

Global esports

Transformation of Cultural Perceptions of Competitive Gaming

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Esports

A Chinese Sport?

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Introduction

In 2016, Foreign policy (Liu, 2016) published an article titled “China Rules Esports.” China was held up as an example of esports developments in terms of codification, legalization, the development of infrastructure, and the size of its fan base. Three years later in 2019 an esports report by Newzoo stated that China is set to become the second largest esports market, boasting \$210 million in revenue and leading the world in the number of esports fans and viewers (Pannekeet, 2019). Does China indeed rule esports as this article states? This chapter will discuss whether China can become the global leader for esports, it argues that while China is well set up to benefit from the esports boom it still faces many challenges with regard to truly creating an esports environment that is globally enabled and not only concerned with the domestic market. We will provide an overview of the Chinese perspectives on esports to argue that while China is a strong player in terms of numbers (i.e., population and investment size), its actual influence is constrained by typical factors such as the isolation of its community, the lack of export of its domestic video games, and the tension that exists between the governments need for information control and a global sport that traverses borders.

This chapter will trace the recent development of esports in China. Esports for China is uniquely situated as it can capitalize on a culture of esports existing within the country. Unlike football, an already fully developed global sport on which the government has set its eyes on, esports is still in its infancy allowing the Chinese government to stake their claim as the sport is still in its early days. By moving fast in this field esports can not only contribute to the economy but also project an image of China as a digital, capable, and competitive nation. For China to truly solidify its image as an esports hegemon, however, there are several obstacles which will become apparent in the chapter.

We start with outlining esports in China, after which current issues of esports development in China will be discussed. We then go to some of the growing pains that China experiences in developing a global esports industry in a country whose internet is defined by the degree of government control. In an authoritarian country like China,

private and public organization of gaming can only operate with the support or consent of the government. We will touch upon the issue of internet addiction and esports, the former seen by the government as a major public health risk (Jiang, 2014) while the latter has been imbued with ideas of glory, optimism, and (economic) growth. Finally, in the conclusion we argue that reputation management and domestic innovation might form bigger challenges than those of infrastructure, as managing the intangible aspects of the esports industry might prove harder to be overcome. China might rule esports in terms of pure numbers but growing a foreign, global fan base will prove to be difficult given the current circumstances.

Esports as Opportunity

The Chinese government, following in the footsteps of South Korea has arrived early on the scene in esports. Esports was recognized by the government as an official sport in 2003 by the General Administration of Sports which in 2010 started to host national and international esports competitions and in 2015 it recruited its first national esports team.

The word for esports in the Chinese academic and government discourse is opportunity. It is an industry that went from around \$200 million in revenue in 2014 to more than a billion today with an audience of around 500 million people, and an annual growth of more than 10 percent being the norm rather than the exception (Newzoo, 2020). How to capture, develop, and exploit this market has been a source of discussion among Chinese academics since the late 1990s. Esports can boost China’s digital economy and the question of which policies might make it bloom has been a fierce source of discussion (Tian, 2000).

Esports is regarded as a golden goose with near unlimited growth potential and an industry in which China cannot lag behind others (Lei and Xia, 2005). It can boost the economy in a time where the digital economy is receiving much attention from the government (Yu, 2018), and could invigorate its cultural policy by using tournaments as opportunities for city and nation brand building using esports as a form of public diplomacy. The idea is that one simply builds the infrastructure and the tournaments, and tourists and money will start pouring in (Tian, 2000; Liu and Zhu, 2007). As an industry it not only provides work for more skilled labor in terms of technical staff, marketing of events, and event creation and management but also contributes to side industries such as tourism and hospitality. The need for esports to have a fast and stable internet would be a boom for other (creative) industries that benefit from fast internet. As tournaments can last for multiple days, the increase in tourism and city marketing can also be a large boon to the local economy. Especially for areas in which higher quality jobs are in demand, esports is purportedly set up to be a relatively easy method to create new jobs. In contrast to regular sports the ingredients for all esports are the same, fast, and stable internet, a large screen, and a suitable viewing environment which means that a one-size-fits-all approach is particularly suitable. In addition, its potential as a spectacle can boost nationalist and empowerment narratives among a young, male audience which has been framed as disillusioned and cynical (Rosen, 2009).

