

Frogs, Ponds, and Culture: Variations in Entry Decisions

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## Abstract

Would you rather be the *Big Frog in a Small Pond* or the *Small Frog in a Big Pond*? In three studies, we demonstrate that the entry preference depends on culture. Study 1 found a higher Big Pond preference for East Asian, versus European American, students. Study 2A and 2B replicated this Big Pond preference in behavioral intent across educational and organizational settings for Chinese, as compared to U.S., working adults. Study 3 demonstrated cultural variation in Frog-Pond decisions was not explained by comparison processes that characterize post-entry decisions, but rather by concerns for prestige. Together, findings highlight how a cultural lens informs psychological processes that shape entry decision-making.

*Keywords:* culture, decision-making, entry decision, frog-pond effect, social comparison

### Frogs, Ponds, and Culture: Variations in Entry Decisions

In *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell (2013) depicted a challenging decision high school senior Caroline Sacks faced: Would she go to the lower-ranked University of Maryland and stand out as a star student, or the higher-ranked Brown University, where she might flounder below-average? Beyond educational settings, people often find themselves at the crossroads of similar entry choices in various social contexts: Would they rather be the *Big Frog in a Small Pond*, or the *Small Frog in a Big Pond*?

There is no distinct rational choice to be made in such settings. Systematic patterns of beliefs and values afforded by one's sociocultural environment (Markus & Kitayama, 2010) and repeated engagements with one's cultural practice provide meaning to the constitution of self and action (Li, Masuda, & Russell, 2015). Together, they inform a culturally attuned *logic of appropriateness* (versus *rationality*; Kopelman, 2009; Kopelman et al., 2016), tacitly guiding decision processes in the context of Frog-Pond choice settings. Through a cross-cultural lens, we propose that one's entry decision to be the Big Frog in a Small Pond or the Small Frog in a Big Pond is not an arbitrary preference, rational choice, or individual tendency, but a decision process informed by culture.

#### **The Big Frog Advantage**

Research across cultures has demonstrated advantages of being the Big Frog in a Small Pond over being the Small Frog in a Big Pond (Seaton, Marsh, & Craven, 2009). Correlational and longitudinal studies consistently show that high performing students in less selective schools feel more competent, have higher grade point averages, and carry higher career aspirations than low-performing students in more selective schools (Marsh & Hau, 2003; Marsh, Kong, & Hau, 2000; Seaton & Craven, 2011). Laboratory studies corroborate these findings through

manipulation of performance feedback (Zell & Alicke, 2010): being the best out of an inferior group leads to higher self-evaluation than being the worst out of a superior group (Alicke, Zell, & Bloom, 2010).

Despite the benefits of being the Big Frog in a Small Pond, no psychological research has investigated how people arrive at Frog-Pond decisions in the first place. Although choosing to be the Big Frog appears to be the rational choice, economic studies found no clear Frog-Pond preference at the point of entry. In one study, 68% of people preferred to live in a less intelligent place where they have higher IQs than other residents; yet, this percentage varies from 80% to 18% across different situations (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). Although existing research has found a universal Big Frog advantage post-entry, what guides people's entry decisions likely relies upon cultural metatheories of how facets of the self are manifested in a priori choice settings (Kim & Drolet, 2009; Mourey, Oyserman, & Yoon, 2013). We thus argue that the underlying motivation of Frog-Pond choices is shaped by cultural contexts in which individuals inhabit, and the likelihood of making Frog-Pond choices would vary by culture.

### **Culture and Frog-Pond Entry Decisions**

#### **Intragroup versus Intergroup Comparison**

Why do people prefer being the Big Frog in a Small Pond? Some research suggests that people tend to rely on local, intragroup comparison to a greater extent than global, intergroup comparison in self-evaluation (Zell & Alicke, 2009). During intragroup comparison, people assess themselves with reference to ingroup others (e.g., "I am a Big Frog compared to others in my pond"). This comparison emphasizes the standing of the individual self, relative to others within the group. During intergroup comparison, people base self-conception on their social group (e.g., "I belong to a Big Pond relative to other ponds"). This comparison focuses on the

collective self and the evaluation of overall group status relative to that of other groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

It is possible that intragroup and intergroup comparisons may not only influence how people feel once in their Pond, but inform the entry decision process. From a cultural constructivist view, thoughts and actions are inseparable from the sociocultural worlds they inhabit (Weber & Morris, 2010). As differences in cultural values shape divergent schemas of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 2010), variations may arise in psychological functioning and comparison processes during decision-making. In Western cultures, such as the U.S., people focus on an individual self as a distinctive agent independent from others. In East Asian cultures, however, people are likely to attune to a collective self, embedded in its social group (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). Given their focus on the collective (versus individual) self, East Asians may rely on intergroup comparison more and intragroup comparison less than Westerners. As such, East Asians may be more likely to select the Big Pond at expense of being a Small Frog.

