.042	-0.038	-0.039
	(0.058)	(0.054)	(0.056)
Experiment Behavior			
Claim: Understand Research Goals			0.015**
			(0.006)
Claim: Comply to Research Goals			0.001
			(0.001)
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 Playing with Interactions (Chinese Sample Only)

	(1) Play SQ	(2) Play SQ	(3) Play SQ
Demographics			
Age	-0.011	-0.014	-0.014
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Gender (Male == 1)	-0.058*	-0.055*	-0.045
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.029)
Univeristy Type, Ref. Cat. = Science and Engineering			
General	-0.074*	-0.064	-0.057
	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Other Miscellaneous	-0.164***	-0.153***	-0.156***
	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.045)
University Region, Ref. Cat. = Center			
North	0.133*	0.137**	0.123*
	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.065)
Beijing	0.125***	0.135***	0.128***
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.047)
Univeristy Rank, Ref. Cat. = Rank Below Median			
Rank Above Median	0.035	0.004	-0.024
	(0.161)	(0.170)	(0.165)
Father Education, Ref. Cat. = Primary or Less			
College and Below	0.097	0.078	0.049
	(0.096)	(0.102)	(0.098)
Secondary	0.032	0.022	-0.005
	(0.096)	(0.103)	(0.098)
Father Education & University Rank			
College and Below × Rank Above Median	-0.052	-0.018	0.022
	(0.169)	(0.175)	(0.169)
Secondary × Rank Above Median	-0.038	0.005	0.050
	(0.167)	(0.176)	(0.170)
Father Occupation, Ref. Cat. = Small Business & Service			
Agriculture	0.240***	0.254***	0.240***
	(0.071)	(0.067)	(0.064)
Clerical	-0.042	-0.022	-0.020
	(0.048)	(0.050)	(0.051)
Public Servant	0.153	0.131	0.145
	(0.172)	(0.123)	(0.115)
Management & Professional	0.062	0.087	0.108*
	(0.066)	(0.064)	(0.064)
Father Occupation & University Rank			
Agriculture × Rank Above Median	0.162*	0.084	0.082
	(0.098)	(0.095)	(0.094)
Clerical × Rank Above Median	0.203***	0.186**	0.176**
	(0.073)	(0.074)	(0.073)
Public Servant × Rank Above Median	-0.123	-0.050	-0.061
	(0.230)	(0.207)	(0.208)
Management & Professional × Rank Above Median	0.027	-0.009	-0.047
	(0.100)	(0.095)	(0.095)
Education			
Lived abroad	-0.054	-0.084	-0.072
	(0.061)	(0.066)	(0.070)
Privilege High School	0.018	0.015	-0.001
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Admission No Exam	-0.042	-0.038	-0.039
	(0.058)	(0.054)	(0.056)
Experiment Behavior			
Claim: Understand Research Goals			0.015**
			(0.006)
Claim: Comply to Research Goals			0.001
			(0.001)
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 16: Detailed Determinants of Status Quo Playing with Interactions (Chinese Sample Only) - Different Parental Occupation Baseline

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 interpret the experiment as being related to worker salary and enterprises – very concrete settings. Those answers usually include 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 sub-category 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 understand the experiment as a way to measure their innate abilities or IQ. The last category involves responses arguing that the experiment is 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 interpret the experiment as 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 understand the experiment as being related to redistribution, fairness, and meritocracy constitute the

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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)".[37] An interesting pattern emerges from this sub-category analysis (see Figure 8.9): the French sample is 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 are 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 exhibit a greater tendency to invoke abstract principles, while Chinese respondents appear 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, more often than not refraining 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 is 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

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[37]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.

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 – can 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 respondents who moved away from the "winner take all" status quo, then Chinese respondents do not behave differently from 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 cast doubt on 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 both due to culture and due to the habit of political (dis)engagement.

While we cannot observe the true preferences of the status quo players, our research sheds some light on the "choice of making no choices". We show that in the Chinese

case, status quo players are more likely to be from agricultural or workers' families, and they often exhibit a greater desire to behave in a socially desirable way. We relate status quo playing to the concept of agency - the capacity to act on something - but not apathy or libertarianism. In a way, our results suggest that some respondents make an almost conscious choice to adhere to the status quo, arbitrating 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: for a person's choices to reveal 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, where the respondents might make **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 are reluctant to bear the responsibility for affecting others' lives. If the choice-reluctant are, as we suspect, individuals with little real-world political agency, spectator experiments may fail to give a voice to the voiceless and thereby result in strongly 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. In that case, the redistributive decision would rather be framed as a "predistribution", where the spectator executes a first distribution. 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 – e.g. by presenting choices as a "vote" and telling respondents that we need their help to determine the fairest payment schedules or by having 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 Graphs and Figures

8.1.1 Frequency Distributions of Sum Given To Losers Under Different Scenarios
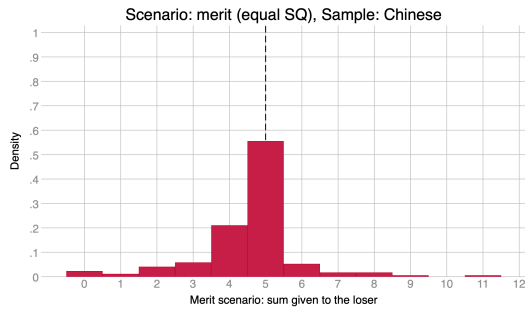
(a) **Merit** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese
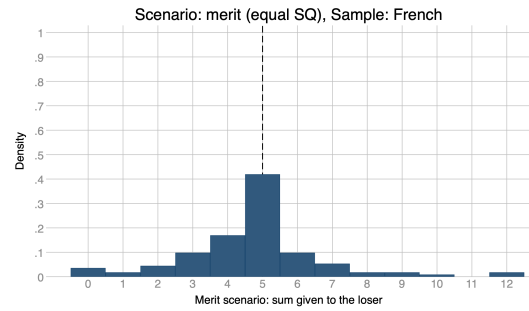
(b) **Merit** scenario, 7/5 Split, French
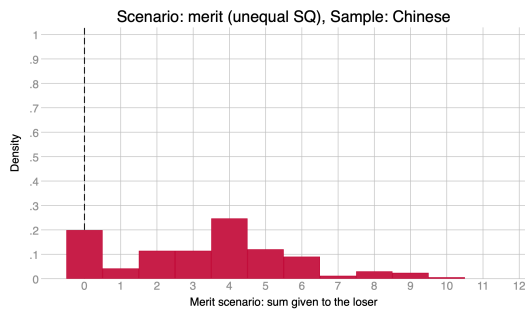
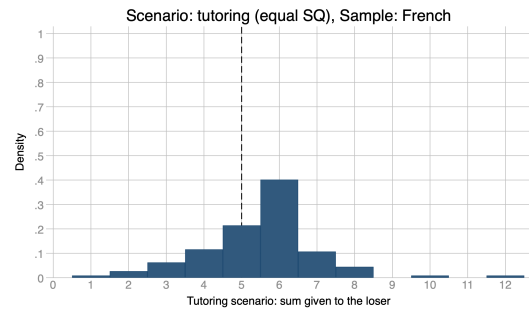(c) **Merit** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese
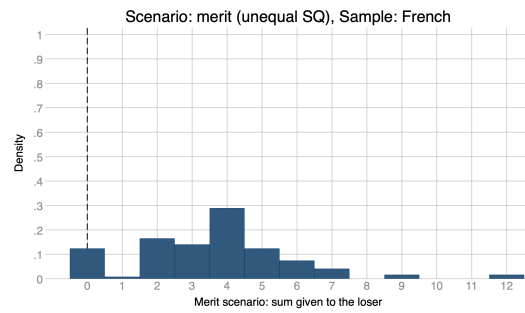
(d) **Merit** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