An audience for which traditional forms of nationalism might appear outdated or worthy of parody. Stimulating grassroots forms of nationalism through esports can serve to further embed narratives of the (nationalist) state (Ismangil, 2018).

As the Chinese government has been touting its “from made in China to created in China” plans now for more than a decade (Keane, 2006) esports would give it a much needed jolt and provide global Chinese representation in an industry that provides both economic opportunities and a new way for China to show off its digital capabilities and dazzle global and domestic audience with its esports spectacles.

Government, Industry, Media

In Chinese traditional (or older) media esports is something of a novelty. In this regard it is similar to other countries where it might only appear in extraordinary cases. One such case is the 2016 international victory by Wings gaming, a team consisting of five mainland Chinese players that won the, at the time, largest first prize in history (\$9.1 million). This was reported on by government outlets such as *China Daily*, *CGTN*, as well as other international and domestic outlets. Esports is separated by both the media and the government from the discourse of internet and video game addiction: for example by praising “Chinese victories” when a team wins, or by using esports to “promote Chinese culture” (China Daily, 2019). To quote the (English) news articles about Wings gaming: “thanks to strong government support and a flood of investment in the gaming industry, Chinese eSports teams can now access the best equipment and coaches.” The story of esports is similar to that of the economy in its ties to optimism and growth. More recently in 2018, when the Chinese organization Invictus gaming won the *League of Legends* world championship *Guangming Daily* framed it as an alternate path toward the national sports dream (GuangMing Daily, 2018; Liao, 2018). A sports dream that is becoming recognized, as Chinese national esports teams are already a reality (Sina, 2015).

In esports the focus of the Chinese policy makers is on the end product of esports as a fully formed sport with athletes who have been recruited and trained by professional teams and organizations, ignoring the thousands if not millions of aspiring esports professionals¹ who grind their respective video game daily in order to achieve their dream of becoming renowned esports athlete. In China esports is growth, opportunity, and a chance for a younger generation to give meaning to their own type of Chinese dream. The development of esports in China is not a centralized affair as local government plays a large role in organizing esports events. Cities or provinces such as Shanghai, Chongqing, Hangzhou, and Zhuhai, to name the major ones, all put in bids to host international annual events for multiple tournaments and are actively developing infrastructure for (international) events. Large investments and the largest esports fan base in the world provide it with a strong base from which to create a domestic esports industry with international aspirations (Pannekeet, 2019). In 2018 Hangzhou received worldwide attention as it opened its “esports town,” comparable to a university campus but solely focused on esports, including facilities such as training sites for esports

teams, esports stadiums, hotels a esports academy (Hangzhou government, 2018; *People's Daily*, 2018b). Hangzhou will host the 2022 Asian games (Fitch, 2018), of which esports are slated to be an official component. It is also host to PSG.LGD's² *League of Legends* team, one of China's most well-known teams. Other regions such as in Beijing a \$1.5 million fund has been created to stimulate the development of local esports businesses (Chen, 2019).

Aside from Hangzhou another up and coming esports city is Shanghai, whose esports plan falls more in line with a general restructuring of the economy as part of transforming the economy from a manufacturing to a service one (Jing, 2018; Ashton, 2018). In cooperation with Tencent, the city is investing in a major esports park which is meant to house hundreds of different companies relating to game development, tournament organization but also education, animation, and other industries that do not directly relate to esports. Shanghai already has a strong tradition of hosting esports tournaments in for example the repurposed Mercedes Benz Arena,³ which will also host the upcoming International 2019, slated to be one of the highest prize pool tournaments in esports history. An article published by Sixth Tone in 2018 notes that Shanghai is plotting to be the “world's eSports capital,” citing a strong culture of gaming, good infrastructure and a cooperative and willing government that could set up Shanghai as the world's esports hub. Shanghai is already host to several esports teams (Vici Gaming, CDEC, PSG-LGD, OMG Esports) and in combination with their status as a world city and international allure might just succeed in marketing itself as Asia's if not the world's esports capital.

