Master's Thesis of International Studies

Get in the Game:
China's Soft Power Success in Esports

이스포츠와 중국의 소프트파워 부상

August 2021

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2021년 8월

서울대학교 국제대학원

국제학과 국제협력전공

문유정

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Submitting a master's thesis of International Studies

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August 2021

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Abstract

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By 2018, China had become an indisputable leader in the global esports scene. Yet its modern, international image as a game-changer sat diametrically opposite to a China, according to mainstream media, that was in pursuit of power and a dream of becoming a global leader. Moreover, China's success in establishing soft power in the world of esports also contrasted to its tireless but futile efforts to refurbish its national brand. Hence, this paper asks, why and how did China achieve soft power success through esports? I fundamentally argue that the nonstop, cyclical interplay of the three dimensions—structure (measured by the network topology), culture (defined by the level of its diffusion or diffusibility), and society (based on its compatibility to structural and cultural changes)—in the two-decade-long development of China's esports resulted in a greater vigor of China's soft power.

Keywords: China, soft power, esports, games, culture, digital media

Student Number: 2019-28586

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I. Introduction

The Fall of 2018 marked the end of an era. After Korean esports teams dominated the League of Legends (LoL) World Championship for five consecutive years (out of a total of seven), Invictus Gaming (iG) managed to take the Summoner's Cup in 2018, becoming the first team in China's LoL league to win the championship title. It was the beginning of a new dynasty.

Yet while the 2018 Championships symbolized a shift in the LoL esports paradigm, China's victory was perhaps merely a culmination of the country's overall investment in esports throughout the previous years. Even prior to their win, iG was touted one of the strongest teams in the world, while the overall competitiveness of China's League of Legends Pro League (LPL) prompted the esports management at Riot Games—the creator and effective owner of LoL intellectual property (IP)—to implement a franchise system two years ahead of the more famous Korean league.

The admiration that the LoL community both in and out of China had for the LPL players contrasted to the glaring image of a China accelerating toward a "Thucydides' Trap" with the United States (Allison 2017). The disparity between the two images was harder to fathom, as each was as convincing as the other. But what was particularly even more perplexing was the discrepancy in effort and effect: soft power seemed to increase in areas where the role of the Chinese government was rather minimal, while it remained virtually at a standstill in places where the Chinese government

made significant political investments. In particular, China's soft power in the esports world already seemed astonishingly pronounced. In contrast, the ideal goal of national-rebranding never seemed to materialize, despite the government's ongoing efforts of working day and night to "flex" its soft power through public diplomacy.

A simple input-output theory was not going to explain this enigma. Even to this day, the myriad of literature on soft power does not sufficiently highlight the multi-layered nature of the soft power mechanism, let alone untangle the mystery of how soft power is actually realized. Despite numerous analyses disproving the efficacy of the Chinese government's efforts to increase soft power, the scholarly discourse on the topic has continued to rely on an analytical lens that simplifies the soft power process as one moving top-down (from the state to a targeted public). Since this reductionist model surely does not represent the complex reality, it warrants a new, more comprehensive approach.

Hence, this paper first introduces a multidimensional analytical framework for understanding the soft power mechanism. As the main case study of the paper is China's esports, the paper aptly narrows its focus on the cultural resource of soft power. To clarify, culture is defined as a way of life, encompassing the ideas and values shared by a single or multiple peoples. More importantly, the key to the concept of culture is that it is inherently and perpetually dynamic; culture is a living organism of its own, constantly being

created, altered, and developed. Nonetheless, the paper does not, in anyway, argue that the cultural soft power mechanism is generalizable for all other soft power resources. In fact, considering the multiple layers attached to the conversion of a resource into soft power, the mechanism will certainly differ depending on the nature of each resource.

Employing the newly proposed analytical lens, the paper ultimately aims to decipher the puzzling yet so evident appeal of China as a leader in the world of esports. For one, esports—defined as competitive, electronic online gaming that takes place in organized formats—displays a rare instance where culture has been translated to a visible increase in China's soft power. On the other hand, because esports epitomizes new media entertainment of the current globalized digital era, understanding esports politically is key to assessing the future cultural landscape of the world.

Therefore, the paper asks, why and through what mechanism has China been able to enhance its soft power through esports? In short, the development of China's esports was facilitated by the nonstop, cyclical interplay of structural, cultural, and social factors. Specifically, shifts in the network structures in which China's esports germinated effectively determined the diffusion of cultures both in and out of China, while shaping the social practices and interactions among social actors of the domestic and international esports community. In turn, these social practices fed into the evolution and diffusion of esports culture, which inherently governed the

success of China's esports enterprise. The structural landscape carved out by industry leaders and the government further bolstered China's position in the global market. In the context of esports' transformation from a game to a sport to, finally, media, China's esports eventually took center-stage of the international esports scene, in which China ultimately realized its soft power.

The paper develops this argument in full in the next six sections. The first section begins with an in-depth critique of Joseph Nye's indirect causal model of soft power. By doing so, I argue that the overly simplistic model does not accurately depict the complexity of soft power, especially when considering culture as a resource. Therefore, after identifying the fundamental blocks that constitute the conversion process from culture to soft power, I map these factors onto a three-dimensional space to explain the multifaceted, dynamic, and recursive nature through which soft power develops.

In the following section, I review the conventional literature on China's soft power as well as esports. The academic discourse on China's soft power endeavors has been rather static, with most analyses focusing on state-led initiatives that have been, for the most part, ineffective. In contrast, there has been extraordinary progress in the study of esports as an academic subject, especially in recent years. Nevertheless, research on esports in the field of political science is still very scant. Thus, this paper hopes to fill that void.

The research design is outlined in section three. The paper mainly resorts to process-tracing, as it explores the two-decade-long history of China's

esports with the aim of explaining why and how the development resulted in an increase in soft power. Both qualitative and quantitative data are used. Overall, the paper refrains from taking on a reductionist approach, but instead pursues, what John Lewis Gaddis calls, the "ecological view," considering not only the "specification of simple components" but also *how* these components make up the whole (Gaddis 2004: 55).

In section four, I unravel the findings of process-tracing by delving into the development of China's esports from the late 1990s to the current-day, using the aforementioned multidimensional analytical framework. The developmental history is divided into three phases: esports as a game, esports as a sport, and esports as media. For each phase, the paper underlines how the changes in structure, culture, and society, as well as the interaction of these three factors, played into the enhancement of China's soft power. In an era of globalization and digitization, China's esports experienced a gradual and seemingly artless transformation, landing at the very center of the global competitive gaming arena.

Section five deals with data quantifying China's soft power in the realm of esports. Specifically, I present the results of textual sentiment analysis as evidence of China's soft power in esports. In essence, the quantitative data serves to show the outcome of China's esports development, as analyzed qualitatively in the previous section. In addition to quantitative data, the paper

concludes the section with a couple of real-life case studies that, again, illustrates China's soft power in operation.

Finally, I end the paper by listing critical implications and suggestions for additional research. Considering the rapid pace at which the esports universe expands, dynamism will always be its integral trait. And increasingly, more political scientists, always endearingly searching for new phenomena to explore, will soon embark on an intellectual journey into esports as a fascinating subject of study. This paper is only the beginning of this convergence. So, without further ado, let us get in the game.

II. A Three-Dimensional Model of Soft Power

In 1990, Joseph Nye first coined the term "soft power" to denote "an indirect way to exercise power…[by] getting others to want what you want" (Nye 1990a: 31). He further clarified the term as a form of power drawn "through attraction rather than coercion or payment," clearly distinguishing it from traditional means of hard power (Nye 2004: x). Nye's conceptualization of soft power fundamentally created a new lexicon for the world to understand the causes of certain state behaviors that, in hard power relations, appeared irrational.

Ever since his 1990 book introducing the concept of soft power, Nye has time and time again worked to develop its definition based on scholarly critiques and the changing international context. In a 2021 article, Nye noted, "all concepts arise in a context, and contexts change," illustrating the malleability of his definition of soft power (Nye 2021: 196). After *Soft Power*, a book solely dedicated to the soft power anatomy, the profound scholar again detailed the concept in *Future of Power* (Nye 2004, Nye 2011). In this 2011 text, he describes two causal models of soft power: direct and indirect. Both models, illustrated in Figure 1, are fairly self-explanatory, as the resources of soft power influence either elites (direct) or publics (indirect), attracting or repelling the subjects, which in turn lead to preferred outcomes for the agent (Nye 2011: 94-95). There is one more element, of course, to the indirect

model, that is, soft power indirectly creates an enabling or disabling environment that influences elites' decisions.

[Figure 1] Joseph Nye's Direct and Indirect Causal Models of Soft Power

Model 1 (Direct Effects)
Resources → government elites → attraction → elite decision and outcome

Model 2 (Indirect Effects)*
Resources → publics → attract/repel →
enabling or disabling environment → elite decision

Source: Nye 2011, p. 95
*This paper focuses on Model 2, looking at the indirect causal mechanism.

To verbally explain the indirect model causes a mouthful, yet while doing so, one naturally senses a distant strangeness with its linear progression. This feeling becomes more pronounced as we try to contextualize the linear model in real-life examples. In order to test the model, however, we must first narrow our scope. Hence, the paper centers its discussion on culture, one of the three basic soft power resources (Nye 2011: 84). The reason it does so is because political values and foreign policies—the other two categories of resources—seem to fit relatively well within the direct causal model, and fosters a less urgent discourse. Then why does Nye's linear model of indirect causation elicit such odd discomfort, the same way it irks us to think about the fourth dimension on a flat piece of paper?

First, as Nye elaborates, soft power, like any form of power, is a relationship, which "by definition...implies some context" (Nye 1990b: 160). From the get go, it is easy to discern why a linear model is not a suitable

illustration of the soft power mechanism. Nye further explains that "with soft power, what the target thinks is particularly important, and the target matters as much as the agents" (Nye 2011: 84). Soft power and hard power do not contrast like black and white; instead, "the softness of the power behavior depends upon the degree of *voluntary* attraction by the targeted actors" (Nye 2021: 203, italics added). Hence, even in the soft power context, "power relations are always two-way," as the subject in the relationship assumes some level of discretionary power over the actor (Giddens 1979: 6). Nye seems to agree, as he notes that with soft power, "success in terms of outcomes is more in the control of the target than is often the case with hard power" (Nye 2011: 83). The fact of admission, however, seems misaligned with his proposed model. If power relations work in two, rather than one, directions, then attempting to demonstrate soft power in a linear, one-directional model would evidently be erroneous.

Second, soft power is simultaneously relational, behavioral, *and* structural. Nye himself blatantly acknowledges the presence and influence of structures, which he refers to as the "enabling or disabling environment," or—if we were to interpret his words metaphysically—the "places" where a certain culture is considered attractive (Nye 2011: 84). Yet we must sort out how soft power is dispositioned in relation to social structures separate to how they relate to the agents within the soft power relationship. As Edward Lock clarifies, Nye's concept actually convolutes "two very different forms of power" that are assigned to a single title of "soft power": one derives from

the actor who is capable of attracting another, and the other is attributed to "the social structures which determine what it means to be attractive" (Lock 2010: 35-6). Hence, if we were to make a preliminary modification to Nye's linear model, the results would look like the diagram in Figure 2:

[Figure 2] Joseph Nye's Indirect Causal Models of Soft Power, Revised

Model 2 (Indirect Effects)

Resources (culture) → publics → attract/repel

↑ ⤢ ↓

enabling or disabling environment → elite decision

But even this revised model is incomplete. Most notably, it fails to answer a key question explored by sociologists and anthropologists for several centuries: where does culture come from? In a perfectly Westphalian world, where the totality of each collective can be unequivocally and unitarily defined by its geographical boundaries, its government, and an immobile people, a culture can be described as an idiosyncrasy of each nation-state. Hence, culture, in this kind of world, would essentially derive from the nation-state.

Yet, reality hardly depicts these conditions. As R. S. Zaharna explains, the notion of culture as a static institution "tethered" to the nation-state needs to be revised, especially as it "grow[s] increasingly anachronistic with the interconnected forces of globalization and digital technologies" (Zaharna 2019). Especially as globalization and digitization lower the costs and barriers to cross-cultural interaction, how people today identify culturally is

oftentimes different to how they may identify as a citizen of a particular country. Furthermore, while societies exist in multitude in each nation-state, individuals themselves are no longer members of a single society, but of multiple societies which each "possess an individual culture of their own" (Tenbruck 2017: 21, Schein and Schein 2017). Because societies themselves also "rarely have easily specifiable boundaries," it is nigh possible to identify cultures purely based on their assumed geographical, national, or traditional markers (Giddens 1984: xxvi). Moreover, the dynamism of culture cannot be overstated and must not be overlooked. Cultures not only can be but also *are* created; they are also "porous, open to intermixture with other, different cultures, and... subject to historical change precisely on account of these influences" (Stewart 1999: 41).

Furthermore, the integer "publics" in Nye's model highlights another ambiguity. If we are talking about public diplomacy initiatives, it may be easier to identify a target public. But in our discussion of culture and its effects on an impossible-to-define *publics*, it is imperative to instead consider publics—or better called societies—as dynamic and transformative in nature. Some may be small in terms of size and/or constituency, while some, as Francis Fukuyama describes modern societies, may "consist of a large number of overlapping social groups that permit multiple memberships and identities" (Fukuyama 2001: 9-10). Hence, societies, in deciphering the soft power mechanism, should be regarded as such.

This relates directly to the next point. When discussing the source of soft power, Nye correctly judges the significance of civil societies. He explains that culture and values stem not from the government but from civil societies (Nye 2011: 83). If culture is deliberately utilized by governments as a scheme to increase soft power, it is more likely that "targeted" publics will perceive those governments as "manipulative and information….as propaganda," destroying the credibility of that government's endeavors (Nye 2011: 83, Nye 2012: 152). The loss of credibility would substantially tarnish the prospects of all ongoing and future government-sponsored public diplomacy efforts and policies. Hence, for a country to have soft power, the growth of civil societies is crucial.

Nevertheless, the possibility of civil societies and the "publics" being non-mutually exclusive groups is ill-considered. For instance, Nye notes that "authoritarian countries such as China and Russia have trouble generating their own soft power precisely because of their unwillingness to free the vast talents of *their* civil societies" (Nye 2021: 204, italics added). It is impossible to determine whether Nye completely dismissed the transnationalizing character of modern-day civil societies—a feature which naturally increases the likelihood of members of the "publics" to also be members of civil societies. Nonetheless, his overly simplistic model of the soft power mechanism implies such versatile interpretations were not part of his main concern. Thus, a new framework of cultural soft power should consider local and national societies, *as well as* the emergence of a "global civil society,"

which has become an indisputable part of our reality today (Keane 2003: 8-17, Batliwala 2002).