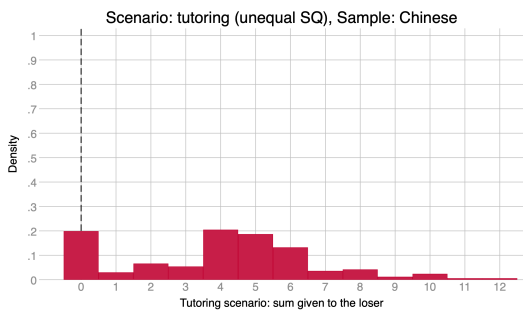Figure 8.1: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Merit Scenario
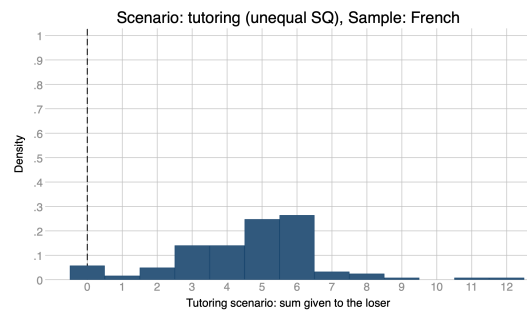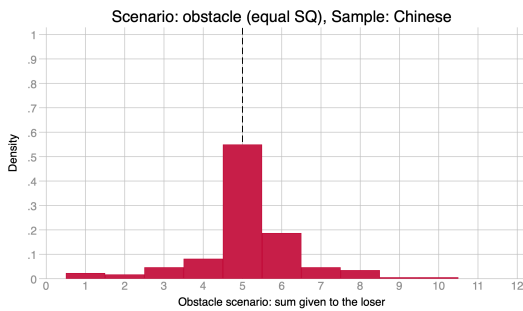
8.1.2 Additional Analysis
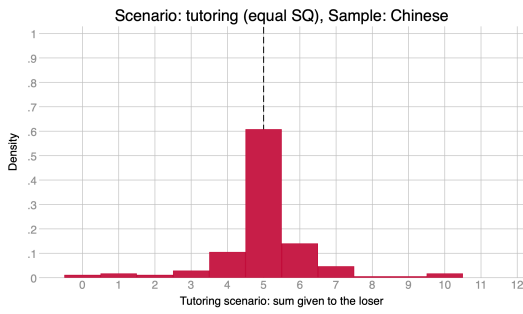
(a) **Tutoring** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese

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

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

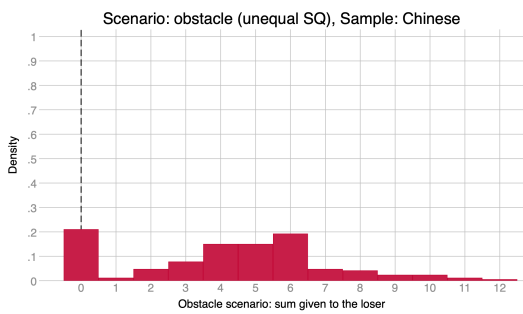(d) **Tutoring** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

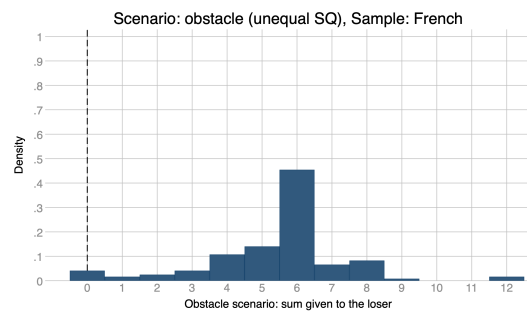Figure 8.2: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Tutoring Scenario

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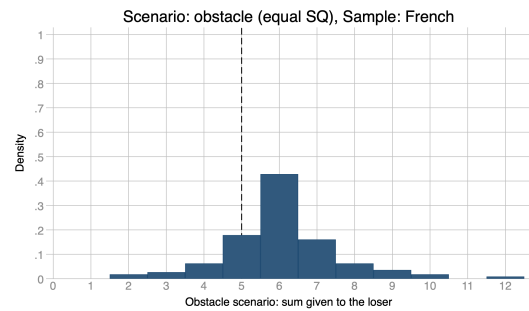
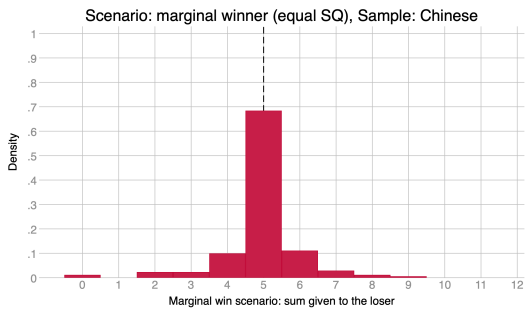(b) **Obstacle** scenario, 7/5 Split, French

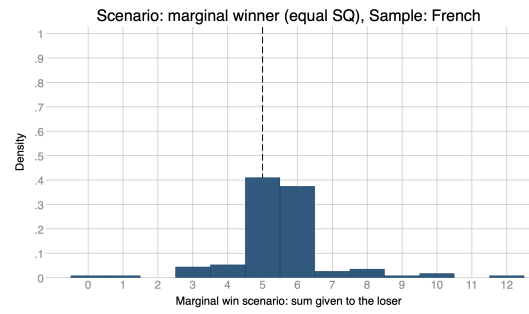(c) **Obstacle** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese
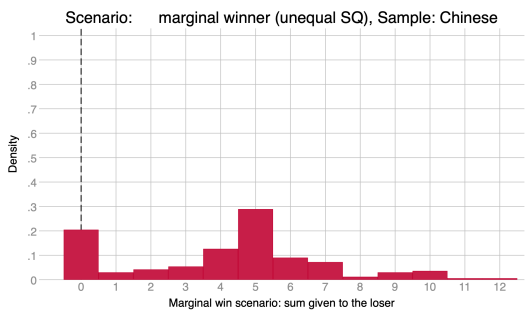