As esports is growing it is capturing the attention of many different companies, some content with simply sponsoring esports teams and others even going as far as creating their own branded esports teams. Of the companies investing in esports Tencent is by far the most important one. It is a dominant player on the market and their size is hard to overstate, as they branch out from video game properties, development, streaming services, esports developments, not to mention hosting its own video game service platform (Wegame).

Tencent therefore is able to control most aspects of the esports experience in China. From the esports game in question down to the streaming platform as it is a major stakeholder in some of the most popular Chinese streaming services available (e.g., Douyu and Huya (Huang, 2019)). Tencent through acquisitions owns *League of Legends*, one of the most popular (esports) games in the world. Tencent is not the only major player as other companies such as Alibaba, NetEase, and others are all investing in esports. The popular video streaming website Bilibili and Suning, a major retail company, both own esports teams for example (iResearch, 2018).

The picture might not be as rosy as described, however. The question is as to what extent the Chinese government is open in creating a global esports culture within China. Due to its habit of strictly controlling the information environment of its citizens and the particularities of the “Chinese internet,” it seems more apparent that the government opts for a two-way strategy: on the one hand, catering to the international market, while on the other hand, providing for its domestic one. This “Chinese internet” (Yang, 2011) allows the government better control of content as

domestically operated and owned websites, in theory it should be easier to control than foreign ones. China has separate streaming websites, separate forums and esports communities, news sites, and so on leading to a segregated audience which puts into question to what regard the government wants it to be international. Rather it seems China is being framed as a spectacle (Szablewicz, 2016) for foreign observers to dazzle at, while the domestic market is strictly controlled. A spectacle which serves the domestic audience in terms of nationalism and a foreign one with narratives of China's rise. Information control and its consequences for esports will be discussed next.

“Chinese” Internet and Global Esports: Managing Domestic Information Flows

Scholz in *Esports Is Business* characterizes esports as “born digital, born global, and born agile” (Scholz, 2019). Esports has grown up amid global flows of information in an industry that is quick to change and innovate toward consumer demands. This section discusses the issues China faces in juggling an environment where information is highly controlled by the government with an industry that is “digital, global, and agile.”

Integrating the online watching environment would mean exposing the domestic Chinese audience to a barrage of information which will prove hard to filter in-real time. Being familiar with Twitch culture for example, it is almost certain that non-Chinese audiences would spam items that are extremely sensitive to the Chinese government such as those relating to the Tiananmen movement, independence of Taiwan and Hong Kong, and other matters. In the case that such a controlled digital environment is possible then it might do more harm than good as China's reputation would drop due to the frustration fans would feel in being unable to have a full range of expression. Lastly and perhaps most importantly it also makes economic sense to maintain two separate products as the mandarin-speaking market is the largest one next to the English-speaking one. Catering to these two makes businesses sense and as a side effect solves any tricky issues of information control.

Another major point of contention is the fact that most if not at all internationally popular esports games are created and maintained by non-Chinese studios. Even Tencent's *League of Legends* is maintained by Riot Games which operates in the United States. This means that if China wishes to grow its international esports it is by proxy promoting foreign content which it might not always agree with. It undermines the nationalist narrative and plays into stereotypes of an uncreative China, one who can only gain success in its domestic esports games by acquiring or copying existing (foreign) games. This is problematized by the tensions that exist between various government institutions. In 2019 the mobile version of the global hit *Player's Unknown Battlegrounds* (*PUBG*), seen as a major up-and-coming esports game, was promptly banned in China and replaced with a copycat called *Game for Peace*, developed by Tencent (Reuters, 2019). A major reason for this change was monetization, as Tencent