Finally, we must clarify how we define social structures and understand their nature especially in relation to social actors. Anthony Giddens, the author of structuration theory, refers to structure as the "rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction" (Giddens 1984: xxxi). To add, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown forty years earlier notes that social structure constitutes the "patterns" of social behavior, while such patterns are "partially formulated in rules" recognized by "the members of the society" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 8). In general, social structure can be defined as a "complex network" or arrangement that both facilitates and is molded by social actors and their relations (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 2, von Wiese 1941: 29-30).

Therefore, social structures and social actors are interdependent. Giddens further elucidates "the duality of structure," which describes social structures as "both medium and outcome of the reproduction of [social] practices" (Giddens 1979: 5). Structure, in essence, is not "external" to the social actors within them, and "as instantiated in social practices, it is in a sense more 'internal' than exterior to their activities" (Giddens 1984: 25). Because of the duality of structure, the social practices of social actors or agents within these structures perpetuate them, while at the same time, the social structures are what make the social practices possible. This precisely indicates the recursive character of social activities vis-à-vis their social

structures, which simultaneously preserves their "dynamic continuity" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 4).

As we bring the evolving nature of culture, the complex notion of society, and the duality of structure into the context of the soft power model, we can easily see why Nye's linear model nor the revised, semi-cyclical model come close to representing the dynamic soft power mechanism. Going back to the very first question, I now realize that the incompatibility of soft power as an intricate reality to that idealistic, overly simplistic model is the cause of that ineffable feeling of discomfort. And in order to resolve this, I propose an entirely new, multidimensional, multidirectional framework of analysis.

In the process of dissecting Nye's linear model, I have come to realize that the three main components of key importance are 1) culture, 2) societies (or social actors), and 3) social structures. In the eyes of a sociologist, this list may seem as cliche as it could get; nonetheless, illuminating the cyclical though not necessarily sequential tripartite interaction and how this culminates in soft power is what adds particular value to the conventional political science discourse.

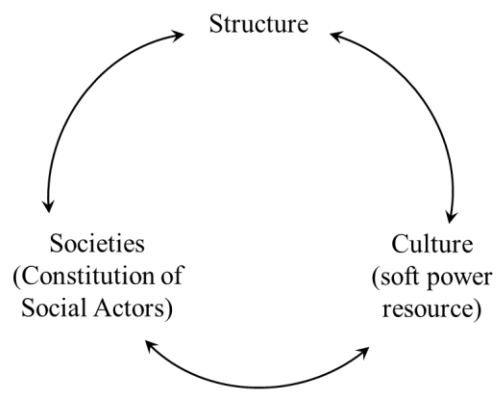
As previously explained, societies cultivate unique cultures of their own, implying that societal changes are inherently associated with cultural changes. The relationship is not one-directional, but reciprocal and not necessarily sequential. As one scholar cautions, understanding culture vis-à-vis "the transmission model of communication [that is]" linear and one-way misses

the aspect of "reception, or the processes through which audiences derive meaning and pleasure from such cultural forms, particularly when viewed in a transnational and cross-cultural perspective" (Flew 2016: 36). Similarly, based on the duality of structure, social structures and actors (or agents) facilitate "the recursive nature of social life," in which "the structured properties of social activity...are constantly recreated out of the very resources which constitute them" (Giddens 1984: xxiii). Structures also refine, give meaning, and instigate changes to cultures, which in turn "influence social actions" in society (Tenbruck 2017).

Metaphorically, if culture refers to the meaning of a sentence, then structure is syntax—the arrangement of words according to a specific set of rules, while society refers to the individuals who have a shared understanding of those rules, which allow them to accordingly interpret the meaning of the sentence. The continued use, or "routinization," of the syntactical rules (structural arrangements) intrinsically substantiate its significance, whereas, these rules are by definition a construct created by the social actors who wish to use it (Giddens 19 1984: xxiii). The meaning (culture) can both be considered the vehicle of the verbal messages passed on to and from individual actors (in a society), as well as a vehicle of the syntax (structure).

Therefore, the relationship of the three dynamic elements can be depicted as a mutually-reinforcing cycle (Figure 3).

[Figure 3] Tripartite Cycle of Structure, Culture, and Societies



However, this diagram is still insufficient in explaining how culture, social structures, and societies (social actors) *increase* soft power. To do so, we must factor in a measurement that reflects the *dynamic* nature of each element.

First, as aforementioned, social structure can also be understood as a complex social network, which thus can be measured by its topology. In other words, the topology of a network denotes the type of social structure and determines the level of connectivity of the network structure. The level of connectivity—based on the topology—of social networks would ultimately shape the contextual space in which a culture, as a soft power resource, affects social actors and, as one of the three main determinants of soft power, instigates change. For example, a country would have less soft power to wield in a social network that connects to a number of five actors than in one that

connects to six. On the other hand, regardless of the precise number of actors (or nodes) a network connects to, the potential for expansion is also important. Even if the current level of connectivity of a network is high, a country's soft power may be limited if the network itself is not open to additional connections. In sum, the key to social structures, in the context of soft power, is the level of connectivity defined by the topology of their social networks.

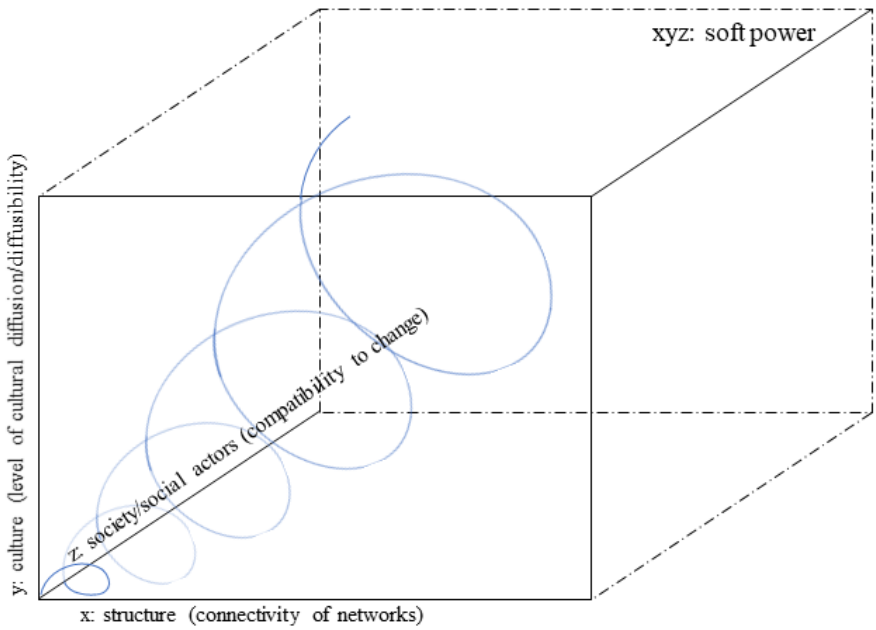
Second, culture, as a determinant of soft power, by definition can be measured by the extent to which it "seeps" or potentially seeps into relevant societies. One may refer to such "seeping" process as cultural "diffusion" and its potential as the diffusibility of a certain culture (Boas 1937). Though Nye briefly mentions the "universalism of a country's culture," universalism does not always lead to diffusion (Nye 1990c: 182). Hence, this paper deliberately shifts the focus from a culture's universal appeal to its diffusibility, as the former implies affirmative intent. Not all cultures are disseminated by those who consciously consider them attractive, as is the case with the diffusion of Western cultures in former colonies. Moreover, cultures oftentimes spread and are syncretized without an identifiable purpose. What is important to this paper in particular is the process and result—not the reason—of the spread of certain cultures. Hence, the dynamic nature of culture is measured by the level of diffusion and diffusibility.

Regarding societies and social actors that constitute them, it is impossible to generalize what kind of change increases soft power. Some

societies may become more racially diverse, which fosters social acceptance of diverse cultures. In turn, social and cultural diversity may promote one's soft power. On the other hand, soft power may also increase because societies remain ethnically homogenous or are less accepting of non-traditions; in exchange, classic traditions become unique features of a country's culture, which increase in appeal as soft power resources. Nonetheless, while we cannot determine the exact trajectory in which societies and social actors must change, what actually matters is how *compatible* societies and social actors are to cultural and structural changes. In other words, the exact type of change that occurs in societies and to social actors will differ for each case study. However, soft power will increase or decrease depending on the extent to which societies and social actors harmoniously adapt to the transformation of culture and structure.

In sum, the three-dimensional (structure-culture-society) framework analyzing the soft power mechanism is illustrated in Figure 4.

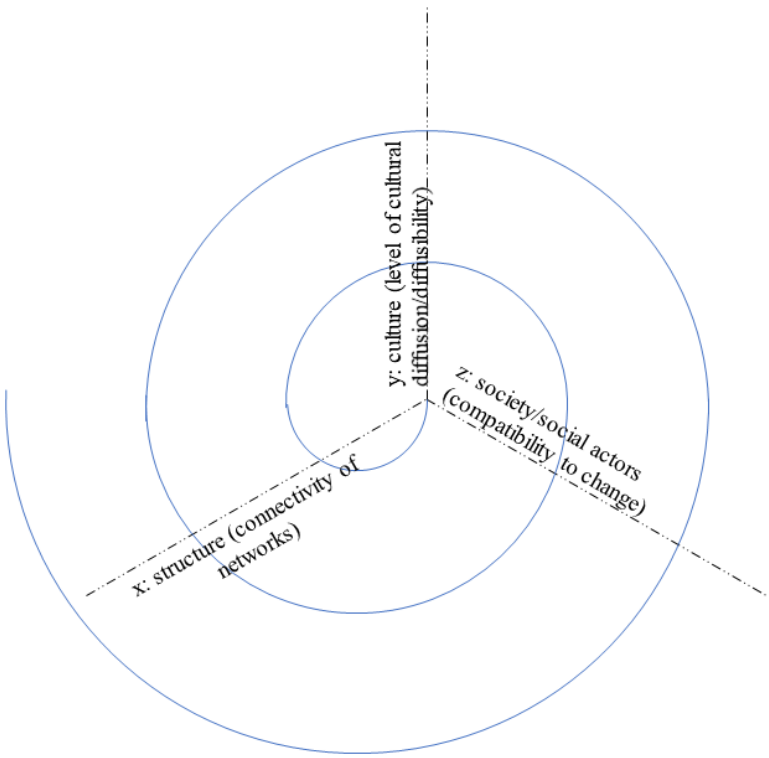
[Figure 4] Three-Dimensional Diagram of Soft Power



The spatial dimension is denoted as a cube for purposes of clarity; this does not necessarily mean soft power in reality is bound within an actual space. The spiral line represents soft power, measured as a combination of three factors *x, y,* and *z*. As aforementioned, each factor—culture, structure, and society (social actors)—is inherently dynamic, and it is their dynamism that subsequently affects how much soft power can be wielded. Hence, the determinants—cultural diffusibility, connectivity of network structures, and the society's compatibility to change—reflect such dynamism.

If we were to slice the cube diametrically, the outcome would look something like Figure 5, though the two-dimensional reconfiguration must be referenced with caution, as the line is a spiral moving three-dimensionally (coming out of the intersection and closer toward the reader's eye), rather than moving clockwise on a flat surface.

[Figure 5] Two-Dimensional Reconfiguration of the Three-Dimensional Model



Nonetheless, both Figures 4 and 5 serve the purpose of better understanding the nature in which the three components change the "amount" of soft power one can wield. The interaction of culture, structure, and society

are what determine the vigor of the soft power relationship. In other words, at any given point on the line, there is a particular interaction among the three factors that indicates the soft power value. For this reason, the 3D spiral can be considered a visual soft power *index* as well as an illustration of the mechanism in which soft power is generated.

This paper thus applies the three-dimensional framework in its analysis of China's soft power, specifically looking at the development of China's esports. But one may wonder, 'out of all the various options, why esports?' For one thing, esports is a newly emerging media entertainment industry, as well as an increasingly normalized part of social activity in all corners of the world. As a new industry, there is still infinite room to analyze the ongoing structural transformations, which, as previously explained, have inherent implications to how social actors of the esports world socialize, shape and create norms, accept and affect cultures, and bring about and arrange societies. If the "context" in which Nye originally developed his soft power thesis had not changed to any significant degree, there would not be much to examine. Yet contexts have dramatically metamorphosed from the post-Cold War order to a still-unknown world ripe for novel discoveries. To borrow the words of Mizuko Ito, who was originally describing the *otaku* culture in 2012, esports is "situated at a transnational confluence of social, cultural, and technological trends that are increasingly global in reach" (Ito and Okabe 2012: xii). This critical juncture calls for a serious exploration into today's most unique

cultural-technological sphere of society, which will uncover the traces of the soft power process.

III. Literature Review

The decision to examine esports in the context of soft power may not be fathomable without a discussion on China and, more accurately, Chinese esports. Hence, this section examines the past and current literature on first, China's soft power, and second, Chinese esports.

3.1 Discourse on China's Soft Power

Overall, the discussion of soft power has been especially fervent in and around China, with most literature illustrating one, if not all, of the following: a diagnosis of China's official soft power policies and programs; a prognosis of these efforts; and a prescription either for China to improve its soft power strategy, or for other countries including the U.S. to respond to China's "charm offensive" (Glaser and Murphy 2009, Wang and Lu 2008, Cao 2011, Zheng 2009).

While the existing literature on China's soft power offers invaluable wisdom in understanding China's foreign policy agenda, most works employ an agent-centered lens, which fundamentally misconstrues how soft power is actually realized and overlooks the inherent characteristics of soft power, as clarified in the previous section.

One of the most widely distributed texts on China's soft power is Joshua Kurlantzick's *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the*

World. The 2007 publication ostensibly offers a full-fledged overview of China's soft power machines, which began with the Chinese public who internalized "a new sense of confidence" fostered by "powerful [economic] growth, technological change, and academic progress," and a "state-dominated Chinese media [that] incessantly highlighted" these accomplishments (Kurlantzick 2007: 22). But China's state-sanctioned soft power strategy, according to Kurlantzick, was formalized in the early 2000s, as highest-ranking government officials began to iterate the phrase "Peaceful Development" of China (Kurlantzick 2007: 37). Championing a narrative of peace interwoven into aspirations to become a global leader, the Chinese government began to forward a "charm offensive" using both money and culture.

Yet Kurlantzick's detailed articulation of various state-led initiatives is not without error. First and foremost, a majority of the content he discusses are mere illustrations of diplomatic efforts, rather than examples that show China *wielding* soft power. In fact, the organic "appeal of the China model" is perhaps one of the few examples in which China has truly built its soft power (Kurlantzick 2007: 136). On the other hand, actively taking part in international summits, granting unconditional monetary assistance, or even erecting Confucius Institutes overseas are merely resources and instruments of public diplomacy. Not only are resources—the vehicles that underlie power relationships—distinct from the power relationship itself, "without underlying credibility, the instruments of public diplomacy" are effectively

rendered meaningless when it comes to soft power (Nye 2011: 9, Nye 2008: 101). Thus, China's decisions to "host high-profile meetings on issues like corporate responsibility" in fact backfire on Beijing's reputation (Kurlantzick 2007: 170) As Sheng Ding explains, the state's dismissal of domestic human rights issues have "become the weakest link in the appeal of Chinese soft power," because it accentuates the state's double standard (Ding 2012: 654). On a related note, China's noninterference policy, employed as part of the "Peace Development" narrative, essentially condones atrocious genocides and oppressive regimes, further tarnishing China's reputation (Kurlantzick 2007: 221).