(d) **Obstacle** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

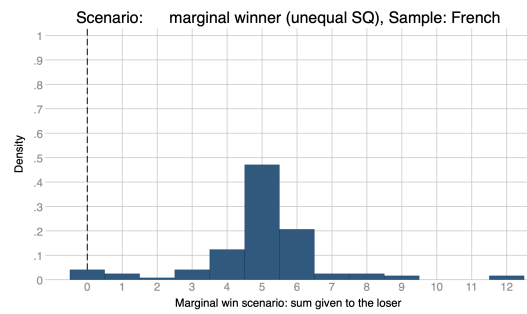Figure 8.3: Distribution of Sum Given to Losers under Obstacle Scenario

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

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

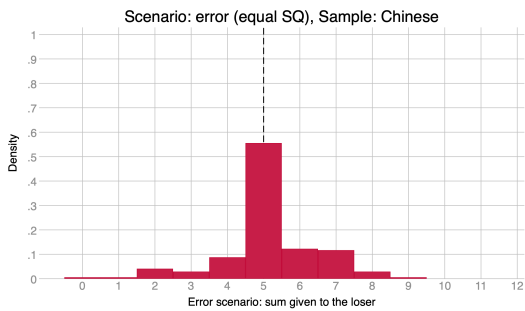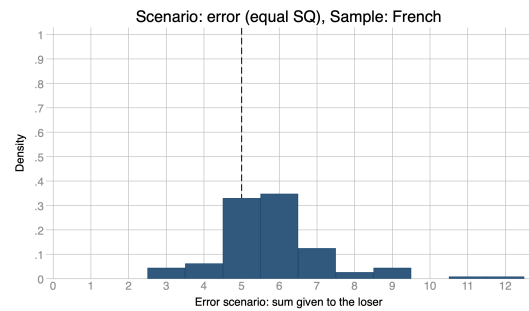(c) **Margwin** scenario, 12/0 Split, Chinese
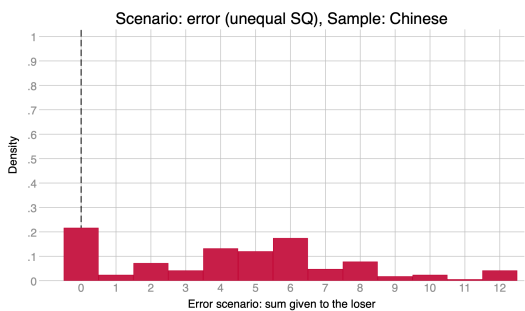
(d) **Margwin** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

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

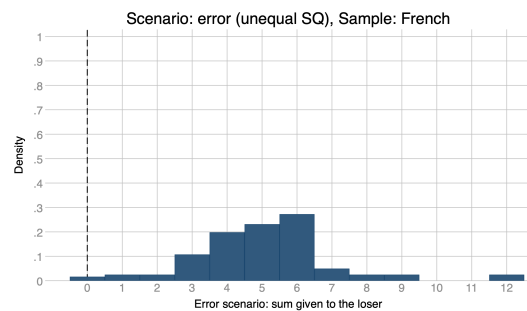

(a) **Error** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese

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

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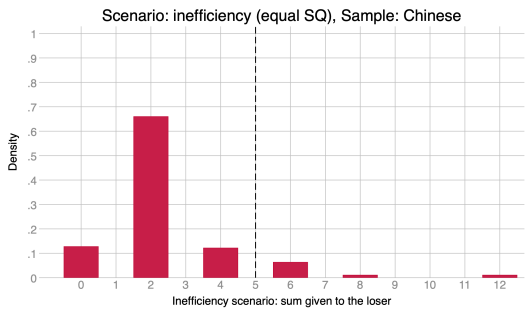
(d) **Error** scenario, 12/0 Split, French

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

| | (1) | (2) |
	SQ Playing	Sum Loser if no SQ
Service	-0.234*	-0.544
	(0.091)	(0.401)
Small Shopkeeper	-0.274***	-0.365
	(0.056)	(0.312)
Private Enterprise Owner	-0.316***	-0.405
	(0.062)	(0.394)
Clerical	-0.208***	-0.444
	(0.060)	(0.298)
Public Servant	-0.100	-0.041
	(0.213)	(0.428)
Management	-0.157*	-0.398
	(0.068)	(0.351)
Army, Police	-0.226*	-0.205
	(0.096)	(0.355)
Professionals	-0.159	-0.195
	(0.091)	(0.389)
Worker	-0.066	-0.375
	(0.062)	(0.376)
Others	-0.350**	-0.001
	(0.127)	(1.159)
Controls	✓	✓
Respondents	2,359.00	1,549.00
Mean DepVar	0.34	4.39
Sd DepVar	0.47	2.43

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
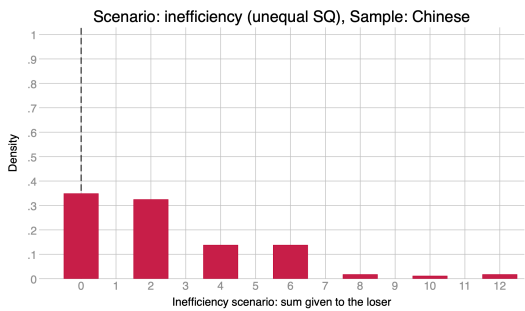
Table 17: Status Quo Playing and Sum Given To the Loser By Father Job Category in the Chinese Sample
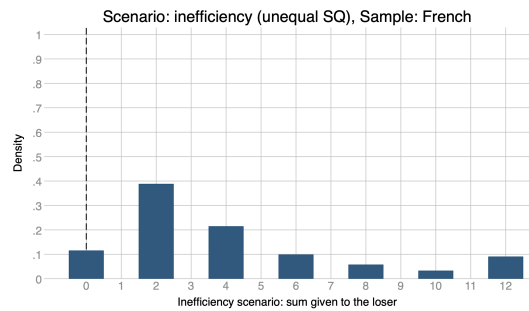
(a) **Inefficiency** scenario, 7/5 Split, Chinese
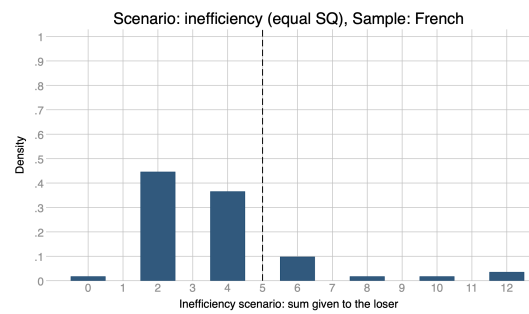
(b) **Inefficiency** scenario, 7/5 Split, French

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

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

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

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	Playing Status-Quo		Sum Loser if not SQ	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Chinese	French	Chinese	French
Salary & Enterprise	-0.027	-0.033	0.277	-0.296
	(0.055)	(0.031)	(0.268)	(0.220)
Fairness, Redist and Meritocracy	0.016	-0.007	0.330	0.113
	(0.053)	(0.030)	(0.269)	(0.186)
Govt., Income Gap, etc	-0.052	0.029	0.403	-0.222
	(0.102)	(0.049)	(0.344)	(0.354)
Ability Test	0.078	0.096	0.166	0.360
	(0.084)	(0.107)	(0.357)	(0.638)
Gather Infos	-0.098	-0.144*	1.980***	-0.176
	(0.070)	(0.068)	(0.449)	(0.686)
No Classif.	0.073	0.060	0.417	0.441
	(0.136)	(0.069)	(0.467)	(0.493)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Respondents	2,359.00	1,596.00	1,549.00	1,338.00
Mean DepVar	0.34	0.16	4.39	5.08
Sd DepVar	0.47	0.37	2.43	2.24