was unable to apply for a license to monetize the game leading it to release their own sanitized version.⁴ This form of protectionism under the guise of protecting the public morals draws makes the development of esports games with violent content difficult as arbitrary intervention by the government is a constant threat. The fact that a game, of which its developer is heavily investing in esports can be barred from one of the largest esports markets highlights the tensions between esports promotion and the Chinese information control apparatus. Another game is *Fortnite*, which exploded in popularity in 2018, but like *PUBG* enjoys uncertain status in China due to government scrutiny. These two games are not isolated cases. In 2018 an internal document was leaked (Sina Technology, 2018) which gave censorship guidelines for twenty popular video games that ranged from “withdraw” to “corrective” actions, with reasons such as “vulgar content,” “inharmonious chat,” or “too revealing women.” This list made the rounds among English esports media as a ban would have ramifications for the global developments of the respective esports communities (Fox Sports, 2018). News like this as well as tournaments which are organized improperly continuously fuel negative stereotypes about China and undermine the government project of image management toward an international audience, which will be discussed later. The tension between a global creative endeavor such as esports and operating within a strict authoritarian environment is difficult to solve (Keane, 2006). If it truly wishes to be a global player then the ruleset regarding which video games are allowed must be clear. Otherwise China is left out of a large number of esports games. This brings with it a risk of isolation where it might only end up participating in esports games which enjoy circulation mostly China. *Honor of Kings*, or *Arena of Valor* as the English version is called, is another example that shows the difficulties of Chinese games in breaking through into the international market and developing its esports component while also dealing with government control. This game, by and large a mobile version of *League of Legends* has, was criticized by the government for being a negative influence termed toxic and a harm for teenagers, with Tencent having to limit young players time in the game. On the other hand, the game was featured in the 2018 Asian Games and the Chinese national team was given a feature in an issue of *People's Daily* (*People's Daily*, 2018a). Of note here is the complicated discourse China has with internet and video game addiction. There is a natural tension where the government promotes esports on the one hand while “fighting” addictive behaviors on the other hand (Szablewicz, 2011; Yue, 2018). To become a professional esports player, however, one has to first become good enough, which naturally involves hours and hours of playing video games and being online. As there are still few institutionalized methods in terms of becoming professional (e.g., talent scouting), the reality is that for many players becoming noticed and potentially being recruited into a team means playing video games as a fulltime job. However, like traditional sports only a few are able to perform at the top level, meaning that many (mostly young males) would see their efforts are in vain.

Aside from information control an oft touted issue is the clash between the promotion of esports on the one hand and China's firm position on (online) video game and internet addiction on the other hand. The tension between the Chinese government firm stance toward internet addiction, and the fostering of what they see

as productive internet activities and esports which requires large time investments in playing video games will be discussed in the following section.

Esports, Addiction, and the Narrative of Growth

The dividing line between diehard esports gamers and prospective professionals is one that appears difficult to distinguish. While in English academia the contradictions between China's discourse of internet addiction and esports are frequently made (e.g., Synder, 2018; Szablewicz, 2011; Yue, 2018; Yu, 2018) this does not exist according to the government. In fact esports is construed as a part of the solution as it channels (young) people's energy into "positive" outlets in terms of consumer nationalism and spending. Szablewicz (2011, 2016) for example discussing the development of esports in China states that esports serves as a viable alternative to the discourse of internet addiction for the Chinese government. Esports form part of the "Chinese dream" (Liu, 2016), in which Chinese people through hard work and talent gather wealth and (inter)national fame. It is characterized as a "civilized" form of gaming which, if successful, can lead to serving one's country as a representative athlete. Esports is used as a spectacle through which cities (governments) (re)brand themselves as modern, hybrid, and capable (Szablewicz, 2016). Reports of the creation of esports hotels, stadiums, and other infrastructure all serve to create a narrative of growth underlying the supposed unstoppable momentum of China's global rise. While internet and video game addiction conjures up images of loneliness, esports rejects this image as it focuses on community elements and the spirit of participation. While in reality there might not be much difference on the outside for most (would be) esports athletes with the average internet café enthusiast there is a qualitative difference as one presumably contributes to a profession while (internet) video game addiction on the other is framed as a dangerous activity classified as harmful and unproductive (see also Lu, 2016). The government frames esports as having economic and social benefits while in contrast internet, or (online) video game, addiction is paired with loneliness and unproductiveness (Liu, 2016). Esports is a space of opportunity, growth, and hope and dreams (Cheong, 2019). Academic articles in Chinese are in general concerned with the challenges and opportunities for this new industry. It is a site of opportunity for which a new (legal, economical) framework has to be created (e.g., Cui, 2006; Dai and Hu, 2013; Gao, Zhao and Du, 2015, Liu, 2010). Only recently have esports investors become wary of the over-optimism and bubbling esports market as a report came out that 90 percent of the esports teams supported by angel investors faced serious financial problems (Sing Tao Daily, 2019).