### **Internal versus External Aspects of Selfhood: The Role of Prestige**

Research on culture and decision-making sheds light on an alternative account underlying Frog-Pond decisions at the point of entry. Under the Western ethos of individualism, the self is reified through individual preferences, goals, and beliefs (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Guided by the metatheory of individualism, decision-making implicates *internal* attributes of the self, and choice reflects personal traits and values. As such, choice acts as a means of self-expression (Kim & Sherman, 2007), personal preference and autonomy (Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008), and intrinsic motivation (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999).

However, decision-making also involves *external* aspects of the self. Studies on collectivistic cultures suggest decision processes are socially informed and consensually

acknowledged (Hoshino-Browne et al., 2005; Kim & Markus, 1999; Savani et al., 2008). In line with the metatheory of collectivism, self-worth is derived from reflected appraisal rather than direct appraisal of the self; in turn, respect is gained upon social conferral (Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007; Kim, Cohen, & Au, 2010; Park et al., 2013). Rooted in a collectivistic cultural context, decision-processes would concern social consequences involving prestige—the degree of deference, respect, and admiration one receives from others. However, empirical social psychological research has not focused on prestige as a core construct in the interplay between culture and decision-making (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013). So far, only one cultural study of decision-making directly points to the central role of prestige in guiding choices: East Asians, motivated by prestige concerns, consistently prefer brand-name products over generic products compared to European Americans (Kim & Drolet, 2009). This prestige account suggests that under the metatheory of collectivism, East Asians would attune to external attributes of the self to a greater extent than internal agency or personal preference. Compared with Westerners, they may be tacitly motivated by higher concern for prestige, and in turn, be more likely to enter a Big Pond at the expense of being the Small Frog.

The Frog-Pond choice setting provides a novel ground for the examination of intra- and inter-group comparison as compared to prestige concerns in explaining decision-making processes across cultures. In this case, both the initial theory on intra- and inter-group comparison and the alternative account of prestige point to the higher likelihood for East Asians to choose the Big Pond compared with their Western counterparts, possibly via different psychological mechanisms. To be clear, we do not imply that East Asians do not want to be the Big Frog; nor do we contend being the Big Frog is the dominant preference for Westerners across situations. Rather, we hypothesize culture influences the likelihood to which the Big Pond

choice is pursued, because this choice may be socially constructed and more culturally appropriate in East Asian than Western cultures.

### **Overview of Studies**

We hypothesize that East Asians would be more inclined to choose being the Small Frog in a Big Pond than Westerners (U.S. European Americans). Study 1 assessed people's broad preference using an abstract metaphor paradigm. Studies 2A and 2B extended this entry preference to education and work settings. Study 3 examined divergent theoretical accounts of post-entry comparison and prestige concerns in explaining cultural variation. Study 3 also disentangled these accounts from additional local mechanisms.

### **Study 1**

We explored cultural variation in entry decision through an abstract metaphor paradigm to demonstrate an overarching cultural pattern in entry decisions not contingent upon specific domains. We hypothesized that, compared with European Americans, East Asian Americans would be more likely to choose the Big Pond.

### **Method**

We recruited 273 students (198 European American: 36.4% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.33$  years; 75 East Asian: 32.0% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.35$  years) from a large U.S. university.<sup>1</sup> We asked the university's registrar office to generate a random list of currently enrolled undergraduates and to email them about our study. Those who agreed to participate followed an online link to an anonymous survey page. Participants were presented with a binary choice of being—metaphorically speaking—the “Big Frog in a Small Pond” or the “Small Frog in a Big Pond”. They were asked to indicate which one they would generally prefer, and an open text question

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<sup>1</sup> See Supplementary Materials for sample size determination, demographic details, and exclusion criteria for all studies.

asked them to elaborate on their choice. To ensure adequate comprehension of the tradeoff in metaphoric terms, we asked how familiar participants were with the frog-pond metaphor (1 = *not at all familiar*, 7 = *very familiar*).