Standard errors in parentheses

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

Table 18: Status Quo Playing and Sum Given To the Loser By Answers Categorization to the Open Question

	Salary, Enterprise		Fairness, Redist and Meritocracy		NA, Don't Know	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Chinese	French	Chinese	French	Chinese	French
Demographics						
Age	-0.027	0.001	0.021	-0.018	-0.010	0.035*
	(0.015)	(0.011)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.005)	(0.016)
male	-0.037	-0.010	-0.025	0.059	0.028	-0.074
	(0.048)	(0.040)	(0.053)	(0.049)	(0.017)	(0.057)
Parent Job, Ref. Cat. = Agriculture						
Small Business	0.101	0.119	0.002	0.037	0.005	-0.031
	(0.084)	(0.129)	(0.093)	(0.158)	(0.030)	(0.186)
Managers, intellectual	0.022	0.102	-0.004	-0.026	0.060*	-0.157
	(0.075)	(0.114)	(0.083)	(0.140)	(0.027)	(0.166)
Intermediate Professions	0.178	0.057	0.263	0.074	-0.071	-0.182
	(0.308)	(0.125)	(0.342)	(0.153)	(0.111)	(0.181)
Clerical Jobs	0.004	0.107	0.068	-0.099	0.010	0.013
	(0.075)	(0.120)	(0.083)	(0.146)	(0.027)	(0.173)
Blue collar jobs	0.292***	-0.000	-0.031	-0.148	-0.024	0.016
	(0.084)	(0.135)	(0.093)	(0.165)	(0.030)	(0.195)
Retired		0.282		-0.097		0.038
		(0.157)		(0.192)		(0.227)
Education						
Lived abroad	-0.144	0.010	-0.132	0.063	0.104**	-0.088
	(0.107)	(0.056)	(0.119)	(0.068)	(0.038)	(0.080)
Privileged High School	-0.203***	-0.043	0.117*	0.013	-0.008	0.034
	(0.051)	(0.040)	(0.056)	(0.050)	(0.018)	(0.059)
Non-exam Admission	-0.067	0.035	-0.049	-0.093	-0.007	0.161*
	(0.090)	(0.054)	(0.099)	(0.066)	(0.032)	(0.078)
Experiment Behavior						
Claim: Understand Research Goals	0.023*	-0.005	-0.005	0.000	-0.044***	-0.035*
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.004)	(0.015)
Claim: Comply to Research Goals	-0.002	0.000	-0.004**	0.001	0.007***	-0.028
	(0.001)	(0.011)	(0.001)	(0.013)	(0.000)	(0.016)
Log Duration (Seconds)	0.058	0.011	-0.080	0.020	-0.065	-0.106**
	(0.123)	(0.024)	(0.137)	(0.030)	(0.044)	(0.035)
Controls						
Respondents	337.00	228.00	337.00	228.00	337.00	228.00
Mean DepVar	0.28	0.08	0.34	0.14	0.11	0.29
Sd DepVar	0.45	0.28	0.47	0.35	0.31	0.46

8.2 Additional Information on the Experiment Design

8.2.1 Beginning of Survey: Consent Form and Comprehension Check

At the start of the survey, the respondents are asked to read and agree to the consent form. For the sake of valid consent, participants below 18 years old are 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 is followed by a comprehension check in which the respondent is asked what bonuses the winner and loser would receive if his/her choice is implemented. If the respondent makes a mistake, the correct answer answer is displayed with an explanation, and the respondent is invited to answer the scenario question again. Attention check questions are inserted into the scenario section to ensure continued attention.

8.2.2 Belief Questions

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

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

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.

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)

Among the belief questions, statement 1 (government responsibility in reducing income gap) is considered the traditional proxy to measure demand for redistribution [38]. 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 tend to systematically be overconfident in their ability and overconfidence is 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.

8.2.3   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 considered 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 check. 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 it while only 81.6% of those who were asked the missing word attention check

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[38]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)

passed it), we however decided, to ensure comparability across samples, to count as "attentive" all Sciences Po respondents who has 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 5th percentile of survey duration (255 seconds) as well as those who provided some low-quality answers when asked to type responses.[39]

8.2.4   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 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.

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[39]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 $p = 0.029$.

Respondents were asked to indicate their gender and age.[40]

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).[41]

Respondents were additionally asked to indicate their parents' occupations.[42] 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 trajectories 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 said 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.[43]

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[40]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.

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

[42]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.

[43]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.

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.

8.3 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.[44] Workers were given 4 minutes to answer as many questions as possible.[45] To guarantee variation in task performance, the number of questions was 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.[46] Bonus payments chosen by survey respondents were paid on top of this base payment.

In total, we hired 426 workers that 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

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[44]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 20th century.

[45]To ensure informed consent, workers could spend any time on the consent form and instructions, before a timer started when they entered the tasks section of the questionnaire.

[46]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.