This attitude is exemplified in a piece published by *China Global Times* about five traditional athletes that tried esports. Titled "Five Chinese Sports Champions Try League of Legends, Praising Esports," different sports heroes are used to legitimize esports as a activity worth doing, to quote: "I felt this is a healthy sport instead of video game addiction" (Zhe, 2018). If one is pursuing esports, one is supporting one's

country economically and emotionally, it is an activity that is promoted as a "healthy alternative to harmful internet games" (Szablewicz, 2011, 264). Another example of this discursive reframing of esports is a *China Daily* piece titled "Time to End Prejudice against Esports" (Zhang, 2018).

This move from unproductive internet addiction to sites of productivity can be seen in how internet cafés have dealt with a scrutinizing government. Internet cafés in China are using esports to rebrand themselves. Linked to internet addiction and wasting time before many internet cafés are now rebranding themselves as hip offline esports sites, meant as places where the next generation of China's esports athletes can meet and train together (Economic Daily, 2018). Emphasizing the social, productive role of esports allows companies to follow the government's narrative and benefit from beneficial policies and subsidies. From isolated to social, online to offline, and inside to outside as companies are organizing esports camps meant as a kind of team building environment combining typical (summer) camp outdoor activities (usually to build teamwork) with esports elements.

In this regard it makes sense to separate them from each other. This might be regarded as contradictory, as it could be argued for example that esports fandom will fuel more video game addiction in young people who desire to become the next esports superstar. As Nielsen and Karhulati (2018) conclude in a discussion of "internet gaming disorder" and esports: "dedication might be mistaken for addiction." Administratively it makes sense to separate these issues as one relates to the growth and subsequent exploitation of a new industry while the other falls under health and social issues. Having discussed the current trends in Chinese esports we now turn to the future. Which challenges does China face in its desire to become the global esports leader. In particular we discuss esports as public diplomacy and the difficulties China has in exporting its own "Chinese" esports games.

Into the Future

As Pun, Yin, and Fung (2019) have emphasized, with the changing cultural policy of China, and hence the public discourse, the public perception of esports has changed from a form of "digital heroin harming the lives of youth" to "a professional avenue with a bright future." The year 2018 was a milestone for esports as the Chinese authorities have changed their policy from suppressing to supporting the industries (Sigmaintell, 2018). Local authorities and companies are investing large sums of money into creating a physical space for esports in major regions in China. The Chinese government declared its intentions to develop esports in the twenty-seventh article of "Notice on Printing and Distributing the Action Plan for Promoting Consumption to Transform and Upgrade in 2016" (Government of China, 2016) did the situation improve. Creating this legal and public framework for esports competition is important as clear guidelines from the government create clarity for new investors willing to join the industry. For China to become the world leading esports country there are several hurdles that

have to be overcome. First there is the issue of reputation management as Chinese esports tournaments, at least in several video game communities, have acquired a bad reputation due to its (mis)management of large esports events. Nationalism also plays a factor in how China balances the domestic and international reputation of its esports communities. Second there is the general development of infrastructure and expertise in terms of tournament management. For the latter point investment should solve this issue but the question remains if a consistent quality of spectacle can be produced in the many cities in China that have esports aspirations. Inconsistent quality across Chinese cities might have a blanket effect on Chinese reputation as a whole. Third, as discussed there is the issue of information management in an authoritarian country and the by and large online separation of the domestic and international audience. Lastly, there is the fact that there are no globally popular esports games that have been created from the ground up in China.