Most of the conventional literature on China's cultural soft power seem to employ a similar state-centered, top-down approach that disregards the inherent dynamism of culture. The general consensus lies somewhere along the lines of recognizing the vastness of China's soft power potential while simultaneously expressing concern about its ability to convert resources into actual soft power. Oft cited is China's multithousand-year history, rich with "abundant reserves of soft power for contemporary use" (Gill and Huang 2006: 17-18, Li and Worm 2011, 75). Nye even claims, "China has always had an attractive traditional culture" (Nye 2012: 154). Even within China, the country's ancient history, cultural traditions, and language, among others, are deemed as valuable sources of soft power that potentially appeal to the international audience (Glaser and Murphy 2009: 13, Wang and Lu 2008: 428).

While praising the valor of China's traditional culture, scholars also note that the limitations to China's soft power derive from its inability to translate these cultural resources into attraction. The main obstacle to China's soft power conversion, according to most scholars, is again the lack of credibility that stems from its authoritarian government. Despite numerous efforts of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy (i.e., Confucius Institutes in foreign countries), and national rebranding, "Chinese media…are viewed in the global mirror as derivative and propagandist" (Keane and Chen: 2017: 54). What appears to be active engagement in the international human rights regime directly contrasts to the central government's heavy-handed domestic policies that run counter to basic freedoms of speech and rule of law, depicting China as a hypocritical, rather than a responsible, global actor (Ding 2012). As Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang further elaborate, "the legitimacy of China's diplomacy can be further weakened by dynamics of globalization," as the emergence of non-state, transnational organizations will pose risks of "sabotag[ing]" China's efforts by "focusing world attention on the China threat or human rights abuses" (Gill and Huang: 2006, 29). "When governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed," along with the soft power potential (Nye 2011: 83, Nye 2012: 152). In sum, scholars generally seem to agree that the lack of credibility dilutes the "charm" of an innately attractive Chinese culture, which hinders its conversion into realized soft power.

Yet this predominant framework of trying to dissect China's government policies to understand how culture translates to soft power is untenable. The warning signs have been present since day one of the soft power discourse. As stated earlier, Nye already made clear that "culture and values are embedded in civil societies" (Nye 2011: 83). In regards to China, he noted that a significant challenge to its pursuit to become a soft power leader derives from its "unwillingness to free the vast talents of [its] civil societies" (Nye 2021: 204). Other prominent scholars such as Ingrid d'Hooghe have also underscored the underdevelopment of China's civil society as reasons to expect the country's "active role in a global policy network with public and private sectors [to be] something for a distant future" (d'Hooghe 2005: 89). Instead, "the focus of [China's] foreign policy strategy [lies] solely on formal intergovernmental contacts," a strategy which in a globalized world is unlikely to be successful (d'Hooghe 2005: 89). Overall, the existing literature collectively disapprove of the effectiveness of state-centric soft power strategies such as those employed by the Chinese government. Hence, if we already anticipate state policies to be doomed by its inherent limits, what would be the point of taking yet again a top-down approach to analyze China's soft power?

By no means does this imply that *all* literature on China's culture and soft power employ the same analytical lens. Antonios Vlassis, for example, suggests the need for a more rigorous analysis of Chinese cultural industries in the context of soft power (Vlassis 2016). Though he focuses on the

"relationship between Chinese authorities and the film industry," Vlassis also pays significant attention to the development of the domestic film industry and its prospects amidst global competition. Private corporations, such as Wanda Group, have acquired foreign establishments including AMC Entertainment Holdings, Inc. to strengthen its grip in the highly competitive media entertainment market (Vlassis 2016). Terry Flew also looks into China's domestic movie industry, specifically analyzing the dilemma film companies face between adopting Western-style know-how and prioritizing Chinese culture. While producing market-guaranteed blockbuster films are profitable and effective in "enhanc[ing] the economic standing of Chinese cultural and creative industries, [they] do little to advance aspirations to make Chinese culture better known to the world through global media" (Flew 2016: 38). In a similar vein, Wendy Su follows the contextual shift in narratives portrayed in Chinese films (Su 2010). Backed by the government's strategic investments and overarching goal of erecting its own "Chinawood," domestic films have moved away from showing overtly propagandistic content and toward presenting narratives of ordinary humanistic stories over a backdrop of subtle propaganda.

A number of scholars have incorporated the soft power discourse to explore more recent global-, media-, and technology-oriented movements within China. Michael Keane and Ying Chen shed light on both state-led and industry-led developments in China's "Go Global" strategy (Keane and Chen 2017). While the Chinese government has reshifted its focus to developing

the country's tech and digital service industries, digital platforms constructed by companies such as Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (BAT) represent new "domains" of control, "challenging the Chinese Communist Party to reassess its command-and-control strategies in the cultural sphere" (Keane and Chen 2017: 59). These digital domains have endowed a certain degree of agency to its users via access to vast sources of information, in addition to fostering grassroots content production and the professionalization of previously amateur-esque careers (Keane and Chen 2017: 65-66). Wanning Sun, on the other hand, also confirms a similar shift in the public policy narrative, where there has been a noticeable move away from the terminology "propaganda" which has been replaced by the word "communication" (Sun 2015: 404). This reflects the state's refurbished goal to attain its "rightful discursive sovereignty" which many of the elite see as having been stripped by non-Chinese voices dictating the international media scene. Once this is achieved, Chinese leaders believe that China will be able to truly "tell its own story" (Sun 2015: 412).

From the perspective of Chinese consumers of digital media, Liu Kang highlights the formation of "a distinct urban youth culture" among members of the Millennial generation (Kang 2012). He describes this culture as the "embodiment of globalization" as it draws mainly from a "'global' consumer culture and entertainment industry" represented by "Internet language" and the "social space" revolving around "the digital network" (Kang 2012: 929). Interestingly, members of the Chinese Millennial generation—similar to

Millennials in other developed countries—fervently aspire to embody a novel cultural identity that is distinct from that of their parents.

Overall, there seems to have been a transformation within the Chinese cultural soft power literature over the course of the recent decade. Pre-2010s texts on China and soft power predominantly focused on the role of the state and their dictatorial leadership in charging their "charm offensive." In contrast, post-2010s analyses tend to highlight the internal changes occurring within Chinese society that pose implications for the government's aspirations to "Go Global." The latter group of studies consists of particularly important sources of insight as they depict the true dynamism of China that, for the most part, has been overlooked. Without considering the multitude of layers that obviously exists in a country that boasts a population size of more than one billion, it is impossible to understand China as a *society* composed of individual social actors. And without seeing China as a society, we are bound to be blinded by an overly simplistic and fundamentally incorrect view of China's soft power.

3.2 Discourse on China's Esports

A recurring theme in the existing literature on both global and Chinese esports is "dynamism." Whether the social actors—both the professional and amateur gamers—are taking on new identities through processes of socialization, or the overall infrastructure of the esports industry is propelled

by forces of globalization and digitization, *change* is precisely what makes the esports scene a unique subject to be studied, especially in the context of soft power. As initially mentioned, the soft power vortex is an illustration of how structure, culture, and society interact. There is clearly a particular, however massive and diverse, "society" within the esports world, consisting of the players, the fans, and all relevant members of the community that heave together to move esports forward. There is a culture that changes and diffuses through the social interactions that take place in both virtual and corporeal spaces. And finally, there is a structure—a hyper-connective social network—which continues to undergo seismic expansions via globalization and digitization. There is precisely no other place where the effects are more pronounced. It is this unique underlying change that makes China's esports the perfect phenomenon to anatomize using the previously proposed framework of analysis.

First and foremost, the paper defines esports as competitive, electronic online gaming[1] that takes place in organized formats such as leagues and tournaments. In other words, esports is a *distinct* form of gaming that is *competitive* and *organized*. Dal Yong Jin, one of the leading pioneers in esports studies, adds that esports encompass both the "electronic sport and the leagues that compete through networked games," as well as the "related

[1] The term "videogames" has been used generically, to refer to games participated vicariously through electronic means. Nonetheless, this paper opts to use the term "online gaming" or simply, "games," to denote the Internet or network-based games that constitute the content of esports.

activities" (Jin 2010: 59). The general definition pertaining to the competitive format of esports and the tools (games that have some sort of internal function that allows players to connect within the game) is agreed upon. Yet while Jin takes on a relatively expansive view that includes "related activities," it begs the question, to what extent are activities considered "related?" To avoid possible risks of ambiguity, the paper instead uses "esports" as an adjective to describe esports-related activities, and maintains its original definition that focuses on the main action—competitive gaming.

The volume of literature on China's esports, particularly as a subject of political science, is scant. Thus, before diving into the modest collection that exists on *Chinese* esports, let us first take a look into the relatively rich library on esports as a whole.

The most rigorous studies of esports exist in two intersecting disciplines: the first is media and communication studies, in which the functions of esports as a unique and unprecedented form of new media entertainment are closely examined; the other is cultural studies, in which the births of new societies, values, and norms vis-à-vis the esports experience offer cases to be dissected using conventional frameworks of analysis. Business is arguably the third largest branch in the esports discourse, though most works available have been published as market and industry reports (which undoubtedly offer invaluable material for research). Fortunately, in recent years, academia has seen an exponential increase in publications on the topic, as well as an ever-

so fast diversification of esports studies, expanding into fields of sports science (Hemphill 2005), economics (Karhulahti 2017), psychology (Lee et al 2021), philosophy (Ekdahl and Ravn 2019), and the law (Burk 2013). Though not all texts of this miscellaneous collection necessarily relate to the direction of this paper, the existing literature offers indispensable value and a rare foundation from which it begins its analytical journey.

Specifically, numerous works highlight esports as an exemplary form of new media in the 21st century digital economy. Esports is "the material interpenetration of media content, sport, and networked computing," and for this reason, scholars underscore the inherent need to examine the subject under a multidisciplinary lens (Hutchins 2008: 864, Jin 2010: 64). Digital technologies—the networks and the computer, among others—are the medium of communication *and* simultaneously, the tool of play. As T. L. Taylor explains, the rise of livestreaming services and their integration into the world of esports have added a new dimension: the same digital technology is now the medium for transmitting the information within the games to the public (Taylor 2018). Apart from the technical complications, this additional layer has had tremendous benefits: due to the recent convergence of livestreaming and esports, the function of esports as an easily-accessible, affordable, and interactive media entertainment has been further pronounced. Thus, the game-sport-media tripartite convergence has been, in the eyes of the average esports fan, an evolution comprised of three "waves": in the first wave, the core of esports was the game; in the second wave, "sport" took on

the "predominant frame"; in the third, most recent wave, attention shifted to media entertainment (Taylor 2018: 136-137).

In the context of consumer culture, Yuri Seo and Sang-Uk Jung add to the discussion of esports' dynamic experience by characterizing esports consumption as a "mutual entanglement" of watching, playing, and governing (Seo and Jung 2016: 649). However, while it is true that the consumer experience is multifaceted, Seo and Jung overlook the transformative nature of the esports consumer demographic that we have witnessed in recent years. In contrast to previous behaviors of esports consumers that mainly depicted a mix of watching esports and playing the esports game, there has been a significant increase in the number of esports viewers that do *not* play the game (Yoon 2021). Hence, as seen in other societies and communities, the esports fandom is undergoing a process of stratification, currently characterized by three major identity groups: viewers who do not play esports games, players who do not watch esports competitions, and individuals who identify as both player *and* esports viewer.

As such, the esports community—which consists of the players competing in organized leagues and tournaments, the media producers, team managers, journalists, game developers, esports operators, sponsors, viewers, fans, translators, and others whose involvement are essential to the total enterprise of esports—is an evolving society with a developing culture mainly shaped by the constituents who also continue to change based on their

interactions with the larger community. Gaming is fundamentally a social activity. Esports, which provides a platform that allows but also obligates players to interact with each other, as opposed to in-game AI, further reinforce the socializing aspect of the social activity of games. Add the element of media and technology—and you have what Brett Hutchins calls a "technosocial phenomenon characteristic of a meta-change in social relations globally" (Hutchins 2008: 863). Drawing from Ulrich Beck's *Power in the Global Age* (2005), Hutchins defines 'meta-change' as a "large-scale transformation in social systems and action" (Hutchins 2008: 852). This "meta-change" is precisely characteristic of esports.

Positioning the discourse of esports within the context of social transformations invites the notion of esports as an entity much larger than a mere category of sports or entertainment. In fact, if digital games "can be understood…also as cultural artefacts, which are given value, meaning and position through their production and use," esports—in which games are used—must be dispositioned to define that value, meaning, and position (Crawford and Rutter 2006: 149). Logically speaking, cultural artefacts derive their meaning from the culture itself. Applying this logic to esports and games makes sense, as it is the culture of esports that define the value and meaning of specific online games (being played as esports). Hence Hutchins' claim that esports is a "new cultural formation" is no exaggeration, but a reflection of esports within the current social context (Hutchins 2008: 860).

Narrowing our search to China, we find a handful of pioneers who have explored the incredible world of Chinese esports. Similar to the general literature on esports, most of the discussion revolve around the realm of cultural and media studies. What is noteworthy, however, is that the discursive connection between esports and politics, or government policies to be exact, appears relatively clear. For instance, Haiqing Yu argues that proactive endeavors by Alibaba and Tencent in China's global esports venture represent both "a corporate strategy" and "a national move to stimulate growth in the digital economy" (Yu 2018). Ultimately, he implies a "money-power alliance" that exists in the backdrop of China's rise as the esports epicenter. Yu's work offers an extremely rich overview of China's esports and digital economy in a contextual narrative of the Chinese Dream. While convincing, his analysis is heavily focused on the market side of esports, which only conveys half of the story.

Similar to Yu, three scholars Yang Yue, Wang Rui, and Samantha Chiang Siu Ling present an industry-wide analysis of China's esports, covering revenue and industry structures, market size, and relevant government policies (Yang et al 2020). Yue, Rui, and Ling's work is not suggestive of an analytical framework per se, but reflects the overall conditions of China's esports industry today. Again, while offering tremendously useful information, their research does not go beyond the economic and business aspects of the country's esports.