## Results

Participants across cultures reported familiarity with the frog-pond idiom ( $M_{\text{European American}} = 5.17$ ,  $SD_{\text{European American}} = 1.88$ ;  $M_{\text{East Asian}} = 4.40$ ,  $SD_{\text{East Asian}} = 2.27$ ), although this was more so for European Americans,  $t(271) = 2.84$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $d = .37$ . Open-ended responses did not reflect difficulty in comprehending the metaphorical choice framing. As predicted, East Asians were more likely (74.67%) than European Americans to choose being the Small Frog in a Big Pond (59.09%),  $\beta = .71$ ,  $p = .018$ , OR = 2.04, 95% CI = [1.13, 3.69]. For East Asians, entry choice was not driven by how long they have lived in the U.S.,  $\beta = -.08$ ,  $p = .116$ , OR = .92, 95% CI = [.83, 1.02]. In addition, cultural variation in entry choice was not explained by familiarity with the frog-pond metaphor: Even after controlling for difference in familiarity, culture remained a significant predictor of entry decision,  $\beta = .62$ ,  $p = .045$ , OR = 1.85, 95% CI = [1.01, 3.38].

Study 1 demonstrated a general inclination towards being the Small Frog in a Big Pond among East Asian Americans compared to European Americans. However, we have yet to show if this preference applies to concrete scenarios with practical implications. Further, it is not conclusive if this pattern would hold for an East Asian population with limited exposure to the American culture. In Study 2A and 2B, we recruited adult Chinese samples from Mainland China in comparison with U.S. adults to replicate and test our hypothesis in specific domains.

## Study 2A

Study 2 extended beyond general proclivity to behavioral intent in specific contexts

relevant to adults in the U.S. and China: education (Study 2A) and work (Study 2B). We recruited nationwide adult samples from the U.S. and mainland China, presenting them with an education [work] scenario that inquired whether they would prefer to attend [work for] a Top 10 College [Company] in which they would be below-average (i.e., Small Frog in a Big Pond), or a Top 100 College [Company] in which they would be above-average (i.e., Big Frog in a Small Pond). We hypothesized that, compared with U.S. European Americans, Chinese would be more inclined to select the Top 10/below-average choice (i.e., Small Frog in a Big Pond).

### **Method**

We recruited 103 U.S. European American (51.5% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.37$  years; Mechanical Turk) and 116 Chinese (54.3% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 24.65$  years; Zhubajie) adults nationwide.

Participants imagined a scenario in which they were to attend one of the following colleges: College A – a *National Top 10* college in which their academic performance would be *below-average*; or College B – a *National Top 100* college in which their academic performance would be *above-average*. Participants selected which college they would attend.

### **Results**

As hypothesized, Chinese were significantly more likely (57.76%) than European Americans (29.13%) to choose the National Top 10 college despite the implication of being below-average on academic performance,  $\beta = 1.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , OR = 3.33, 95% CI = [1.90, 5.84].

## **Study 2B**

### **Method**

We recruited 74 U.S. European American (62.2% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.15$  years) and 77 Chinese (46.8% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 25.35$  years) adults nationwide. Participants imagined a scenario in which they were to accept a job position at one of the following companies: Company A – a

*Global Top 10* company in which their work performance would be *below-average*; or Company B – a *Global Top 100* company in which their work performance would be *above-average*.

Participants selected which company they would work for.

## **Results**

Replicating Study 2A, Chinese (27.27%) were significantly more likely than European Americans (13.51%) to choose the Global Top 10 company,  $\beta = .88$ ,  $p = .040$ , OR = 2.40, 95% CI = [1.04, 5.53].

Together, Study 2A and 2B results supported our hypothesis that Chinese were more likely than U.S. European Americans to demonstrate a Small Frog in a Big Pond preference in educational and work settings. Next, we turned to examine mediating mechanisms underlying this cultural variation in entry decisions.

## **Study 3**

Study 3 sought to understand the motivation underlying cultural variation in entry decisions. Our initial theoretical account assumed that intra- and inter-group comparison underlying self-regard post-entry would spill over to the entry decision process. As such, Chinese, compared with U.S. European Americans, would focus more on intergroup comparison and less on intragroup comparison, and hence be more likely to choose to be the Small Frog in a Big Pond. Alternatively, entry decision processes may diverge from post-entry comparison mechanisms, and reflect the varying degree to which the external (versus internal) aspect of the cultural self is manifested. Given a greater emphasis on the external self in East Asian cultures, Chinese adults may have higher concern for prestige than U.S. European American adults, and concern for prestige may fuel the tendency to prefer being in a Big Pond even at the expense of being the Small Frog. Study 3 also sought to rule out local mechanisms constrained to the

scenario context, such as concern for grades and school status.