Managing Reputation, Esports as Public Diplomacy

For China to be truly successful internationally it needs to be regarded positively by both audience and esports professionals to make a successful bid as a global, leading esports country. Due to the bad organization of a number of high-profile tournaments held in China their national reputation as a tournament and esports host is less than stellar. A less than stellar reputation as a tournament host affects not only the audience but also the players and crew for which people flock to a tournament. A common complaint for tournaments held in China is the bad stream quality and production values which is often only focused on the Chinese (mandarin speaking). Two famous examples from the video game *Defense of the Ancients* are the Shanghai Major in 2016 and the Chongqing Major in 2019. The first is notorious for its huge delays, bad image quality, and bad treatment of staff and players visiting Shanghai (Thursten, 2016). Both from the audience and the players' perspective the tournament was badly organized as many reported things missing from their hotel rooms, or lacking facilities in general. The second example can be found two years in the "Chongqing major." This major, while technically sound, was nicknamed the "hospital major" due to many cases of food poisoning among (foreign) staff and players (Mtera, 2019).

While these tournaments represent a worst case scenario for China it is emblematic for the stereotypical image that exists for many tournaments and events hosted in or organized by Chinese organizations. It can boost its reputation not only by hosting domestic tournaments but also through proving the capabilities of its domestic organizers in hosting successful tournaments overseas. The 2019 "Disney major" held in Disneyland Paris is an example of this, as this was the first international tournament organized by the Mars Dota League, which, some complaints about overt Chinese or French focus from the English-speaking community notwithstanding, went off without a hitch.

This complaint of being "too focused" on the Chinese side of things ties in with a stereotypical discourse of the Chinese esports organizers and community as being

overly nationalistic. Nationalism, its utilization by the government and its potential impact on foreign investment and reputation esports, can be a potent tool for the reinforcement and maintenance of nationalist sentiment as it involves continuous engagement of teams identified as Chinese versus non-Chinese teams (Ismangil, 2018). Nationalism can also work to alienate foreigners, however, potentially dissuading international investment. The balancing of nationalism by esports stakeholders will prove to be crucial if Chinese esports is to become global, international esports. Esports can serve as a tool for the government to imbue a young generation with new dreams and a nationalist sentiment. It can be an effective vehicle for nationalism (Ismangil, 2018). While, to paraphrase Scholz (2019), esports "grew up in the global, connected internet" this does not make it immune to forms of (digital) tribalism and politicization. Due to its decentralized nature and the fact that there are many "Chinese" teams, as well as different tournament matches of different games being played on a daily basis, esports offers an easy, nearly on-demand space for nationalist sentiment.

Nationalism can be both a boon for Chinese esports as it creates strong emotions in its viewers, creating narratives of clashing nations and an emotional payoff when the "Chinese team" emerges victorious (see Si and Jing, 2016; Techweb China, 2018; Ye, 2018; Ismangil, 2018). It can also, however, alienate an international audience, as especially in the online environment interactions between fans can quickly become toxic. Nationalistic framing by Chinese esports can also lead to alienation among an international fan base (why should a Belgium fan care if the team is Chinese). In this sense organizers and teams have to carefully balance their twin audiences, on the one hand playing with narratives of nations and a confrontation with the foreigners while on the other hand not alienating the non-Chinese fan base through use of English language social media, for example, engaging the international audience on their own terms.