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

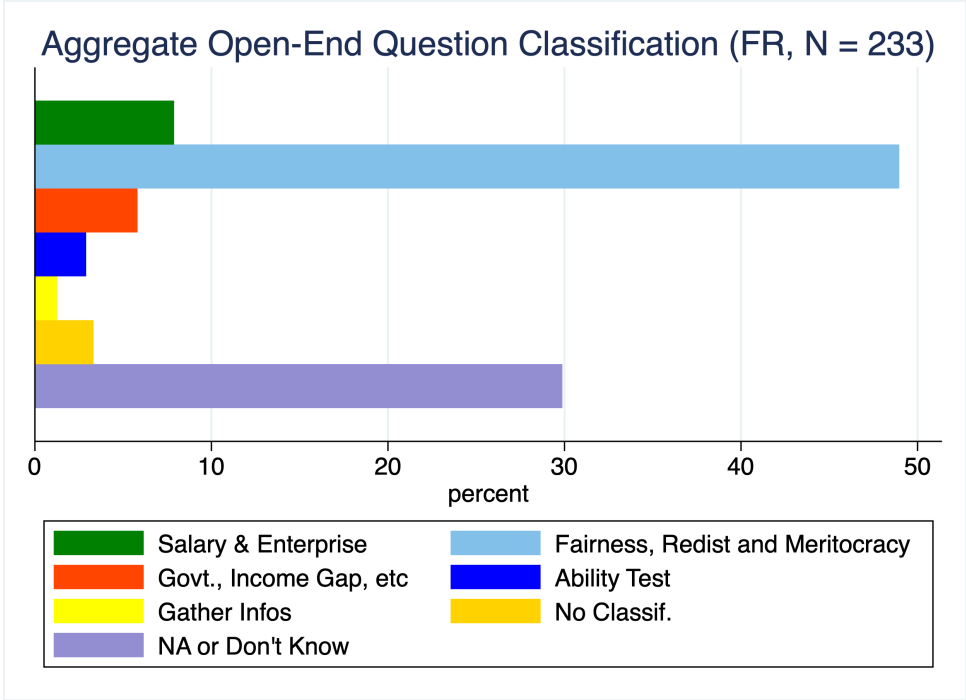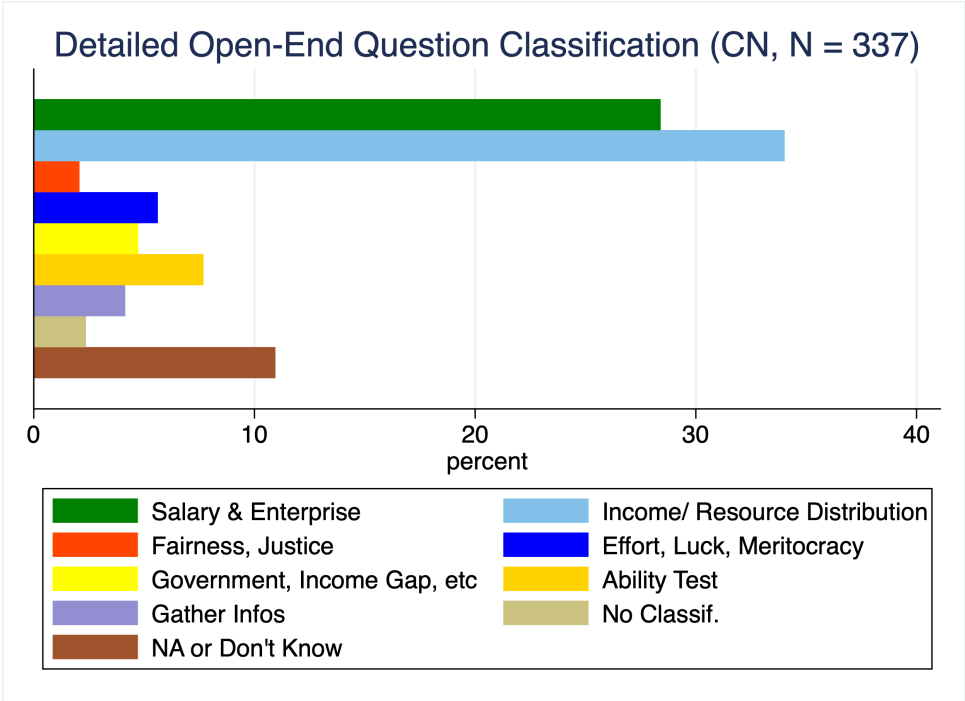(a) Chinese Sample
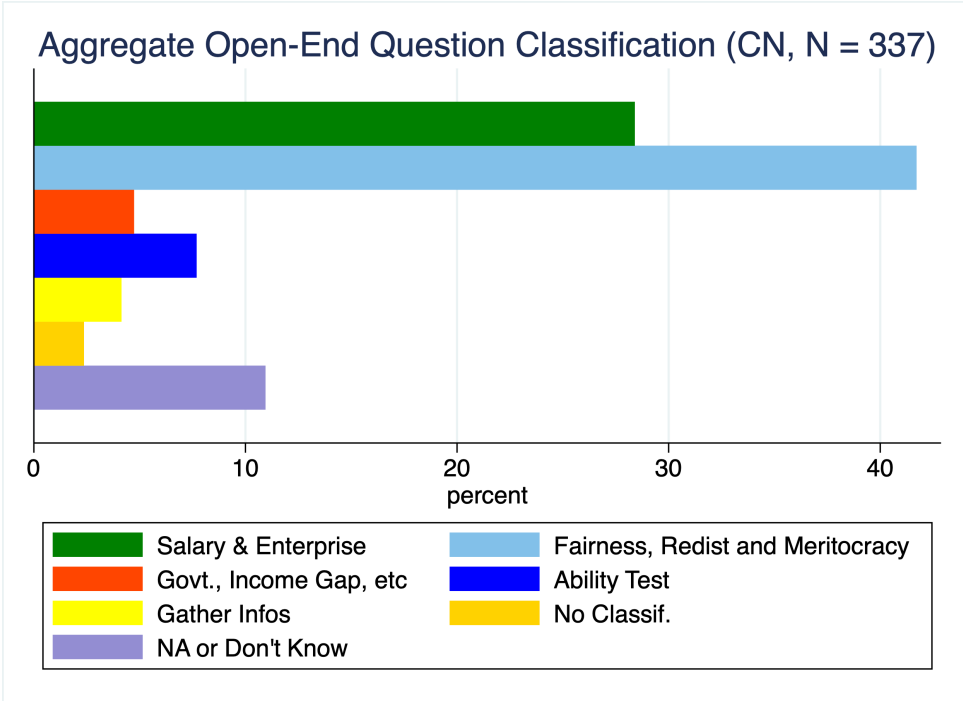
(b) French Sample

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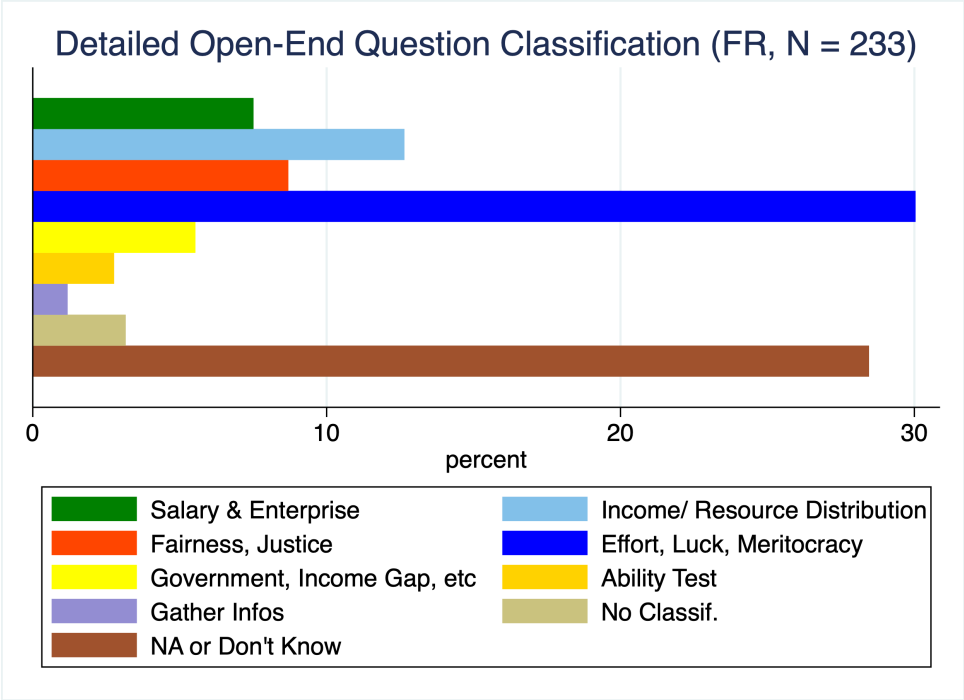
(a) Chinese Sample

Detailed Open-End Question Classification (CN, N = 337)

(b) French Sample

Detailed Open-End Question Classification (FR, N = 233)

Figure 8.10: Screenshot of the Chinese and French Surveys

(a) Screenshot of French Survey

Worker A gets 7

Worker A

Worker B REPORTEDLY COMPLETES FEWER tasks and gets 5, BUT,..