### **Method**

We recruited 150 U.S. European American (56.7% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.33$  years; Mechanical Turk) and 95 Chinese (46.3% male,  $M_{\text{age}} = 24.28$  years; Zhubajie) adults nationwide.

**Entry decision.** Participants indicated their college entry preference similar to Study 2A, and completed the measures below in randomized order.

**Intragroup and intergroup comparison.** The 6-item ability subscale of the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) assessed the extent to which people compare themselves with others (e.g., “I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life”;  $\alpha_{\text{European American}} = .93$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Chinese}} = .81$ ). This measure is commonly used as a proxy for intragroup comparison in frog-pond contexts, given that the form of social comparison people make is in reference to others within their local group rather than a general other in the broader population, even when multiple comparison standards are available (*local dominance effect*: Zell & Alicke, 2009; Zell & Alicke, 2010). The same comparison items were adapted to measure how people compare their group with other groups, or intergroup comparison (e.g., “I often compare my group with other groups with respect to what my group has accomplished”;  $\alpha_{\text{European American}} = .94$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Chinese}} = .73$ ; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Concern for prestige.** The 7-item status aspiration subscale of the Achievement Motivation Scale (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989) was used to assess concern for prestige (see Maner & Mead, 2010 for similar adaptation; e.g., “I would like an important job where people look up to me”;  $\alpha_{\text{European American}} = .90$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Chinese}} = .81$ ; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Concern for grades.** Five items adapted from the Motivated Strategies for Learning

Questionnaire (Pintrich, Smith, García, & McKeachie, 1993) assessed and controlled for concern for grades (e.g., “As a student, it is very important for me to get good grades”;  $\alpha_{\text{European American}} = .85$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Chinese}} = .87$ ; 1 = *not at all true of me*, 5 = *very true of me*).

**Concern for School Status.** Four items adapted from the School Status Scale (Marsh et al., 2000) assessed and controlled for concern for school status (e.g., “When at school, it is important that my school has a good reputation”;  $\alpha_{\text{European American}} = .90$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{Chinese}} = .85$ ; 1 = *false*, 6 = *true*).

## Results

**Entry decision.** Replicating Study 2A, Chinese (53.68%) were more likely than European Americans (16.00%) to choose the National Top 10 college,  $\beta = 1.81$ ,  $p < .001$ , OR = 6.09, 95% CI = [3.36, 11.03].

**Intragroup and intergroup comparison.** Chinese reported higher intergroup comparison ( $M_{\text{Chinese}} = 3.41$ ,  $SE_{\text{Chinese}} = .06$ ) than European Americans ( $M_{\text{European American}} = 2.78$ ,  $SE_{\text{European American}} = .09$ ),  $t(237.56) = 6.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .74$ . However, contrary to our initial prediction, Chinese also reported engaging in intragroup comparison more ( $M_{\text{Chinese}} = 3.40$ ,  $SE_{\text{Chinese}} = .07$ ;  $M_{\text{European American}} = 2.96$ ,  $SE_{\text{European American}} = .09$ ),  $t(242.15) = 4.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .50$ . Further, comparison mechanisms that typically underlie self-evaluation post-entry did not constitute motivational processes during entry decision-making. Neither intragroup (indirect effect = .04, 95% CI = [-.15, .22]) nor intergroup comparison (indirect effect = .12, 95% CI = [-.10, .41]; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) mediated the effect of culture on entry decision.

**Concern for prestige.** In line with the alternative theoretical account, Chinese reported greater concern for prestige ( $M_{\text{Chinese}} = 3.70$ ;  $SE_{\text{Chinese}} = .06$ ) than European Americans ( $M_{\text{European American}} = 3.13$ ,  $SE_{\text{European American}} = .07$ ),  $t(242.77) = 6.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .77$ . Furthermore, prestige

significantly mediated the relationship between culture and entry decision (Figure 1: indirect effect = .34, 95% CI = [.12, .65]). Chinese had higher concern for prestige ( $b = .57, p < .001$ ) than European Americans; in turn, concern for prestige was positively associated with choosing to be the Small Frog in a Big Pond ( $b = .60, p = .008$ ).