Perhaps the most relevant piece of research that exists is a chapter in *Global Esports*, a collection of international esports studies that was published in April 2021. In "Esport: A Chinese Sport?" Milan Ismangil and Anthony Fung acknowledge China as a strong player in the esports world, but also take note of the limits to establishing a globally enabled esports environment in China (Ismangil and Fung 2021). According to the authors, the four key factors hindering China's influence are the government's control over information flow; incoherent policies that ostensibly push for a crackdown on game addiction yet support the development of esports; the lack of a China-developed global esports game; and nationalistic elements and subpar events that potentially repel a global audience from Chinese esports and hurt the country's image.

Related to the final point, two additional articles written by Ismangil further highlight the relationship between nationalism and esports. First, investigating into the Chinese Dota 2[2] esports community, the author finds that through the use of memes,[3] a subtle nationalistic discourse is normalized within the community (Ismangil 2019). In the second article, the author again confirms similar patterns of nationalism being disseminated in the form of online posts and digital messages within the Chinese esports community (Ismangil 2018). These two particular works are crucial for this paper, as they

[2] Dota, or Defense of the Ancients, is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game developed and published by Valve Corporation. In MOBA genres, players can play the game online with other players, who are grouped in teams that battle against each other.

[3] Memes usually refer to images that often become viral through social media platforms.

are rare case studies focusing on how esports communities interact in a particular country. It is important to note however, that the Dota 2 esports community and their culture may not be generalizable to other communities of different esports games. Moreover, more recent accounts indicating government censorship of major meme publishers and webpages need to be considered when analyzing political implications of social practices in the online space (Wines 2009, McDonell 2017, Liu and Zhao 2021). If it is the case that only nationalistic or patriotic memes "survive" online, memes, as a sample of analysis, are prone to be biased.

Research by Marcella Szablewicz again mentions the connection between nationalism and esports. In contrast to Ismangil's approach, the focal point of Szablewicz's research is esports tournaments, rather than the communities activated around them. She argues that live esports events function as a "spectacle" presenting a "carefully crafted vision of Chinese politics, nationalism, and capitalist consumer culture" (Szablewicz 2016: 235). Her research findings, along with those by Ismangil, indicate an intimate connection between the mode and manner in which esports events are presented and the political message they convey. The representational power of esports cannot be undermined; the question then lies, in relation to our soft power discourse, in the effects that these representations have on the global audience.

Other works in the field of China's esports discuss internal transformations experienced by professional players. For example, Zhongxuan Lin and Yupei Zhao, based on fieldwork and interviews, argue that Chinese esports players have "transformed themselves into new, self-enterprising subjects" as they "pursue meritocracy, suffer from precarity, and face disposability"—overall qualities related to the perceived security of their occupations (Zhao and Lin 2020). Yupei Zhao, this time with Yimei Zhu, delves into sociopsychological identities of professional players and their mental wellbeing (Zhao and Zhu 2020). After interviewing thirty-five esports practitioners in China, they conclude that esports professionals are easily "self-stigmatized"; at the same time, government-backed policies and entrepreneurs' support provide a source of legitimacy that helps them neutralize those stigmas; and finally, players who capitalize on livestreaming are often framed as greedy, which compels them to further focus on improving their performance in professional play. Although both of these articles pertain to psychosocial identities of professional players in China, these offer insightful resources that prove, in fact, social structures and cultural forces significantly and collectively affect individuals heavily involved in the relevant social activity. In this case, professional players are affected by the underlying stigmas to the extent that they themselves internalize these norms.

Taking a step further, Szablewicz, in her more recent work delving into the "topography of digital gaming in China," argues that the "affective

experiences central to digital gaming culture are intimately tied to [a] sense of space and simulated mobility" (Szablewicz 2020: 7, 10). In essence, the space and situation in which people in China play games shape their attitudes toward gaming. Notably, impressions about gaming depend on the perceived level of productivity of each specific game, under each particular set of circumstances. This explains the discrepancy between how the Chinese public, including the government, treat esports as a professional activity and how they see Internet games as sources of addiction (Szablewicz 2020).

IV. Research Design

The previous section illustrated a form of theory-building, specifically developing a new theoretical framework to understand and qualitatively measure soft power. In the following sections, the paper will apply the theoretical framework to the main case study—the development of esports in China.

In general, the paper follows China's esports development through a method of process-tracing. It takes heed of Nye's words of wisdom that, with regards to the soft power mechanism, "judging the indirect causation requires careful process-tracing because multiple actors are involved" (Nye 2011: 95). Moreover, process-tracing not only allows one to consider "multiple actors," but more importantly, it also rules out a reductionist approach in searching for a causal explanation. Process-tracing exemplifies what John Lewis Gaddis calls an "ecological approach" which accepts the notion that all variables are interdependent (Gaddis 2004: 55). Because of this characteristic, process-tracing is appropriately used to "provide explanations for specific cases…, test and refine available theories and hypotheses, [and] develop new theories"—all of which this paper seeks to accomplish (Bennett and George 1997: 9).

In its process of tracing the developmental history of China's esports, the paper focuses great attention on the ways in which the three components culture, structure, and societies interact, reinforce one another, and ultimately

instigate progress. Based on the theoretical framework, we can discern that further progress of the three-dimensional cycle, within an increasingly globalizing and digitizing world, signifies the augmenting vigor of China's soft power relationship.

While the overarching case study can be singled out as "the development of China's esports," it is, in practice, a constitution of three sub-case studies. Borrowing Taylor's concept of the "three waves," this paper divides the two-decade-long history of China's esports into three separate sections. For each phase of study, I plan to identify the underlying structural, cultural, and societal factors that changed the landscape of China's esports from one that was relatively insulated from the rest of the world to one that is clearly international. By doing so, the paper aims to illustrate how the interactions of these three components culminated in a dramatic upgrade of China's position in the esports world.

In terms of data collection, the paper relies heavily on two types of textual analyses. The first is a manual document analysis of anecdotal evidence found on blogs, in online forums, and through other media illustrative of online interactions that occur within both Chinese and global esports communities.

The second type of textual analysis is big data sentiment analysis using an algorithm built on VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary for sEntiment Reasoner), "a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool" (Hutto and

Gilbert 2014). VADER relies on a lexicon that acts as reference for the algorithm to analyze the sentiment of a given text. For instance, VADER would assess the sentence "I like esports" to have a positive sentiment *because* there exists a dictionary in which the word "like" is associated with positivity. For this paper, I set up a Python code to analyze sentiments of the texts of Twitter posts and news headlines incorporating the VADER model. While VADER provides an analysis of both polarity (whether the text being analyzed has a positive or negative sentiment) and intensity (how strong the negative or positive sentiment is), the paper solely focuses on the former. Out of the various modules, I particularly rely on VADER, as its sentiment analysis lexicon has been proven to outperform most other lexicons especially when analyzing social media content (Hutto and Gilbert 2014).

I conducted a VADER sentiment analysis on three groups of data: all Twitter posts on the topic of either "China esports" or "Chinese esports" from April 21, 2006 (when Twitter was launched) to April 21, 2021; news headlines of articles available through a Google search of either "China esports" or "Chinese esports." This paper utilizes sentiment analyses to provide a quantifiable measurement of China's soft power in esports. While the paper recognizes that the results of the sentiment analyses do not perfectly represent the "numerical value" of soft power, it incorporates these statistics as meaningful reference points that illustrate the vigor of China's soft power vis-à-vis esports. An analysis of Tweets and Google News articles (both of which are banned in China) takes into account the international perspective,

which is crucial in determining the soft power relationship. The use of sentiment analysis in the context of soft power is by no means a novelty; in fact, precedents further substantiate why these analytical results are worth examining (Yecies et al 2019).

In sum, the paper relies on qualitative data to holistically trace the process of China's esports development, while the quantitative results of sentiment analysis of textual big data provide evidence that China's soft power *has* been enhanced by esports. In other words, the paper examines both the process and outcome of the soft power mechanism vis-à-vis China's esports development.

V. The Development of China's Esports

The following section delves into the three-phase development of China's esports. In each phase, particular structural, cultural, and social transformations shaped the trajectory of China's esports in a way it would eventually result in an enhancement of the country's soft power.

5.1 Phase 1: Esports as a Game

The inaugural phase of China's esports development illustrates how the collection of economic markets, technological breakthroughs, social stigmas, and individual passion resulted in the formation of a grassroots community of serious gamers. Though it is impossible to pinpoint an exact date of establishment, this phase coincided with a global shift in mainstream gaming away from consoles and toward personal computers.

While the rise of global esports would not have been possible without the invention of the Internet and subsequent advancements in computer technology, it is also true that the current state of esports owes much to the setting in which they were developed. This is especially true in China, where gaming itself was also a reflective outcome of the political and economic moods of the 1990s. The birth and subsequent worldwide popularity of the Atari 2600 and Nintendo consoles[4] in the 1980s sparked the first major wave

[4] Consoles are small electronic devices used for playing games. More modern examples include the PlayStation, Xbox, and Nintendo Switch.

of a global culture around video games (Liao 2016: 278). Coincidentally, as China was opening its doors to the rest of the world, game consoles flooded into the country through third-party vendors or smugglers. While the new form of entertainment stirred Chinese consumers, consoles failed to catalyze competitive gaming, as they were unaffordable for the average individual. High tariffs imposed on Japanese game companies raised the prices of these luxury goods to a greater degree (Liao 2016: 278, Lu 2016: 2188). This did not necessarily mean they did not appeal to the Chinese public; in fact, *because* Japanese consoles were so popular yet so costly, it catalyzed an emergence of a black market in which cloned consoles known as "Famiclones" and pirated content were sold (Liao 2016: 278). A handful of companies in China actually flourished off of Famiclone sales. One of the most notable examples of an internationally successful Famiclone was the Subor, also known as *Xiaobawang* (小霸王) in Chinese, which was later exported outside of the mainland (Chiu 2019).

Hence, the domestic economic conditions and a growing international videogame market shaped the context of the first phase of esports development. As Lu Zhouxiang points out, "none of the leading video game companies, such as Atari, Nintendo, and Neo-Geo, officially launched their products in China" (Lu 2016: 2191). The general lack of awareness on intellectual property inherently condoned a culture of cloning and piracy, which in turn discouraged companies such as Nintendo from officially entering the Chinese market. This of course had much to do with the relative

price of the original products, which deterred official consumption but not the overwhelming popularity of consoles in China. As a result, early versions of esports competitions, which the console manufacturers exported along with the product as part of a marketing tool, were not introduced in China. As Lu elaborates, electronic companies "had no reason to organize gaming competitions [in China] to promote their products" (Lu 2016: 2191).

As the global IT industry began to reach new heights, the Chinese government also revised its policies to stimulate domestic manufacturing and consumption. In particular, the Ninth Five-Year National Development Plan, 1996-2000, included plans to advance domestic computer technologies (Li 1996). As part of China's integration into the world market, tariffs on imports were reduced manifold, enhancing consumers' access to foreign electronics including the personal computer (Kraemer and Dedrick 2001). Yet the culture of PC[5] consumption bore close resemblance to what was happening next door. Much like the PC *Bang*[6] boom in Korea, Internet cafés[7] took the storm in China's youth society. Images dating back to 1995 portray the early beginning of an Internet industry that grew bigger by the day (Jou 2014).

These Internet cafés offered both the physical infrastructure for grassroots competitions, as well as new social spaces for a newly emerging generation of gamers. Similar to Florence Chee's argument that a "relatively

[5] PC stands for "personal computer."
[6] The Korean term *Bang* means "room"; hence PC *Bang* literally mean "rooms with PCs."
[7] Internet cafés are also known as *wangbas* (网吧).

elevated level of gaming in Korea [was] not due to the game[s]" themselves but to external factors including the PC *bang*, Internet cafés in China functioned to elicit tacit competition among gamers who convened in a common agora (Chee 2006: 227). As Michael H. Jong of Intel China put it, "It's not about games. It's about community. It's about communication" (EETimes 2004).

At the same time, new developments in game technology, particularly LAN[8] and other network-based services further fueled the rise of grassroots esports. Notably, the official release of real-time strategy (RTS)[9] game *StarCraft*[10] in 1998 and its integration with the Battle.net interface—an in-game platform through which players could compete with other gamers online—hastened the rise of Internet-based game communities (Fenlon 2016). What was especially eye-opening about the Battle.net infrastructure was its function as a conduit between Chinese gamers and the rest of the world. At the time, *StarCraft* developer Blizzard Entertainment had not yet developed an official Chinese server, which prompted Chinese gamers to play on the

[8] Local area networks, or LANs, refer to a limited computer network that connects computers or devices that lie within a specific proximity to one another. An example of a wireless LAN technology is Wi-Fi, through which devices that are close enough to a router can connect to the Internet.

[9] Real-time strategy (RTS) is a specific genre of games. Instead of taking turns, players have control over the game throughout its entirety, and the ultimate aim of the game is to defend one's own territory while conquering the enemy's base or annihilating the enemy's units.

[10] StarCraft is a real-time strategy game developed and published by the American game developer Blizzard Entertainment.

American server, where they would compete against non-Chinese gamers (Wang 2010).

Simultaneously, the Battle.net platform essentially fostered a new class-like structure among StarCraft players. Notably, gamers not only were ranked by performance, but the ranking list itself was updated live and published within the Battle.net server ("History of Chinese StarCraft" 2005). Because ranks naturally corresponded to prestige, the ranking system both stimulated competition while constructing a new class structure—one based on pure meritocracy—within the online gaming space.

At the turn of the millennia, the Chinese Ministry of Culture, jointly with six other government organs, proclaimed the "Opinions on Carrying out Special Governance of Electronic Game Businesses" which officially required Internet cafés to register for licenses, as well as adhere to a number of safety measures (State Council 2000). These regulations were the government's response to public concerns about videogames, which all the more worsened after a fire at Beijing's Blue Speed Internet Café killed 25 people (Jou 2014). School patrols were deployed to ensure that rules were being followed, while parents protested for age limits to prohibit underage teens from hanging around in Internet cafés (Zhang 2016: 45).

Hence, the discursive rupture around the Internet, videogames, and Internet cafés illustrated an intergenerational divide. According to Lin Zhang, the contrasting narrative of these technologies as both "productive and

pathological" stems from the state's disapproval of capitalist consumerism of the 1980s, enmeshed with post-socialist reforms to catch up with the West (Zhang 2013). Oftentimes, new narratives within society do not merely push out the old. As the case with culture, ideas tend to adapt rather than disappear. Thus, cultural norms surrounding online gaming aptly described the syncretism of both stigmas and honor. Seeking a mixed, rather than dichotomous, understanding of the changing climates shed light to how grassroots esports successfully emerged in spite of seemingly aggressive, social concerns about games.