There's **20% chance that B is the WRONG LOSER.**

Worker B

How much would you like to redistribute?

YOU

Base Payment:

Base Payment:

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.

甲得到了7块钱奖金。

乙被软件报告说完成了较少的任务，得到了5块钱奖金，但是……

有20%的可能性，乙被软件错误地选成了输家。

甲

你想重新分配多少钱？

乙

基本工资:

基本工资:

你

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

54%

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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.[47]

Workers were randomly allocated to one of three possible questionnaires, namely the tutoring questionnaire, where they would receive some tutoring on shortcuts to searching for the relevant information the celebrities online, the obstacle questionnaire, where the worker would be asked to solve some additional unnecessary questions,[48] and the default questionnaire, which is the most standard version with celebrity information searching only.

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.[49]

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.[50]

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

[48]These questions were simple mathematical operations such as additions, subtractions, etc.

[49]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.

[50]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, either it being **merit**, **luck**, **inefficiency** scenario decisions will be randomly selected to be implemented twice.

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 solves exactly the same number or more correct tasks than the worker who received the default questionnaire, he/she would automatically obtain the entirety of the bonus. In the **tutoring** scenario, if the worker who received the tutoring questionnaire solves exactly the same or fewer correct tasks than the worker with the default questionnaire, the tutoring-questionnaire worker will automatically get zero, and the default-questionnaire worker will get 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			

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 drop one scenario of the respondent (among the **merit**, **wrong winner/loser** and **inefficiency** scenarios), and implemented his/her **marginal winner** scenario instead.
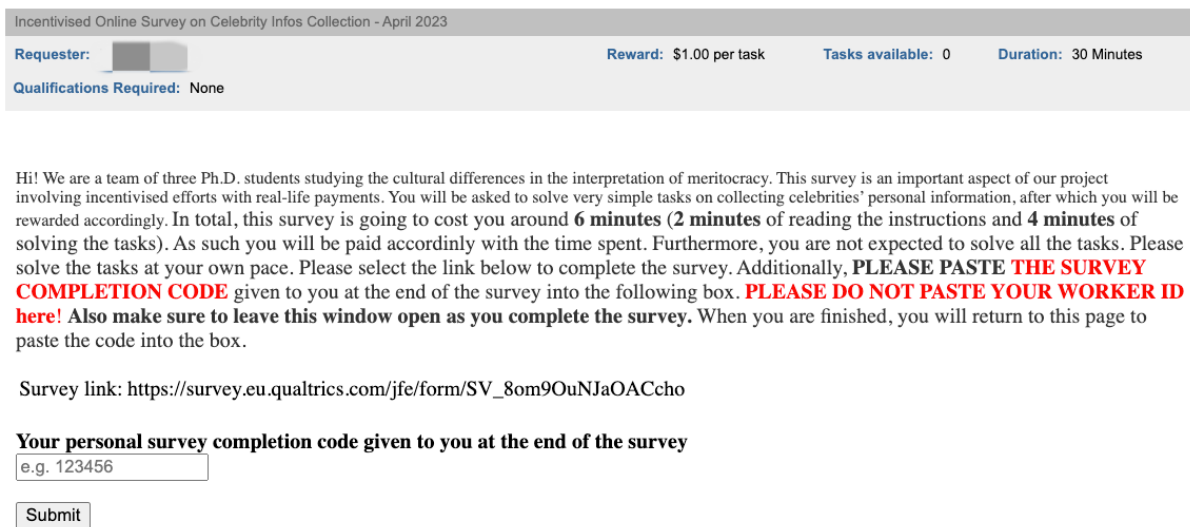
Figure 8.11: A Screenshot of the Batch for the Link of the Worker's Survey Published on Amazon M-Turk

8.4 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 play the status quo and one might fear 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 of 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* play the status quo: in the French sample, among respondents who play the status quo at least once, almost none always plays the status quo, while, among Chinese status quo players, only about a third systematically play the status quo.[51]

The idea at the heart of our identification is the following: although it may seem a 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 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 prefer 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 Appending 8.4.1. While, reassuringly, none of the graphs exhibits multiple local minima, certain

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

graphs appear to be very flat, suggesting that there might be little variation helping 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.[52].

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

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

<u>where:</u> $y_{is}^* = \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is}$ **(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 the vector of parameters maximizing the following sample pseudo-log-likelihood:

$$
\sum_{i,s} 1\{y_{is} \in (y_{is}^{SQ}, 12)\} log\left(f_u(y_{is} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta) F_v(\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is} - y_{is}^{SQ} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma \mid u_{is}) \right)
$$

$$
+ 1\{y_{is} \in (0, y_{is}^{SQ})\} log\left(f_u(y_{is} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta) F_v(y_{is}^{SQ} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta - u_{is} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma \mid u_{is}) \right)
$$

$$
+ 1\{y_{is} = y_{is}^{SQ}\} log\left(\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f(u_{is})(1 - F_v(|\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is} - y_{is}^{SQ}| - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma|u_{is})) du + f_u(y_{is}^{SQ} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta) F_v(-\mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma \mid u_{is}) \right)
$$

$$
+ 1\{y_{is} = 12\} log\left(\int_{12-\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta}^{\infty} f(u_{is})(F_v(\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta + u_{is} - y_{is}^{SQ} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma|u_{is})) du \right)
$$

$$
+ 1\{y_{is} = 0, SQ = eq\} log\left(\int_{-\infty}^{-\mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta} f(u_{is})(F_v(y_{is}^{SQ} - \mathbf{x}'_{is}\beta - u_{is} - \mathbf{z}'_{is}\gamma|u_{is})) du \right)
$$

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.[53] Additionally, the preference equation is assumed to depend

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[52]The likelihood function is reported in section 8.4

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

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 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.[54] 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** sce-

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[54]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.

nario, 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 2. Note, however, that the coefficient on Chinese x Status Quo sum (0.262) is significant at 0.1% and nearly identical to the coefficient on French x Status Quo sum (0.268).

Those results should be compared with those in Table 8.4, where the same preference equation was estimated without imposing a deviation cost of 0. The coefficient on Chinese x 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 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., 2021)). Thus, in line with previous results, comparing those two tables suggests that assuming no deviation cost conduces to seriously underestimating the Chinese merit premium. By contrast, the coefficient on Chinese x 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 x 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 influences Chinese respondents through status quo bunching, this effect is weaker among French respondents but the latter are influenced by the status quo in that shifting the initial split accordingly shifts the location of what French respondents consider desirable.