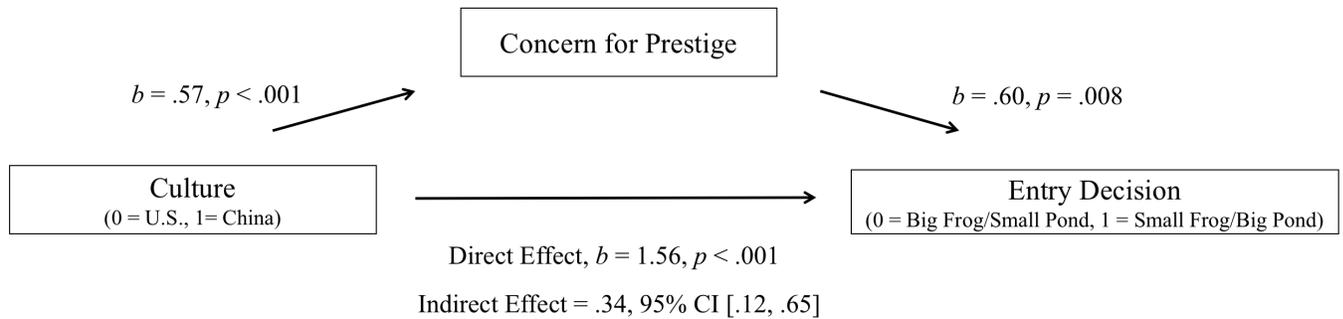


Figure 1. Simple mediation model for the effect of culture on entry decision via concern for prestige (Study 3).

**Concern for grades and school status.** Chinese did not differ from European Americans in concern for grades ( $M_{\text{Chinese}} = 5.50, SE_{\text{Chinese}} = .11; M_{\text{European American}} = 5.47, SE_{\text{European American}} = .10$ ),  $t(243) = .16, p > .25, d = .03$ . However, Chinese had higher concern for school status ( $M_{\text{Chinese}} = 4.84; SE_{\text{Chinese}} = .08; M_{\text{European American}} = 4.43, SE_{\text{European American}} = .08$ ),  $t(243) = 3.41, p = .001, d = .46$ ). Simple mediation established concern for school status as an underlying mechanism (indirect effect = .17, 95% CI = [.03, .43]), such that Chinese valued school status more ( $b = .41, p < .001$ ), which drove the Small Frog/Big Pond choice ( $b = .41, p = .026$ ). However, when entered into the mediation model simultaneously, mediation through the local mechanism *concern for school status* was non-significant (indirect effect = .11, 95% CI = [-.02, .34]), while mediation through the global mechanism *concern for prestige* was significant

(indirect effect = .28, 95% CI = [.03, .58]).

Thus, Study 3 replicated cultural variation in previous studies and shed light on what motivated participants' entry preference. Contrary to our initial theoretical account, the decision to be the Small Frog in the Big Pond was not driven by intra- or inter-group comparison—mechanisms previous research demonstrated to illuminate post-entry self-regard or self-evaluation. Rather, variation in entry preference was fueled by higher concern for prestige, even when controlling for differences in local mechanisms such as concern for school status.

### **Discussion**

One cannot fully understand the Frog-Pond entry decision process without a cultural lens. Our findings demonstrate that the choice to be the Small Frog in a Big Pond over being the Big Frog in a Small Pond is more likely among people from East Asian versus U.S. European American cultural backgrounds. Study 1 demonstrated a higher Big Pond preference among East Asian American students as an overarching inclination not contingent upon specific situations. Study 2 replicated this to behavioral intent scenarios in education and work among Chinese and U.S. European American working adults. Study 3 disentangled theoretical mechanisms underlying cultural variation, pointing to concern for prestige as undergirding Frog-Pond decisions, rather than intra- and inter-group comparison or local mechanisms (concern for grades or school status) constrained to the education scenario.

Our findings underscore the importance of adopting a culturally attuned *logic of appropriateness* versus a logic of rationality (Kopelman, 2009; Kopelman et. al., 2016) and studying Frog-Pond decision-making in a culturally contextual framework (Gelfand & Dyer, 2000). A culturally informed appropriateness framework theoretically accounts for psychological factors such as identity (e.g., external versus internal aspects of selfhood), how people recognize

attributes of the situation (e.g., tradeoffs between being in a Big Pond and being the Big Frog), and what decision rules come into play (e.g., the role of prestige in Frog-Pond decisions). Our results support the account that external aspects of selfhood may be ascribed more cultural meaning for East Asians. Indeed, they held higher concern for prestige in making Frog-Pond decisions. These findings are consistent with a social consensus (versus personal belief) account (Park et al., 2013; Zou et al., 2009), in that social recognition and cultural conferral constitute the collective self and guide subsequent thoughts and actions. This extends cultural research on the independence-interdependence dimension (Markus & Kitayama, 2010) to status-applicable domains. Although both cultures may realize the advantages of being the Big Frog, the greater shift towards choosing the Big Pond prior to entry was motivated by what was culturally appropriate.