The negative reputation and stereotypes of esports events organized in China or by Chinese organizations is a painful point. For a spectacle to be delivered properly it has to be perfect, the fact that subpar events have been delivered weakens both the nationalist narrative as well the modernist narrative of a capable China. Nevertheless if Chinese organizers are successful in retrieving their image and boosting their reputation esports can serve as a tool for public diplomacy for the Chinese government. Esports can serve as a neutral space, separating the Chinese and the non-Chinese audience serving spectacle to both. As broadcasting for foreign audience is done on non-Chinese platforms this means that non-Chinese observers have the benefit or appearance of freedom of expression on the one hand while on the other hand witnessing a carefully orchestrated piece of marketing. More and more tournaments serve double as city marketing, overlaying shots of touristic highlights in between games as well as showing pre-recorded vignettes that showcase cultural or touristic highlights. In this regard it falls in line with China's public diplomacy aims (Rawnsley, 2015), which mean to increase "understanding" of China through public outreach and news outlets. It can help to undermine narratives of state oppression and authoritarianism by bringing foreign (Western?) viewers in contact with carefully contracted images of a "normal" China that embraces esports.

Chinese Esports Games

In an authoritarian country like China, private gaming organizations can only operate with the support or consent of the government. Currently, Western game developers have to rely on Chinese game companies to publish video games in the Chinese market and operate servers for online play in China. This means that the central government in China can retain their influence over video game content through the domestic game companies, for example banning games if they violate certain principles, for example overly excessive violent content. Similarly, esports competitions are organized only legally with the collaboration of local Chinese gaming companies, this results in only few games having a formal competitive arena.

Despite the size of the investment and the scale of companies such as Alibaba and Tencent, China has so far not been successful in exporting its own, domestically produced esports games to an international audience. A true, from the ground up esports games created by China, and adopted globally, has yet to be made. How and why certain esports games gain popularity seem impossible to predict. There are many games released each year which feature sizeable esports components and promotion budgets but fall flat quickly. There are many pathways to global esports success. Games like *Player's Unknown Battleground* and *Fortnite* for example enjoy sudden worldwide success, while *Dota 2* or *Starcraft 2*'s success has been built through many years of sustained effort. Domestic (esport) games share difficulties with China's other creative industries in terms of exporting their products. As has been discussed by many (see Cai, Ting and Pang, 2009), the move from "made in China" to "created in China" is one that has still not manifested itself properly. This does not mean that there is cause for too much pessimism in the Chinese camp as industry giants such as Tencent, NetEase, and more recently Alibaba have made substantial investments in both domestic video game creation, esports development, and foreign game acquisition. The broader question, however, is if this investment into domestic development will result in esports games that will gain a foothold outside of China. Closest to a Chinese esports game would be the Tencent's *Honor of Kings*, or *Arena of Valor* as it is known internationally, which enjoys huge domestic popularity but internationally, has not hit the same heights by any margin (Snyder, 2018).

Honor of Kings can be regarded as a mobile version of Tencent-owned *League of Legends*. It has been argued that the game is too reliant on Chinese cultural idioms and might be confusing for a non-Chinese audience (Sue, 2018). This is a similar problem that other creative industries also face in China. If Chinese companies succeed in creating a successful global esports game it will be a great boon to the nationalist narrative and legitimize an up and upcoming video game market that internationally has not had the best reputation due to the perception of China as a copycat nation, as made evident by many popular games today being eerily similar to earlier released games. While companies such as Tencent due to its sheer size is able to buy out many non-Chinese companies and influence game design from that angle (i.e., *League of Legends*), the fact remains that China does not have one homegrown game among most, if not all internationally popular esports. Many video game companies such

as Blizzard (of which Tencent owns shares) or Valve recognize the opportunities present in the Chinese market and openly cater to by, for example, creating Chinese-themed video game content and hosting of major tournaments in Chinese locales. Nevertheless, the lack of a global Chinese sourced esports game might prove to be a lacuna in the ideological argument of nationalism as it underlines the narrative of an "uncreative China."