While competitive gaming had already taken the fore through unofficial matches hosted by and in Internet cafés, the first signs of institutionalization of Chinese esports appeared in July 1998, when StarCraft gamer Wang Yinxiong founded the China StarCraft Association (also translated as China StarCraft Alliance, CSA) ("StarCraft in China" 2017). As grandiose as the name sounds, CSA was initially nothing but a team that Wang was trying to build. In its infant stage, as one StarCraft gamer recalls, there were only eight members in CSA ("History of Chinese StarCraft" 2005). Despite the small circle of CSA, the formal association of individual gamers was an entirely new phenomenon. It also elicited the birth of new social identities, particularly represented by the suffix ".csa" that was attached to the members' in-game IDs. This visual symbol thus had the effect of both fraternizing members of the association and delineating social circles within the greater StarCraft community. Social identities based on dispositions of "ingroup"

versus “out-group” were thus formalized in these virtual spaces (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Yet the barriers for entry were fairly low, offering opportunities for both experienced and novice players to interact as part of one identified society. Writing in 2005, the unnamed gamer continues:

> Especially in an era when there is no commercialization or professionalization of the game, CSA is like a “rookie paradise,” which prolongs the lifespan of the organization (“History of Chinese StarCraft” 2005).

By the end of 1999, CSA’s membership multiplied to more than 1,000 players, indicative of its dramatic metamorphosis from a circle of gaming friends to a nationwide network of gamers (“History of Chinese StarCraft” 2005). In order to cater to its increasingly growing membership, the organization underwent a number of significant structural changes. First, moving away from its initial purpose of recruiting team players, CSA transformed into an association of multiple teams. Existing teams were allowed to join CSA while retaining their team logos, fundamentally changing CSA’s function to a quasi-official national players’ association (“History of Chinese StarCraft” 2005). Second, as CSA grew in size, it partitioned subsidiary branches based on each province or municipality. The organizational restructuring allowed player communities to be better

managed, while formally institutionalizing the Association's operational network.

Another critical development for the Chinese player community was the launch of server-cloning programs such as Free Standard Game Server (FSGS) and BNetd, which though illegal, allowed an exclusively Chinese Battle.net server to surface (BNETD 2001). Using these resources, several clone Battle.net servers were released, from which CSA selected to play all its games on the server 263 Battle.net. While the widely accepted use of cloning programs reflected the still underdeveloped awareness of intellectual property rights, the process in which gamers themselves found solutions to the problems they faced during their play experience resembled a new form of "work" ethic. It was ultimately the lack of oversight that compelled players to help themselves and each other, which served to glue the community more closely together.

Therefore, the late 1990s to early 2000s was a period of grassroots development for China's player community. China's opening-up to the world economy fundamentally inspired new patterns in domestic consumer culture. PCs flooded into the country, landing not at home but in Internet cafés which became new social spaces. Stigmas attached to videogames persisted, but failed to stop critical grassroots gamer communities from germinating. The built-in network of StarCraft by definition illustrated a structural transformation. Social networks no longer were bound by physical distances.

Consequently, it facilitated both inclusive *and* exclusive social behavior within the community at-large: while Battle.net brought together the global gaming community to one platform, it also induced subcommunity groups to form, inherently excluding non-members while knitting in-group members close together. The virtual space that was created proved neither to be a flat surface nor an all-encompassing utopia. But the community was there, born out of the grassroots and led by passionate gamers. And because the community was there, so were the culture and structural factors that reinforced and reshaped it.

5.2 Phase 2: Esports as a Sport

While the grassroots efforts led by Wang quickly evolved into a widely-accepted institution within the StarCraft community, the expansion of international networks vis-à-vis cyber and physical infrastructures further engendered new social contexts for these multiplayer games. Most importantly, it helped institutionalize the *competitive* aspect of gaming.

In 1999, the first widely known StarCraft championship was held on 263 Battle.net, amassing nearly 2,700 participants online ("StarCraft in China" 2017). The StarCraft community also saw its first nationwide offline tournament "Gao Xinda StarCraft Cup," which was hosted by the Gao Xinda Computer School in Beijing (The Paper 2019). The tournament even granted sizable monetary prizes for winners, closely resembling the esports scene we see today. The following June, a newly established Chinese Professional

Players' League organized the first-ever international exhibition game between Chinese and German players on Battle.net (The Paper 2019). According to a former StarCraft player, "masters" (denoting high-ranking gamers) from all over the country gathered online to discuss tactics and strategies for the Chinese team days before the international battle took place (Wang 2010). Since livestreaming services were not available at the time, Chinese StarCraft players learned of the match results through online forums. Once the news of China's landslide victory broke out, members of the online community celebrated the achievement as if it were the Olympics. The player following the game recounts reading a post by Han Yuliang, one of the most widely known players in the community, published the day immediately following the German-Chinese match:

> Yesterday, we made the proud Germanic people lower their noble heads…We are nearing the start of the European Cup. At the time of decline in national football, we have achieved such results, which will comfort our hometown fathers... (Wang 2010).

Interestingly enough, the pride attached to winning the German team—not to mention, in a friendly match—alludes to nationalistic rhetoric much similar to what Ismangil observed in 2016 and 2017. In a discussion about a Chinese team's victory, one of his interviewees responded, "[The winning] team not only gives itself honour but also brings honour to its country" (Ismangil 2018: 207). The resemblance is uncanny.

In addition to the recurring theme of nationalism—which is somewhat expected in any kind of competitive sport, the linguistic similarities between the two statements written in two clearly different points in "time and space" exemplify the recursive nature of social structures and social practices (Giddens 1984, Bairner 2001). Social networks, particularly structured in topologies that instigate transnational connections, are what make international competitions possible; it is this international competition that in turn stimulates nationalistic fervor in support for their own country's team. Hence, while particular esports genres may change with the passing of time, there are structural norms and structurally-reinforced practices that remain the same, ultimately resembling the coexistence of continuity and change within the social system of esports.

Until late 2000, however, China's gaming community was mainly insulated from the outside. While a number of prominent national competitions took the fore, it was only in October that Chinese players entered the global competitive scene. In 2000, the inaugural World Cyber Games (then called the World Cyber Game Challenge; WCGC) was launched in Seoul bearing the slogan "Beyond the Game, More than Sports," illustrative of creating a culture that loomed larger than the mere competition (World Cyber Games, n.d.). China was one of the 17 countries that was invited to the first WCGC.

On a national level, the WCGC necessarily institutionalized a meritocratic system of competition. In essence, the National StarCraft Competition, also inaugurated in 2000, functioned as the qualifiers for the World Cyber Games, as the first and second place winners of the national competition would represent the Chinese delegation in the international event (Wang 2010). Wang Yinxiong, the founder of CSA, won the national cup and thus headed to the first-ever WCG as a representative of Chinese esports (The Paper 2019). Though all of the Chinese players who participated in the 2000 WCGC returned home empty-handed, the mere fact that the Chinese esports community—only two years after its formal inception—had been given the chance to compete against sixteen international teams at the first "Olympics of Esports" was remarkable. As Tobias Scholz eloquently states, esports *was* "born global and born digital, [and later] turn[ed] analog and local—quite the opposite of every other industry that is generally born local and analog first" (Scholz 2019: 4).

Much like Wang had spearheaded the creation of a key institution in China's StarCraft community, other players, who had become famous for their mechanical mastery, also began championing significant and much-needed reforms. For instance, Bin Guo, who goes by "ChinaHuman" in the game, launched the China Esports Association (CESA), which took on functions similar to that of CSA (The Paper 2019). Han Yuliang, another famous player sought diligently for the creation of a team of referees who would provide oversight in competitions and prevent cheating. These two

developments helped systemize competitive gaming; without these efforts, the prospects of gaming becoming a serious profession would have remained murky. Moreover, leading players of the esports community were especially active in efforts to gain official recognition and firmly establish institutions to better operate esports competitions. In one online post, Han Yuliang articulated what he envisioned for the future of China's esports—the investment of large corporations, establishment of official esports clubs, and official recognition from the General Administration of Sports, all of which would soon become part of the esports reality ("History of Chinese StarCraft" 2005).

The international climate in 2000 appeared more welcoming of a global esports scene. Building off its initial success, the WCG franchise continued to expand in the coming years, consequently providing more opportunities for esports players to compete on an international level. As shown in Table 1, the WCG continued throughout the decade. Participation continued to increase over the years, while the performance of Chinese esports players began to improve especially since the mid-2000s.

[Table 1] Statistics on World Cyber Games (2000-2013)

Year	**Location**	**# of Players**	**# of Countries**	**Medals Earned by Chinese Esports Players***
2000	Yongin, South Korea	180	17	None

2001	Seoul, South Korea	389	37	2 Gold, 1 Bronze
2002	Daejeon, South Korea	456	45	None
2003	Seoul, South Korea	562	55	1 Silver (Bin Guo)
2004	San Francisco, USA	642	63	None
2005	Singapore, Singapore	679	67	1 Gold (Li Xiaofeng)
2006	Monza, Italy	700	70	1 Gold (Li Xiaofeng)
2007	Seattle, USA	700	75	2 Silver (Li Xiafeng, Sha Jun Chun)
2008	Koln, Germany	800	78	None
2009	Chengdu, China	600	70	1 Gold, 1 Silver
2010	Los Angeles, USA	450	60	1 Silver
2011	Busan, South Korea	600	60	1 Gold, 1 Silver, 1 Bronze
2012	Kunshan, China	500	40	7 Gold, 7 Silver, 2 Bronze
2013	Kunshan, China	500	38	5 Gold, 4 Silver, 2 Bronze

Source: World Cyber Games. “History.” Accessed May 1, 2021.
* Medal counts include both the official games (where players compete against one another regardless of their nationality) and the games categorized in the national competition (where players, as representatives of their national teams, compete).

At the 2001 WCG, a Chinese team won an international title for the first time in the history of China's esports. While an audience of more than 30,000 watched the competition, players Wei Qidi and Ma Tian Yuan managed to win a gold medal in the 2v2 category of StarCraft, previously dominated by Korean gamers (Yitian guan canghai 2020). In the coming years, the WCG franchise successfully affirmed its grounds as the leader in the global esports scene, with the 2002 Games garnering almost 1.5 million players who participated in the year's preliminary rounds (World Cyber Games 2002). In a year, WCG's offline audience quintupled in size to 150,000, excluding the American fans who watched the Games online and Korean esports followers who had access to the contents on a TV channel solely dedicated to esports (World Cyber Games 2003; Jung 2003). Compared to next door's professional gamers taking up the Korean stage, Chinese esports players were still trailing behind significantly, illustrated by their mediocre performance at the WCG until 2005. This narrative, however, gradually began to change with the rise of an esports hero—Li Xiaofeng.

Li Xiaofeng (who goes by "Sky" in-game) rose to stardom after winning two consecutive championships at WCG in 2005 and 2006. His success is especially notable because the esports game he devoured was not StarCraft but WarCraft, a massively multiplayer online role-play game (MMORPG)[11]

[11] Massively multiplayer online role-play game (MMORPG), as its name suggests, is a game genre that consists of an extremely large number of players. Each player selects a character, or role, to play and can interact with other players who access the game online.

developed by Blizzard and released in 2004. Interestingly, however, Li Xiaofeng was a former StarCraft player and a direct witness to the globalization of the esports community. Even in a time preceding YouTube, Li learned to play StarCraft the "Korean way" after watching a video of a Korean gamer in 2002 ("StarCraft in China" 2017). Needless to say, he moved on to play a different, more recently released game, and ended up winning the first-ever international WarCraft title in Chinese esports history (World Cyber Games 2005). This first remarkable victory set up Li's rise to stardom, but what kept him there was a consecutive victory at the 2006 WCG in Monza, Italy (World Cyber Games 2006). This was the third WCG to be hosted outside of Korea, and the largest in terms of the number of participating countries and players. The event was truly a spectacle, as it was held in Italy's most famous F1 racing stadium. It was a monumental win for Chinese fans, as the name of their very own player "Sky" would forever be engraved in the world's most prestigious esports Hall of Fames (World Cyber Games 2006).

The rise to stardom of individual figures such as Li Xiaofeng had substantially influenced China's esports culture. Much like what Taylor describes about the earliest labor conditions in esports media production, esports players also were rarely compensated (Taylor 2018: 166). As one of the interviewees in Zhao and Zu's ethnographic research articulates, the first generation of esports players received "only RMB 800 per month [equivalent of US $110], which is much lower than the basic salary in Chengdu" (Zhao and Zu 2020: 8). When low salaries and a shoddy quality of life were deemed

normal for a professional esports player, Li's success and fame that followed his victory proved to be a source of inspiration for young gamers who dreamt to one day step in his shoes. In their research, Lin and Zhao observed that "almost every interviewee mentioned the impressive scene of Sky (Li Xiaofeng) raising and waving the five-starred red flag…after winning the WCG championship in Singapore" in 2005 (Lin and Zhao 2020: 590). Apart from the recurring theme of patriotism and nationalism that appears embedded in every Chinese athlete's success, Li's legacy offered reasons for professional players to hope for a brighter and richer future.

In contrast, the spotlight on Li accentuated the disparities across different types of esports games. On the one hand, a Dutch production studio published a documentary on Li Xiaofeng and two other WarCraft champions in 2008 (De Putter 2008). The documentary served to certify Li's status as a world-class player, and offered a direct channel connecting the international audience to the ins-and-outs of China's esports. Yet while competitive players in StarCraft and WarCraft leagues, among others, increasingly took center-stage in China's esports communities, athletes who pursued careers in relatively niche game categories were not treated the same. One esports fan recalls the noticeable contrast in public support for WarCraft players such as Li and the lack thereof for FIFA Online[12] athletes regardless of their worthy accomplishments. In particular, the writer notes that "everyone remembered

[12] FIFA Online is an online sports simulation game in which players can build their own football teams and compete with other teams.

Bin Guo, who won the silver medal in the 2003 WCG, while no one remembered Zheng Wei, a bronze medalist" in 2001—and the only medalist for China that year ("Sports Simulations Games" 2017). Thus, there was a specific level of prestige attached to each esports category, reflecting a structural hierarchy based on newly defined social norms and values. While the alphas enjoyed international recognition, the rest remained in the shadows.

Amidst the social transformations that were happening within and around the Chinese esports community, esports as an industry was undergoing a revolution of its own. New online games, including first-person shooters (FPS)[13] such as CounterStrike and CrossFire were growing increasingly popular both as recreational and professional genres. This, too, in terms of its effects on social behavior, meant that players were playing more than one type of game. In addition, the overall increase in multiplayer games, in particular, warranted players to undergo a "socialization process" through which even newer virtual societies and cultures would emerge (Taylor 2006).