Although we originally hypothesized that cross-cultural intra- and inter-group comparisons would explain entry decisions, our results suggest that concern for prestige explains cultural variation in this context. These results bring important implications for bridging the Frog-Pond literature (Marsh, Abduljabbar, Morin, Parker, & Nagengast, 2015) and cross-cultural frameworks on social identity theory (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Yuki, 2003). Pan-cultural Frog-Pond perspectives maintain that East Asians tend to focus on intragroup comparison (Marsh et al., 2000), thereby feeling less competent as the Small Frog in a Big Pond post-entry despite equal level of absolute competence. This is consistent with cross-cultural perspectives on social identity theory, supporting a stronger intragroup focus among East Asians (Falk, Heine, & Takemura, 2013; Yuki, 2005). However, other conceptualization of cultural schemas—from which our initial prediction was derived—suggests a more distinct intergroup demarcation among collectivists (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Our empirical findings on intragroup comparison

buttress the first view, that East Asians engage in intragroup social comparison to a greater extent than Westerners. This contributes to the emerging literature on within-group comparison, which dispels the intuition of less social comparison due to collectivistic values (Sasaki, Ko, & Kim, 2014). Instead, growing research demonstrates greater upward and downward social comparison seeking among East Asians (versus North Americans; Chung & Mallery, 1999; White & Lehman, 2005), more focus on relative comparison than absolute gain among Koreans (versus U.S. Americans; Kang, Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2013), and heavier emphasis on local than global status in Japan (versus the U.S.; Curhan et al., 2014). Broadly, this does not necessitate that East Asians engage in less intergroup comparison than Westerners. In fact, when assessed separately, East Asians also reported higher tendency to engage in more intergroup comparison than European Americans (Study 3). It is rather that in specific post-entry settings, where intragroup and intergroup motives are pitted against each other, intragroup comparison appears to prevail.

Our intra- and inter-group comparison findings also demonstrate that although they may be key in explaining post-entry self-regard, they do not mediate cultural variation in entry decisions. Philosophers have long cautioned against the possibility of reaching the right conclusion with a specious rationale (Gettier, 1963). Indeed, although our findings did evince a high likelihood of choosing the Big Pond among East Asians—a decision preference that could be driven by intragroup and intergroup comparison—such mechanisms, albeit intuitive, failed to explain the entry decision process. That is, people may engage in intragroup and intergroup comparison in the process of self-evaluation and affective regard once situated in the competition environment (Zell & Alicke, 2009). However, interpersonal relations and group belonging—upon which intragroup and intergroup comparison are predicated—are established, experienced,

and repeatedly engaged with only after entering the competition environment. By disentangling post-entry comparison mechanisms from a priori decision mechanisms, we empirically distinguish our inquiry from prior Frog-Pond research, which focused on how people feel *after* they entered the pond (Marsh & Hau, 2003; Seaton & Craven, 2011). To summarize, comparison processes governing post-entry affect did not explain cultural variation at the point of entry; rather, concern for prestige mediated entry variation, dovetailing the burgeoning literature on key roles of culture and prestige in decision-making (Cheng et al., 2013; Kim & Drolet, 2009).

In closing, one might draw broader inferences that if being the Big Frog carries post-entry benefits across cultures, East Asians in particular might not be making the *rational* decision by focusing on prestige and choosing the Big Pond. However, we propose and find that Frog-Pond entry decision cannot be viewed through a rational or universal lens, but by attributes of the self that align with a culturally informed logic of appropriateness (Kopelman, 2009; Kopelman et al., 2016). Although it is a well-known English adage that “it is better to be the big frog in a small pond than the small frog in a big pond”, similar aphorisms abound across cultures (“it is better to be the head of a chicken than the tail of a phoenix”; Carlsson & Qin, 2010) and yet co-exist with beliefs recognizing “it is better to be the tail of a dragon than the head of snake” (Seaton et al., 2009). When it comes to decision-making, our analysis mirrors the myriad of adages and suggests not one *right* choice. Rather, we offer a way to unravel the intricate entry decision process and argue that one’s Frog-Pond choice is culturally informed.

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