Table 8.4 reports the estimates of the deviation cost equation, estimated jointly with the preference equation reported in Table 8.4. 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 with-

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)

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)

out a private sector father, the median deviation cost is estimated to be 1.784. In turn, the coefficient on Chinese x 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 calculations 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 reports estimate for the preference and deviation cost equations estimated jointly when considering all scenarios.[55] Those tables corroborate the findings of Tables and . In the preference equation, almost all estimated Chinese merit premia are positive and significant – the only exception is the **inefficiency** scenario and 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%, corroborating 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 – 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.

---

[55]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.

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)

8.4.1 Simulated Loss Functions

Figure 8.12: Loss function for different parameter values (only luck and merit; no deviation cost)
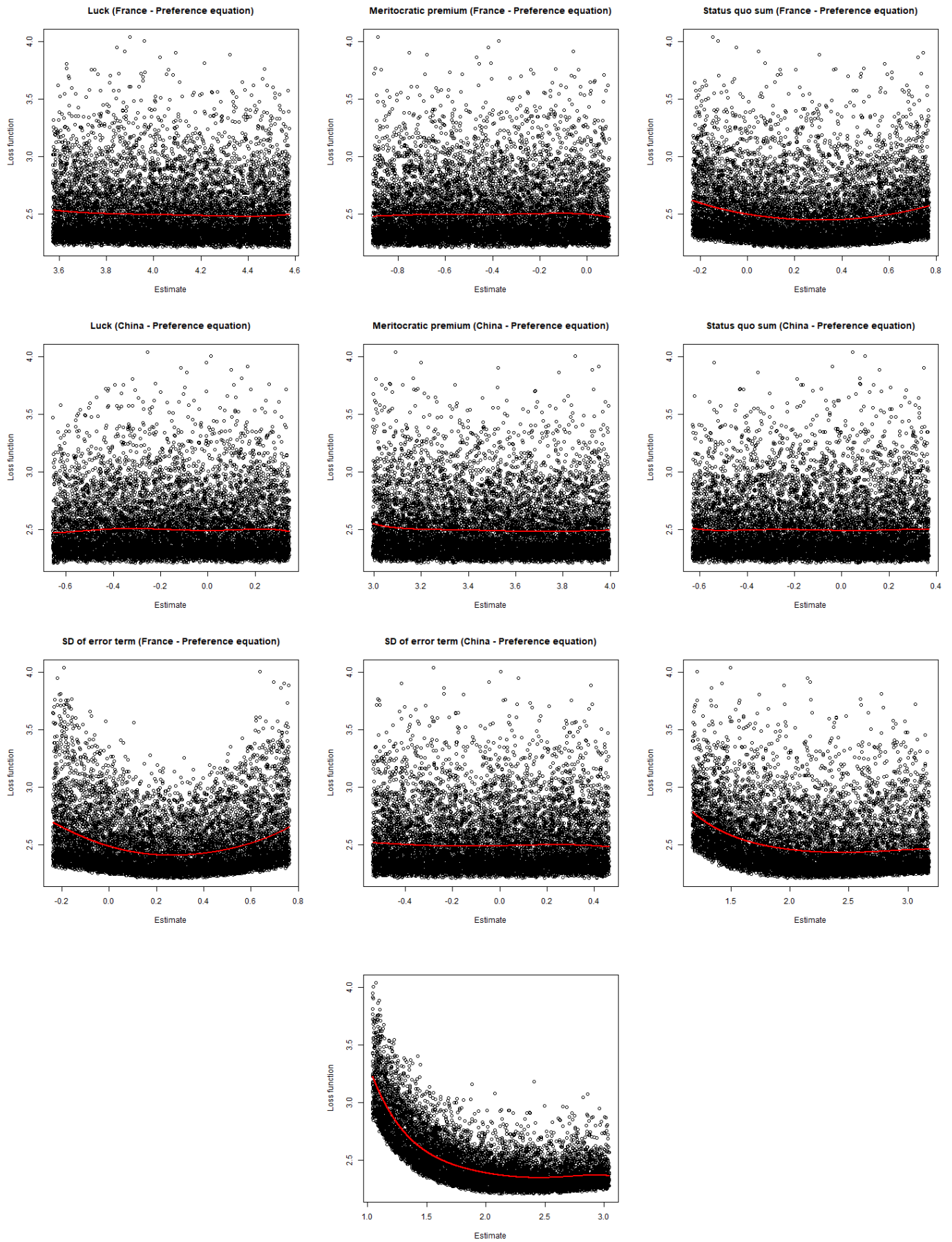
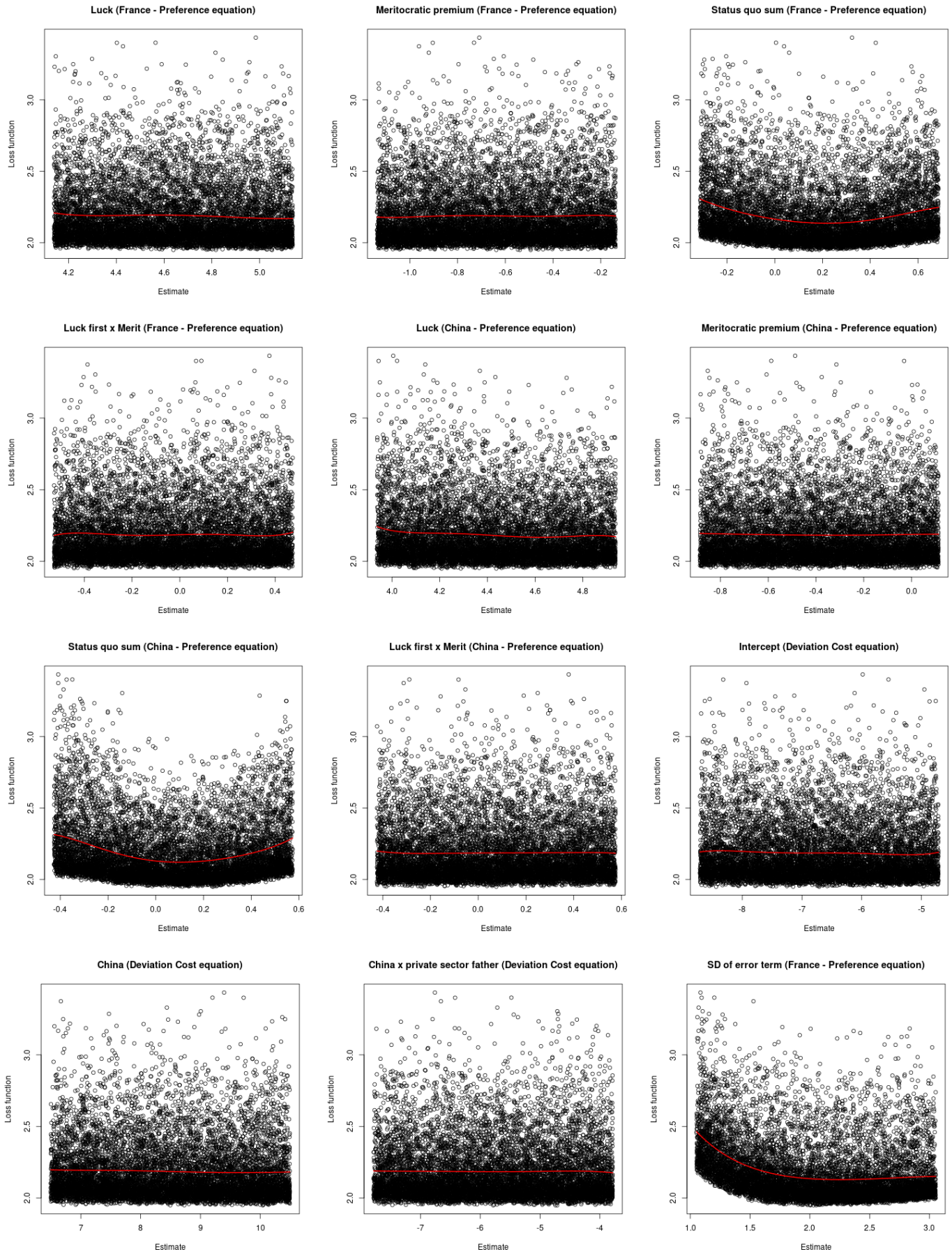Figure 8.13: Loss function for different parameter values (only luck and merit)