Apart from the diversification of the gaming market, major electronics companies in China rose from under the soil, previously saturated by state-owned enterprises. Particularly notable was the rapid success of Tencent, now touted as one of three biggest digital corporations in China. The company,

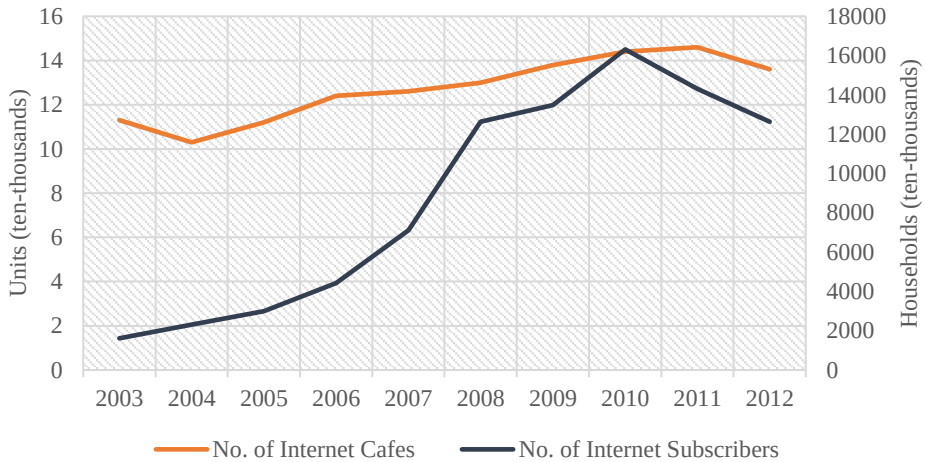
[13] First-person shooter (FPS) is a genre in which players combat in a first-person perspective. Usually, the objective of FPS games is to take down an enemy using guns and other weapons.

established in 1998, owed much to its success to its QQ App, a mobile chat messenger that now goes by the name WeChat (Tencent Holdings, n.d.). In the context of esports, Tencent is perhaps one of the earliest mega-corporations to get involved in the industry, initiated by QQ Game, which became the no.1 portal for gamers in 2004, and QQ Tang, the company's first internally developed video game (Tencent Holdings 2004). These innovative platforms obviously reshaped the topology of social networks by mobilizing gamers across the nation to one single portal. And because of this structural shift, social interactions were no longer restricted to the virtual space within the game; gamers who played one genre or title could now socialize online with others who played a different one.

Interestingly, there were noticeable shifts in the infrastructural landscape. As previously discussed, Chinese consumers accessed the Internet at Internet cafés rather than from home. Yet, as seen in Figure 6, the number of Chinese households buying into the network had dramatically increased since 2003, while the growth rate of Internet cafés appeared to approach an equilibrium. This privatization of the cybernetwork foreshadowed even more dramatic social drifts to come. With Internet available at home, the corporeal interaction that was embedded in people's experiences in Internet cafés was to be replaced by social interactions in virtual spaces.

[Figure 6] No. of Internet Cafés vs. No. of Internet Subscribers

Source: Internet Service Industry Association (2012)



The noticeable increase in the number of Internet subscriptions highlight a contextual as well as a cultural shift in gaming. Szablewicz ties the Internet café to a specific generational cohort:

> Internet cafés and Internet games…for those born in the late 1980s and early 1990s…, were considered a location and form of release that played a particularly important role in their coming-of-age (Szablewicz 2020: 14).

Yet the salience of Internet cafés as a modern cultural artefact is itself a diminishing past. As Zhang illustrates, "the Internet café is outmoded" by a "new mode of modernity and production," characterized by advanced technologies and lowered costs of consumption of these technologies (Zhang

2016: 43). The core demographic of the Internet café era is now much older, under pressures of other social responsibilities that leave no room for play. Hence, due to low demand, new social spaces increasingly replace Internet cafés, perpetuating the dynamic transformation of the world of gaming.

In addition, the Chinese government in the second phase appeared to have taken a more proactive stance in the country's esports sector. At the inaugural ceremony of the "China Digital Sports Interactive Platform" (also known as Huaao Xingkong Technology Development Co., Ltd., or Huaao Xingkong) in 2003, the General Administration of Sports officially recognized esports as the nation's 99th official sport (China Sports News 2003). Huaao Xingkong was an initiative sanctioned by the All-China Sports Federation (ACSF) and the National Olympic Committee to support the development of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The package of initiatives that Huaao Xingkong put forth included the organization of large-scale esports events, particularly with the vision to bolster China's position in global esports. As part of these plans, the ACSF hosted the first China Esports Games (CEG) in 2004, which marked the first official nationwide esports competition and garnered more than two million participants (China Sports News 2003). In 2006, ACSF released its "Regulations on the Management of Esports," which outlined five categories: esports competitions, referees, registration of athletes, a national esports player points system, and rules of

competition (Ma 2006). An official guideline for competitive gaming not only legitimized esports, it also institutionalized a system and fostered stability.

In contrast, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) banned all television broadcasts of esports programs in 2004, in concern that it would have negative "ideological and moral" effects on minors (Xinhua News Agency 2020). Ironically, the decision came only a year after CCTV's documentary of the 2003 World Cyber Games (Lu 2016: 2196).

While mixed signals elicited confusion, the effects of the 2004 broadcast ban can be considered as a positive, though unintended, impetus for the development of non-TV livestreaming services such as that of Tencent. Optimizing its QQ platform, Tencent signed an agreement with CCTV.com that granted rights to live broadcast the 2008 Beijing Olympics online (Tencent Holdings 2008b). As a result, over ten million concurrent watchers experienced the Olympic Games through Tencent's video live broadcast (Tencent Holdings 2008a). The success of the online streaming business as illustrated during the Beijing Olympics most likely sent stronger positive signals to the esports industry at-large, overshadowing the negative implications of the 2004 SARFT regulation on TV broadcasts.

Thus, the government's inconsistent policy line consequently defined the spatial boundaries for esports. Esports was forbidden taboo in territories of traditional mass media such as broadcast television, but because it was not outlawed entirely, esports instead flourished as a major source of content in

the newly emerging media space manifested in online livestreaming. The spatial divide not only had structural implications, but it also delineated *who* would be part of the mass esports community. While the online space offered a much higher level of interconnectivity than traditional television, it was a space practically reserved for the tech-savvy youth. Hence, in years to come, esports as media (phase three of China's esports development), along with the "play for pay" livestreaming culture, would bloom into a lucrative industry, but one where nearly 97% of its users are younger than forty years old (Cunningham et al 2019, Analysys 2020).

Following its official recognition of esports, the Chinese government both at the central and municipal levels began to embark on various international projects in the industry. With Korea, China launched the China-Korea Cyber Games (CKCG) in 2005, holding its very first event in Beijing. CKCG was further developed in a series under the title International Esports Festival which lasted until 2011. Interestingly, the quality of the first CKCG was subject to scrutiny by esports fans both in and out of China. One Chinese fan who went to watch CKCG in Beijing expressed their complaints about the event in an online forum mainly consisting of English speakers. The individual writes,

> The prize is maybe supported by SK telecom & Hyundai & Pantech, that is all from Korea…but the organi[zation] of China is very poor, they know nothing about games. Let us see what funny things they have done:

> There's nothing to eat except boiled eggs…The 3-star hotel has no water…Because of the narrow tables the CKCG matches were delayed...(spacesmith 2005)

Ismangil and Fung argue that a poorly organized international event may be "emblematic for the stereotypical image that exists for many tournaments…hosted in or organized by Chinese organizations" (Ismangil and Fung 2021: 105). While the implications of bad optics are clear, following the previously quoted thread shows that the assumption is not fully substantiated.

In fact, one member from Canada named "mensrea" responded in the online forum,

> I would not be so negative about the state of affairs in China. It's still early days for China in a lot of ways. Hotels, service, LAN connections, quality of venue, etc. all these things will improve with time and experience. And if they don't, it probably means that the Chinese, for whatever reasons, have simply chosen not to attach the same degree of significance to the endeavors as others do. No big deal.

Though this nonchalance does not represent the general sentiment, it is worth noting that members of this international esports forum did not always exhibit the xenophobic or ultranationalist fervor seen *during* esports competitions. The response by "mensrea" exemplifies a willingness to "wait out" the current inadequacies that nascent industries usually portray.

Another individual (going by the name “haduken”) who, according to the context of their comment appears to be Chinese, adds another interesting layer to how Chinese living overseas (in Australia) perceive the so-called “Chinese Model” of national rebranding:

> Hey, I’m allowed to bag my own country!
>
> Anyhow, my patriot[i]sm only kicks in when foreigners bad mouth China... I do have a few opinions regarding the affairs of my country but lately I have grown more critical after reading threads after threads of Chinese posters who only think in terms of pride and so called "face reclaiming".
>
> It just appears that everyone back there only want something utterly superficial. They want China to be strong, to be united and when you ask them why? they tell you it is so that foreigners can treat them as equals and they can stand tall T_T. No one thinks to better the country or anything... if anything went wrong, they blame the society while totally neglecting their own responsibilities... I’m just sadden by this whole perceived notion of success in my culture...

The tone that these two Chinese individuals employ, their candor and willingness to openly criticize their own country in English, demonstrates a much more complex dynamic in how members within the community interact. First, contrary to Ismangil’s repeated concerns, the Chinese esports community has not been entirely isolated (Ismangil 2018: 205). As his subject

of analysis is the more recent Dota 2 community, we must explore if and, if so, what has caused intracommunity dynamics to shift toward an internalization and normalization of nationalism.

Moreover, the conventional literature on the Chinese esports community has been overly focused on the group as an isolated collective rather than examining the individual personalities and perceptions that make up the collective. Chinese members of the global esports community, have, as seen above, been critical of the gap between what the state officially says of becoming and what the actual reality portrays. One may explain that criticism is a form of love, engendering out of hope that the other makes appropriate improvements for the better in the long-run. Yet nonetheless, what is important for our discussion is the ways in which Chinese individuals are integrated within the global society, as well as the ways in which the narrative that Chinese esports fans share are not necessarily in line with the state's official message.

The development from Chinese esports as a grassroots community to a national institution has not stopped there. In the latter half of the 2000s, the internationalization of esports—on an official level—was being realized. For the first time in any major international sports event, the 2007 Asian Indoor Games introduced esports as an official category. The three games played at the Games were NBA Live 07, FIFA 07, and Need for Speed: Most Wanted,

in all of which the Chinese national team placed first (Olympic Council of Asia 2007).

The choice of these three games is also worth highlighting, as it seems, at least according to one esports journalist, to suggest the outcomes of a compromise (Aggro Gaming 2019). The expansion of the esports franchise has stirred much global debate about whether esports can or cannot be considered a sport. As the discussion itself goes beyond the purview of this paper, I will simply note that it has been, especially during the time of the second Asian Indoor Games, hotly contested. Thus, despite the wide popularity of idiosyncratic esports titles such as StarCraft or CounterStrike, the organizers of the Indoor Games may have opted to incorporate sports simulation genres (as sports fans will be more familiar to games that appear similar to traditional sports) to avoid stirring unnecessary complaints.

In this context, again, there are social structures and factors related to cultural diffusion that have pushed forth this compromise—the inertia stalling a more rapidly widening acceptance of esports as sports, as well as the forces pushing for the diametrically opposite goal. The same way the import of the Internet and video games sparked disputes between the believers of their productivity and those of their pathological effects, the question of whether esports is a sport may be the next contested topic of debate. Yet if certain compromises can be made, as in the case with the Asian Indoor Games, convergence may be the ultimate outcome.

Esports players' success evidenced at the Second Asian Indoor Games may have further convinced the government to take even more proactive measures to support the industry. Attesting to this were the revisions made by the General Administration of Sports in 2008 which recognized esports as the 78th national sport, twenty-two steps above its previous rank (Yang 2018). In 2009, the General Administration of Sports established an esports department that would solely focus on China's esports sector (Sports Information Center 2014). In the same year, China participated in the 3rd Asian Indoor Games, where He Xuebin became the sole gold medalist in esports.

Table 2 outlines a few of the major breakthroughs that occurred in China's esports development from 2003 to 2010. As seen in this chart, the second phase for Chinese esports was mostly about legitimation and professionalization. It was also about the transnationalization of esports and China's active involvement in the global esports community, through events sanctioned directly by the government, as well as through active participation of average Chinese gamers in international online forums. China, in 2009, hosted its first World Cyber Games in Chengdu. In 2010, the first National Esports Work Conference was held, which garnered more attention to the global governance structure of this rising industry. China's esports community, by no means, was touted the leader in the global esports scene—this was still a position saved by the highly-advanced South Korean players.

[Table 2] Major Breakthroughs in China's Esports Development, 2003-2010

2003	General Administration of Sport of China nominates esports as the 99th national sport
2004	All China Sports Federation (ACSF) launches the first China eSports Games (CEG)
2005	The inaugural China-Korea Cyber Games (CKCG) occurs in Beijing
2006	International Summit Forum of China's Esports occurs
2006	All-China Sports Federation (ACSF) releases "Regulations on the Management of Esports"
2007	The 2nd Asian Indoor Games hosts three esports categories
2008	General Administration of Sport of China nominates esports as the 78th national sport
2008	WarCraft 3 player Zhang Xiangling selected to bear the torch for the Beijing Olympics
2009	General Administration of Sport of China establishes the Esports Department
2009	China hosts its first World Cyber Games in Chengu
2010	National Esports Work Conference is held

5.3 Phase 3: Esports as Media

In merely a decade, China's esports had evolved from a game played by amateurs to a sport for professional players. In the following years, China's esports would undergo another full-fledged transformation into a major media enterprise at the center of global esports.

First, it is worth noting the role of the Chinese government in esports during this final phase of development. In stark contrast to the 2004 ban of all television broadcasting of game-related content, China's state channel CCTV-5 broadcasted an esports documentary as an episode of "The World of Sports" (体育人间) in January 2014 (CCTV 2014). The documentary primarily featured professional esports players of the Chinese League of Legends team Royal Club, highlighting their sensational journey at the 2013 League of Legends World Championship. Though the team was defeated by Korea's SK Telecom T1 at the finals, the documentary itself was a massive success. Aired on China's main sports TV channel, the show was so well received that the search volume for "The World of Sports"—according to the Baidu Index, which tracks the relative search volume for selected keywords on Baidu's search engine—surged from less than 200 to 8,554 in merely two days (Sina Games 2014).

CCTV's broadcast of the documentary in 2014 marked a critical moment in China's esports history for two reasons. For one, it symbolized the convergence of traditional and non-traditional media. As explained in the

previous section, esports, as a form of gaming, could not be televised ever since the 2004 SARFT ban. Yet it was the state's very own central broadcaster that violated and thus essentially invalidated this rule, officially opening the mainstream media gateway for esports.

This ties into the second point, which is that the state, by publicly endorsing esports in a media space previously untainted by games, began to clearly distinguish esports as separate from games. Since the early 2000s, the state's narrative regarding online games has and continues to be one centered around health and addiction (Xiang 2019). In contrast to the "pathological" image tied to games in general, esports, on the other hand, is deemed a "productive" activity, further legitimized by its professional nature and therefore one that the state can actively support (Zhang 2013). Hence, the government's policies toward esports and games are not necessarily inconsistent but, to be precise, one that is consistently and deliberately different.