Conclusion

Esports can be a great boon to China. It can not only provide economic benefits in terms of high skill jobs, tourism, and the transformation to a digital economy but also be of great value in terms of projecting Chinese tournament hosts as modern, capable, open, and international. For the domestic audience it provides the government with a powerful channel in which nearly daily international encounters can be framed in nationalist terms. The frequency and scope of esports potentially provide a near endless stream of consumer nationalism, which further enables the esports economy. The manner in which major media such as *China Daily* or *CCTV* further pick up China's international esports successes further amplifies the recognition of esports as a legitimate means of national representation as well as folding it under the umbrella of the Chinese dream. Time spent on pursuing esports in this regard is constructed as young people who pursue their own version of the Chinese dream. Chinese esports has seen a positive turn in recent years with many large international events being hosted all around China, as well as winning major victories in prestigious tournaments. These opportunities not only provide Chinese organizers with chances to boost their international reputation but also give Chinese teams to earn worldwide respect for their skill. While it is President Xi's ambition to win the football world cup, perhaps it is, at least currently, more realistic to look at the Chinese esports tradition seriously and see how, in stark difference to football, their teams are often respected and admired for their skill, tenacity, and tradition in many esports games.

For esports to blossom, Chinese companies and government have to carefully balance its engagement with both the local and foreign audiences, engaging with nationalism while simultaneously projecting an image of an international and welcoming China to its international audience. Reputation management will prove to be a key issue in the coming years for Chinese esports as it has to battle both a stigma due to mismanagement of several high-profile tournaments and the more general issue of bad reputation due to their closed off, authoritarian nature. Relying on the strength of the domestic market has so far proven to be a successful strategy as China's esports economy will or has already surpassed Western Europe's but in the long term the development of an international fan base and reputation will be paramount to secure both a healthy esports economy and maintain the nationalist tradition. China needs both talent and infrastructure, and developing both will be key in becoming an esports frontrunner. Especially in the light of the professionalization of esports and the combination alongside regular sporting events such as the 2022 Asian Games in

Hangzhou. This event might prove to be a litmus test for China to show to the world its capabilities similar to the Olympic Games in 2008.

China is well positioned to be a global leader in esports development. They are rapidly developing their infrastructure and industry, and perhaps more importantly have a burgeoning esports culture among their youth. This culture if harnessed probably can set up China to dominate esports on the competitive level, which might mean the respect of a growing audience worldwide. Chinese esports versions of Ronaldo or Federer admired worldwide might be a possibility in the near future. A boon for both the economy and the potential for image projection in the hearts and minds of a large mostly young international audience.

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Notes

- 1 See Yue (2018) for a summary of the negative health aspects.
- 2 LGD is one of the major esports brands in China (and the world), recently partnering with the football TEAM PSG (Murray, 2018).
- 3 Originally utilized for the 2010 world expo.
- 4 The mobile version of PUBG has also been banned in India citing similar reasons of "promoting violence" and propagating "addiction" (Jones, 2019).

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Historiography of Korean Esports

Perspectives on Spectatorship

Dal Yong Jin

Introduction

In the late 2010s, millions of global youth participated in esports as gamers and viewers every day. With the rapid growth of various game platforms, in particular, online and mobile, people around the world enjoy these new cultural activities. From elementary school students to college students, to people in their early careers, global youth are deeply involved in esports, referring to an electronic sport and the leagues in which players compete through networked games and related activities, including the broadcasting of game leagues (Jin, 2010; T. L. Taylor, 2012). As esports attract crowds of millions more through online video streaming services like Twitch, the activity's popularity as one of the most enjoyable sports and business products continues to soar.

With that said, there were several game competitions before this boom period, as far back as several decades ago. Already in the 1950s the foundation stone of digital games "was laid and with it the competition on PC or console" (Larch, 2019b, para. 1). When *Tennis for Two*—known as the first video game, created by William Higinbotham, in 1958, in the United States—came out, it had esports potential. The game design allowed for spectating, as it was possible to follow the match between two players, leading to a public spectacle. At that time, people were already watching other people play video games (Kalning, 2008; Scholz, 2019). In the 1970s and the 1980s, arcade games were popular, and several major competitions attracted many game players and fans (Borowy and Jin, 2013). Of course, although some people watched game competitions, this did not mean that mass spectatorship (the increasing involvement of mass media in mass competition events like esports, with people not only playing but also watching other players' games and sharing their opinions for fun) occurred immediately, nor was it televised on screens. Back then, computers were also expensive, and most people could not enjoy this particular entertainment medium (Scholz, 2019; T. L. Taylor, 2018).