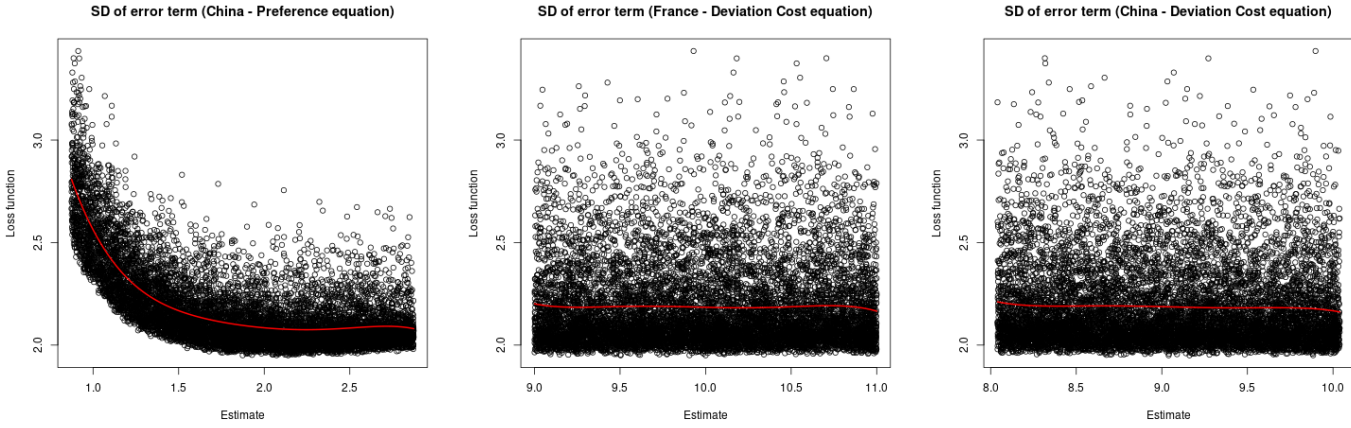Figure 8.14: Loss function for different parameter values (only luck and merit) cont.

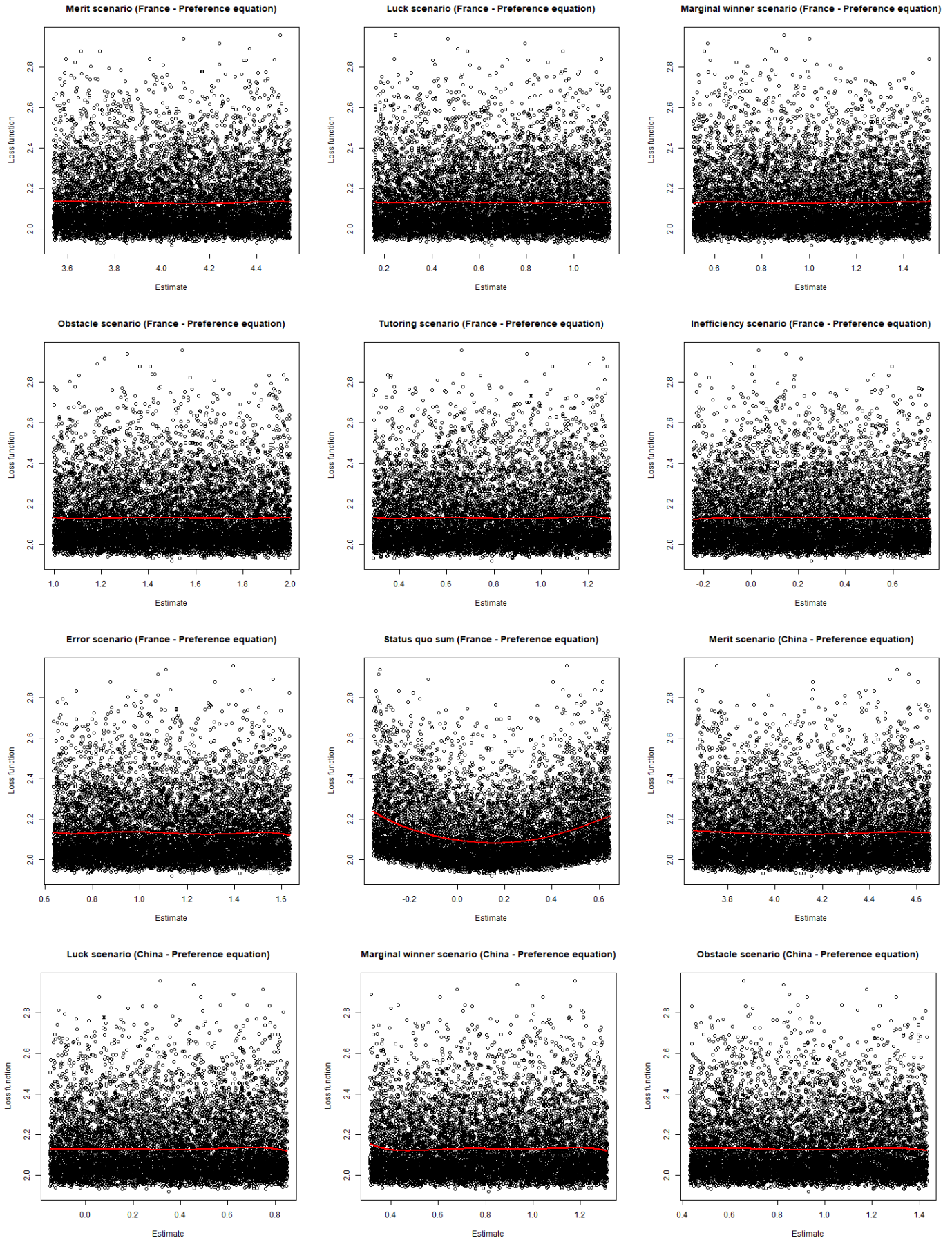Figure 8.15: Loss function for different parameter values (all scenarios considered)

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