Nonetheless, the introduction of esports into mainstream television rarely impacted the trajectory of esports. As aforementioned, esports, in both China and in the rest of the world, had already been evolving into new forms of media entertainment that surpass the scale of traditional media. Especially significant was the integration of livestreaming services to esports leagues and competitions, which brought the esports scene closer to a much wider audience (Taylor 2018). Service platforms BiliBili, DouYu, and HuYa

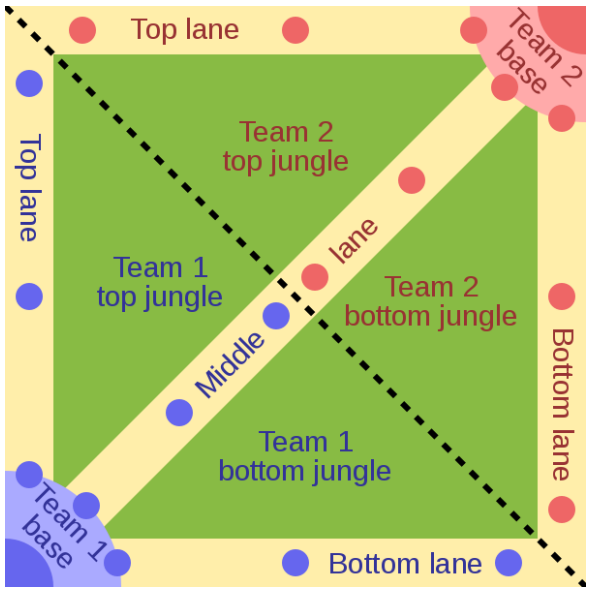
brought China's esports scene to fans' computers and homes (Zhao and Lin 2021). Esports was no longer just a sport, but the full-fledged convergence of games, sports, and media.

Significantly, esports' transformation into a widely popular form of media entertainment owes much to global gaming market trends. If phases one and two of China's esports history can be defined by the rise of real-time strategy (RTS) and first-person shooter (FPS) genres, phase three is most aptly described as the era of the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA). MOBA is a subgenre of RTS, meaning that real-time strategic play is of the essence. In addition, it bears resemblance to the massively multiplayer online role-play game (MMORPG) genre in that more than one player participates in a single game. The unique feature of MOBA is that multiple players are divided into two teams that compete against each other, while each player takes on the role of a single character within each game. The objective is to defeat the enemy team's base by devising up teamplay strategies.

Two MOBA titles are especially noteworthy in the Chinese market: League of Legends (LoL) and Dota 2. The multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) genre has come to the very forefront of modern esports media because their strategic plots fit perfectly with the types of content that garner spectatorship. The ultimate goal in both Dota 2 and LoL is to destroy the enemy's base, located on opposite ends of the map as shown in Figure 7. For each game, there are two teams, each consisting of five players that each take

a specific role or position. (In the case of LoL, the five positions are Top, Mid, Bot, Support, and Jungle; when referring to a player of a certain position, they are called toplaners, midlaners, botlaner, supporter, and jungler, respectively). While the players technically have infinite lives, the characters or champions they play get stronger by killing (or assist in killing) its opponents.

[Figure 7] Map of MOBA Genre Games
(Raizin 2013)



This format perfectly suits what it takes to be an entertaining form of media. Regarding the in-game contents, each game can play out in an infinite number of possible scenarios, adding an element of surprise. Although the team's performance in competitions ultimately depends on their teamwork and individual mechanical prowess, the randomness of each game implies that underdog stories are always possible. In terms of camerawork—the

media production side of broadcasting, it is relatively easy to follow the action, as there are only ten players in one match. Moreover, because certain tactical patterns exist, it is not difficult to anticipate where the next fight will occur.

Hence, the "media" part of esports now distinguishes what games can or cannot be developed into esports. In the first two phases, camerawork did not factor in significantly, especially since livestreaming services were not yet available. Now esports is not solely about the contents of the game, but how well those contents can be shared and conveyed to the audience. The structure has definitely been transformed, and thus warrants cultural implications on social practices within the esports society.

While new trends in gaming helped lay the groundwork for popular esports entertainment to materialize, China also secured its leadership position in the global esports market, particularly through the Chinese tech giant Tencent. First and foremost, Tencent, in the early 2010s, fervently began to acquire international game companies. Most notably, Tencent purchased a majority stake in the American game publisher Riot Games—the creator of League of Legends (LoL)—in 2011, followed by an acquisition of 100% of the company's shares in 2015 (Tencent Holdings 2011, Osawa 2015). In addition, Tencent is also, as of October 2020, a major shareholder of Activision Blizzard, Epic Games, and Bluehole, each of which developed internationally-known esports titles.

[Table 3] Tencent's Ownership Structure of Four of the Top 10 Most-Watched eSports Games (2020)

Rank	*Game*	*Developer*	*Ownership of Tencent*
1	League of Legends	Riot Games (U.S.)	100%
6	Starcraft II	Activision Blizzard (U.S.)	5%
8	Fortnite	Epic Games (U.S.)	40%
9	Players' Unknown Battleground	Bluehole (South Korea)	11.5%

Source: Newzoo (2020), Tencent Holdings Limited (2016), Leonard et al (2020)

Domestically, Tencent has essentially "platformized" the infrastructure around esports by seeping into all three "streams" of the value chain: game production and distribution, esports tournament operations, and livestreaming (Zhao and Lin 2021). In addition to developing its own games, Tencent has been the main distributor of non-Chinese games such as League of Legends (LoL) in China's domestic market (Pham 2009). As an example of Tencent's control of the second stream, the tech giant, along with Riot Games, launched the subsidiary Tengjing Sports (TJ Sports) in 2019 and delegated the new company to operate the League of Legends Professional League (LPL) (TJ Sports, n.d.). Finally, Tencent, to this day, owns over 50% and 37% of the two most popular Chinese livestreaming platforms Huya and DouYu respectively, illustrating the corporation's reach in the third stream of the value chain (HUYA 2018, DouYu 2021: 29).

Of course, Tencent's strategy of vertical and horizontal expansion is not unprecedented; in fact, it is a fairly common practice in the media and entertainment industry. For example, in 1998, French company Vivendi purchased Blizzard Entertainment, the developer of the StarCraft and WarCraft franchises (Jin 2010: 144). Swedish conglomerate MTG acquired Turtle Entertainment in 2015, the online video entertainment network Zoomin.TV, as well as DreamHack, the largest digital festival in the world (Lindemann 2015, Lindemann and Lindmark 2015). As Jin explains, "transnationalization [is] not unique to gaming" but it is a general pattern observed in the media entertainment business (Jin 2010: 145-147).

Nevertheless, the case of Tencent is especially prominent because the company's near-monopoly feeds into a global esports market in which both power and money are virtually concentrated in China. To understand why, we must first highlight a distinctive feature of esports business, which is that, unlike traditional sports leagues such as the National Football League (NFL), the developer of the game also has total control over the esports league as well as any and all of the relevant IP. As the CEO of Unity Technologies, a global game development software company, explains,

> The economics [of esports] will end up being a little bit different [to sports] because it is not an unfettered competitive marketplace, [but] one that is controlled by an individual capitalist that thinks esports is a marketing program (Riccitiello 2020).

In other words, as long as Tencent has a major stake in the developer (e.g. Riot Games) of the esport-ized game, it will also maintain significant control over the esports (i.e. LPL and all the existing LoL leagues in the world) that evolved out of that game (e.g. League of Legends).

Another integral factor to consider is the business environment in China. In general, maintaining cordial (or at least, nonadversarial) relations with the state is critical for companies in China to do business (Ma and He 2018, Yan and Huang 2017, McGregor 2019, McGregor 2010). Accordingly, Tencent has been walking a fine line: while operating a lucrative business in games, the company continues to promote anti-addiction programs, making sure to publicly highlight its efforts to adhere to government sanctions against youth gaming (Tencent Holdings 2020: 6, 133). In essence, power relations among the Chinese government, Tencent, and the rest of the esports world exhibit a hierarchical structure, with of course, the state at the very top.

Apply the economics of esports to China's political-business environment and you have a global market in which power is monopolized by a single authoritarian state, and money, by one ever-enlarging tech conglomerate. This unique and uneven structural landscape has had sociopolitical implications on the professional esports scene. In October 2019, Hong Kong pro-gamer Ng Wai Chung, who goes by the name "blitzchung" in-game, shouted, "Liberate Hong Kong!" during a post-match interview at

the Hearthstone Grandmasters[14] (Matthiesen 2019). Blizzard Entertainment, the developer and publisher of Hearthstone and a subsidiary of Activision Blizzard, determined that "blitzchung" had violated official competition rules that prohibited players from "engaging in any act that…brings [players] into public disrepute, offends a portion or group of the public, or otherwise damages Blizzard image" (Blizzard Entertainment 2019a). As a result, the organization rescinded all prize money the player had earned during the season and banned him from participating in any other Hearthstone competition for the following year.[15] In light of the incident, Riot Games' Global Head of League of Legends Esports released an official statement discouraging players from discussing "sensitive issues (political, religious, or otherwise)" during esports broadcasts "to ensure that statements or actions on…official platforms (intended or not) do not escalate potentially sensitive situations" (Needham 2019). Though it is unclear whether the decisions were made independently or under pressure, the defensive posture of Blizzard Entertainment and Riot Games—both financially tied to Tencent and dependent on China's gaming market—clearly exemplified China's growing influence in the modern-day world of esports.

[14] Hearthstone is an online digital strategy card game developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment. The Hearthstone Grandmasters is a four-month-long professional-level Hearthstone tournament where players from North and South America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific compete (Blizzard Entertainment 2019b).

[15] Responding to public backlash, Blizzard then decided to return the prize money to "blitzchung" and reduce his suspension to six months (Brack 2019).

To be clear, this does not imply that digital conglomerates including Tencent are engineering their business and investment strategies as part of a concerted effort with the government to realize the Chinese Dream—a theory proposed by Yu (Yu 2018: 97). Fundamentally, as will be further discussed in the latter half of this section, Chinese esports is much more than a vehicle for recreating a nationalistic narrative. In response to the "blitzchung" incident, Tim Sweeney, the founder and CEO of Epic Games, wrote on Twitter that, "Epic supports the rights of Fortnite players and creators to speak about politics and human rights" (Sweeney 2019). Despite what the comment implied, Tencent did not resort to take retaliatory action; in fact, the tech giant took no action at all.

Another concern about any kind of monopolized, unequal network structure like that of the esports market is related to what Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman call "weaponized interdependence." According to these two scholars, "asymmetric network structures create the potential for…some states…to leverage"—or "weaponize"— "interdependent relations to coerce others" (Farrell and Newman 2019: 45). While it is true that China's esports market, as explained previously, is perhaps perfectly set for the Chinese state to "weaponize" its interdependent relations, it seems less likely for Tencent to go along with a political move of this kind. Tencent, upon its acquisition, promised that Riot Games would "remain its independent operations and its existing management team [would] continue to lead all aspects of the company," signaling to keep its investment relations and business operations

separate (Tencent Holdings 2011). In fact, Tencent's vow to stay on the sidelines of Riot Games' corporate territory hints to a token of goodwill: Tencent, as well as Riot Games, cares about maintaining the integrity and credibility of its international business operations and thus will unlikely risk damaging its own corporate reputation by exploiting its position in the market to achieve a political goal of the state.

If China's consolidation of power and money in the esports market laid the structural foundation for 21st century esports, the League of Legends (LoL) franchise is what truly brought China's esports league to the center-stage. Arguably, the most important game in global esports—*the* game of global esports—is League of Legends (LoL), as the content that its developer Riot Games provided throughout its decade-long history has raised the standards for the entire media entertainment industry. The game was first released in China in 2011, while the official League of Legends Professional League (LPL) was established two years later.

LoL was, and still is, a worldwide success both as a game and an esports franchise. To be exact, LoL is the most successful game to have been "esport-ized." Since the early 2010s, Riot Games has established league operations in twelve regions including Korea, Japan, China, the U.S., Europe, Southeast Asia, and South America. Every year, each regional league hosts two regular competitive seasons; after the Spring Season, Riot Games organizes a major international tournament titled the Mid-Season Invitational

(MSI), where the number-one teams of each region play against each other. After the regular Summer Season ends, the top one to three teams of each region are invited to the League of Legends World Championship (also called Worlds), which is considered the main event of the year. The systemized format of the year-long competition adds to the professionalism of LoL esports, while Worlds—as does the SuperBowl for the NFL—offers an exciting grand finale filled with festivities including live performances by worldwide musicians and celebrities.

Most significantly, international events such as MSI and Worlds offer formal opportunities for esports teams and communities of the twelve regional leagues to come together. In the very first MSI finals in 2015, LPL's very own Edward Gaming (EDG) defeated the Goliath of esports SK Telecom (SKT) T1 by a match score of 3:2, becoming the inaugural champions (LoL Esports 2015). While the two finalists comprised of players of Asian ethnicity, the entire event happened over a course of three days at Florida State University in the U.S. After the main event, international casters played against the professional players as a showmatch. All MSI games were livestreamed via various platforms including Twitch, YouTube, and DouYu, formulating an experience shared by esports fans all over the world. And now, with esports being recognized as an official category at the Asian Indoor Games, the Asian Games, and even the Olympics, the global esports community will become even more integrated than before.

Along with this extraordinary development, there is, of course, the underlying support of the esports community tied to each regional league. In the case of the LPL, Chinese fans interact with other fans as well as professional teams and players through WeChat, Weibo, and streaming services such as Huya and DouYu. One may argue that these separate Chinese platforms "lead…to a segregated audience which puts into question to what regard the government wants [China's esports] to be international" (Ismangil and Fung 2021: 98). Nevertheless, a closer examination into today's LoL esports reveals a more in-depth level of transnationalization than appears at first glance.

First of all, professional players are exposed to the non-Chinese community on a daily basis. Due to the vast number of online "trolls" in the Chinese LoL server, professional LPL players opt to play League in the Korean server, where they are naturally exposed to the Korean esports community. On any given day, you see a handful of Chinese players taking up the top 100 ranks of the Korean server (FOW n.d.). At the time of writing (May 10, 2021), thirteen professional Chinese players each take up a spot in the top 100, in addition to other nonprofessional Chinese gamers whose name appears on the list. Cyber "troll" behavior in general warrants a deeper discussion related to the psychological causes and conditions, as well as the sociological effects of these online customs. Explaining the frequency of such behavior as merely a "cultural" phenomenon unique to the Chinese esports community is too banal. But for our discourse on soft power, it is worth

concentrating on the unintentional effects of troll behavior, which prompt professional Chinese players to leave the domestic server and resort to non-Chinese gaming spaces. If the emergence of an unofficial yet solely Chinese Battle.net server was inspired by the technical inconveniences caused by the lack thereof, the collective move away from the domestic LoL server can be explained by the negative online "culture" arguably perpetuated by the game's nationwide popularity. The consequences are also worth comparing: the grassroots-built domestic server had the effect of bringing newly emerging groups of Chinese players to one virtual space, fostering institutions and the birth of a visible esports community. On the other hand, the diaspora out of the official domestic server has encouraged further integration of the professional esports communities in China and South Korea.

From a social structural perspective, the decision to resort to external resources to avoid potential internal conflict simultaneously sustains and shuns the social practices of "trolling." While it is widely known *why* LPL players are practicing and playing games on a non-Chinese server, these players, by distancing themselves from the problem are, in effect, allowing such behavior to persist. This also contrasts to the proactive attitudes of earlier StarCraft players who championed for change and led the institutionalization of esports.

Second, the LPL is a rather ethnically diverse league, the result of a culture that prioritizes skill over nationality. Team rosters usually include one

or two Korean athletes, who are recruited from the LCK or as amateurs ranking high up in the Korean server. Oftentimes, LPL teams would keep a close eye on overseas leagues, especially the LCK, and recruit regional or world champions who often come with an expensive price tag. As they continue this pattern, the level of competitive play of the LPL reaches new heights. Interestingly, what makes this form of talent recruitment possible is the previously mentioned esports market structure, which relatively enriches the LPL more in comparison to other regional leagues.

The careers of two Korean players in the LPL are particularly worth examining. The first is Eui-jin Song, or more commonly known by his in-game ID "Rookie." Only a year after debuting in the Korean LoL professional scene in 2014, he headed to China to join Invictus Gaming (iG), a now massively popular esports organization acquired and developed by Wang Si-Cong, the son of Dalian Wanda Group chairman Wang Jianlin. In his very first season in the LPL, Rookie led the team to the finals of the 2015 Spring Demacia Cup[16] and LPL Regional Finals, where iG beat team Qiao Gu in a landslide victory, ultimately placing second. This awarded their slot to compete in the 2015 LoL World Championship—an international competition whose prestige, for esports players, is equivalent to that of the World Cup. Rookie rose almost immediately to stardom in the LPL

[16] The Demacia Cup is a domestic LoL tournament in China, involving all 17 teams in the LPL and several teams from the secondary or tertiary leagues.

community, and was often cherished as the “star boy” of Wang Si-cong. In 2018, iG won their ticket to Worlds with a spectacular performance in both the Spring and Summer seasons of the LPL. This time, Rookie managed to lead the team to the very top, making iG the first Chinese team in esports history to take the Summoner’s Cup home (LoL Esports 2018).

Unlike most other “imports” (referring to non-Chinese players who are recruited from overseas), Rookie has stayed in China on iG ever since 2015, amassing an enormous fan-base in the country. He and DoinB—the second figure to be explored—are considered two of the most popular midlaners in the LPL. Rookie participated in three LoL All Star events, what Riot Games advertises as “a celebration of our sport’s most-loved personalities” (LoL Esports 2020).

Similar to Rookie, Taesang “DoinB” Kim is a star player in the current LPL scene. Born in Korea, he, like Rookie, was recruited to China in 2015 by Qiao Gu, a team that was later renamed to NewBee. In 2017 he left the team to join JD Gaming, run by, as the name suggests, Jingdong, the largest e-commerce retailer in China. Less than a year later, DoinB signed onto Rogue Warriors, a team in the LPL owned by ASUS, a multinational electronics company headquartered in Taiwan. He joined his current team FunPlus Phoenix (FPX) in late 2018. And under DoinB’s leadership, FPX successfully inherited the world champion title from iG in 2019, confirming the establishment of an LPL dynasty (LoL Esports 2019). The same year DoinB

officially registered his residency in China, illustrating his intentions to stay in the LPL for the long term.

To emphasize again, Chinese esports is in fact not merely about recreating a nationalistic narrative. While nationalism does exist in the esports fandom, it is only a part of the story. For one thing, sports has traditionally been considered to fuel tribalistic sentiments, especially when teams compete as national representatives in international events like the Olympic Games. Hence, it would be misleading to think that nationalism is a distinct feature of the Chinese esports community, let alone a culture that only exists in China.

Furthermore, as evidenced in the LPL scene, it appears that a form of social exchange occurs between the domestic LPL fans and the foreign "imports": as the former entrusts non-Chinese players such as Rookie and DoinB with their undue support, the professional gamers offer their long-term loyalty to the domestic league. This is not a phenomenon limited to Korean players. In 2018, Lê "SofM" Quang Duy became the first Vietnamese player to join the LPL, as well as the key player that led Suning to the 2020 World Championship finals. A handful of players and coaches from Taiwan and Singapore are also a pivotal part of the Chinese esports scene, and the LPL community is becoming more diverse by the year as teams recruit international talent. LPL's global expansion is therefore closely linked to the development of esports industries outside of China. As previously overlooked leagues in countries like Vietnam continue to cultivate world-class players,

Chinese esports clubs, like most other teams in the world, will increasingly seek for their talent. In exchange, success stories like that of "SofM" will further inspire young Vietnamese gamers to pursue careers like his—the exact same way "Sky" had sparked the dreams of thousands of esports youth in China.

Thus, by perpetuating and prioritizing meritocracy over nationality, the LPL is bound to become even more competitive than it is today. And this competitiveness is precisely what defines the LPL's prestige in the global esports community. Although South Korea has been traditionally known as the powerhouse of esports, the narrative has changed towards one that favors an "LPL-style" of play. The following excerpt from a former ESPN esports journalist highlights this:

> Year after year the patterned South Korean way of playing the game – the mastering of the game – resulted in international champions and champagne baths. That was until 2018…where the script was flipped on its head, the game enabling the team with the faster trigger finger, the teams who could push the pace the best and teamfight the ones rewarded with deep runs in the tournament. The heavy roaming, unorthodox-style of playing the game would extend into 2019, where the two teams who enjoyed moving around the map of Summoner's Rift[17] the most, FunPlus

[17] The Summoner's Rift refers to the spatial map or field on which players play League of Legends esports games.

Phoenix and G2 Esports, made the worlds final while all three South Korean teams watched from home (Erzberger 2020).

Hence, there is an organically driven interest for the LPL in the global esports community. For example, South Korean livestreaming platforms themselves have made regular efforts to livestream the LPL on their websites. In 2016, even before an LPL team won the World Championship, Korean livestreaming platform AfreecaTV signed with the LPL to broadcast the Chinese league (Korea JoongAng Daily 2016, Thisisgame 2020). It is also true that teams and players of one league regularly follow and scrutinize how teams and players strategize their plays in another. Hence, when one notices that "teams and mid laners all around the world talked about how they wanted to play in the style of Kim 'Doinb' Tae-sang and FPX," it can be translated, in esports jargon, that Doinb led the "meta" of the global competitive LoL scene which thus compelled other clubs to study his style of play (Rand 2020). In order to do that, they would have to watch China's LPL.

In sum, the evident success of LPL styles of play—a Chinese invention—made China's esports culture more diffusible. International esports clubs began to borrow from the LPL playbook precisely because it worked. Hence, China's esports culture was both "odourless," in that its appeal was more so about its utility, and idiosyncratically Chinese, as everyone recognized the origins of such effective playstyle (Iwabuchi 2002: 27). This also implied that, as long as the game maintained its popularity

worldwide, the world-class level of play exhibited by professional esports players in China would never cease to garner international attention.

One thing to note, on the other hand, is that the rise of China's LoL esports is not necessarily the story of South Korea's permanent decline. Two consecutive international championship titles validated China's status as an esports powerhouse. But South Korean team Damwon Gaming retook that title in 2020, after they defeated China's Suning at the World Championship finals in Shanghai (LCK 2020). In return, Royal Never Give Up (RNG)—known as one of the original members of the LPL—beat Damwon at the 2021 MSI hosted in Reykjavik, Iceland (LoL Esports 2021). Hence, the set of wins and losses attests to the germination of an intense competitive rivalry between the South Korean and Chinese esports leagues. Though the prolonged dominance of South Korea's esports teams is now a part of the past, there is now a healthy though heated contest that perhaps will make the esports scene ever more fruitful and exciting.

Before concluding this section, I must clarify that Ismangil's concern about the isolation of Chinese esports communities seems completely unsubstantiated. As Keane and Chen highlight, "Chinese servers and websites have an international reach; that is, they are not blocked by foreign governments" (Keane and Chen 2017). Hence, as long as foreigners actively seek access to Chinese online media, they are free to do so. This is precisely what it means to attract. On the other hand, public outreach has now become

an integral part of the everyday practices of Chinese esports organizations. Despite Twitter being blocked in China, fourteen out of the sixteen teams in the LPL league have Twitter accounts, a majority of them actively engaging with the English-speaking community on a daily basis.

Moreover, there are the unofficial interlocutors who volunteer their services to translate Chinese news and media contents in English, allowing potentially isolated areas to be uncovered. Individuals who go by the Twitter profile "Linda Pro League" (@iCrystalization) and "Ran" (@ran_lpl) actively Tweet translations of Chinese players' interviews, community "scandals," clips of players' livestream, or even social media posts. While the language barriers do cause hindrances and by definition act as barriers between the LPL in-group and outgroup, the insulation is not as extreme, because community members such as Linda Pro League and Ran create tunnels for information to flow both ways.

One of the ways in which Chinese livestreaming companies also pull in Korean esports fans is by signing exclusive livestream contracts with a number of teams in the LoL Champions Korea (LCK) league. As of May 2021, Korean teams including HLE, Gen.G, and DK (originally named Damwon Gaming; last year's World Champions) are contracted to DouYu, meaning they cannot livestream their LoL games on other service platforms. In this way, Korean fans who want to watch LCK players are compelled to access

the DouYu platform, perhaps even make an account, and potentially end up watching other content as well.

Overall, the third phase of China's esports development illustrates a more complex, in-depth integration of China's esports into the world of esports. While the discussion is mostly limited to LoL esports, it must also be noted that LoL is the biggest esports franchise in the world today. According to Riot Games, the 2019 World Championship Finals was watched by 44 million concurrent viewers (LoL Esports Staff 2020). Compare this number to the viewership of the 2019 NBA Finals, you find that Worlds garnered more than twice that of the NBA (Sports Media Watch 2021). Although LoL esports is not a definitive nor complete portrayal of the global esports community at-large, it highlights many of the aspects that explain esports' transnationalization and epitomizes China's evolution into the epicenter of global esports.

5.4 Summary

To recap, Table 4 lays out major factors related to structure, culture, and the society of each developmental phase of China's esports, referring to the proposed three-dimensional analytical framework of soft power.

[Table 4] Summary of China's Esports Development Using Three-Dimensional Framework

	Structure	Culture	Society
Phase 1: Esports as a Game	• Interconnective social networks formed by physical (Internet cafes) and online (Battle.net) infrastructures	• New identities associated with in-game ranks and groups	• Formal association of amateur games (i.e. CSA) and online grassroots communities
Phase 2: Esports as a Sport	• Cross-regional networks formed by international competitions • Domestic esports fixed to online media space	• National prestige attached to esports professional players • Social stigmas against gaming	• Star players and early forms of online esports forums • Government regulations against games and policy support for esports
Phase 3: Esports as Media	• China's near-monopolization of global market • Full-fledged domestic and international social networks (through livestreaming and social media platforms)	• Values of meritocracy, professionalism, and productivity (esports and games deemed separate) • Distinctive Chinese style of gameplay exported overseas	• Ethnically diverse professional esports players in China • Enterprise-like esports community, involving full-sized clubs and diverse professional careers

It is critical to remember that each factor influences the other two in the form of a dynamic cycle (refer to Figure 3 in the introduction). Trade liberalization, the commercialization of the Internet, and advancements in game technology of the late 1990s shaped the social practices of Chinese gamers, who not only resorted to playing PC games, but also formalized amateur players' associations and contributed to grassroots communities online. Along with new in-game services and technologies, the social practices themselves created new identities and cultures in and around the relevant virtual and corporeal spaces. As the grassroots gamers' associations increasingly grew in size and prestige, international esports competitions offered opportunities for players to gain national recognition, which helped legitimize esports as a professional career. Though existing stigmas and government regulations against videogames confined domestic esports to the online space, this surprisingly facilitated the rapid growth of China's esports into a full-fledged enterprise linked to multiple economic and social sectors and professional careers. In particular, online services such as livestreaming and social media perfected the aspect of entertainment and lowered the barriers to access. The subsequent popularity of China's esports, along with Tencent's near-monopolization of the global market, enriched Chinese esports leagues and clubs. With both money and power, China's esports grew to realize the values of meritocracy, professionalism, and productivity, to which society and the state began to disassociate esports from the stigmas

attached to games. This, in turn, facilitated the diffusion of esports culture into the mainstream society of China. Although esports fans and players in China, even to this day, portray nationalistic tendencies, China's esports is less about nationalism and more about triumph itself. Hence, as long as players can prove their prowess, their nationality does not matter. The meritocratic system, combined with nearly unlimited cash of the industry, helps maintain China's outstanding level of performance and encourages a fearless style of play. Teams and players across the globe try to adopt the Chinese playbook, hoping it will also reward them a world or regional title. Likewise, the rest of the international esports community pays close attention to China, eagerly waiting to see what's next in store for the global esports scene.

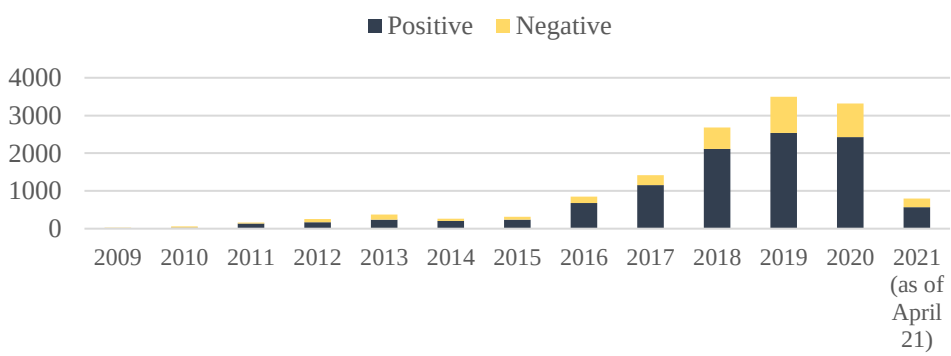
In short, the development of China's esports can also be described as China's journey from the periphery to the center of esports. Phase one, Esports as a Game, is about the grassroots formation of China's esports. Phase two, Esports as a Sport, centers around the introduction of China's esports to the global arena. Finally, phase three, Esports as Media, marks China's ascendance to the summit of international esports.

VI. China's Soft Power, Quantified

China's soft power success in esports is the culmination of a two-decade-long development. The interaction of structure, culture, and society (or social actors) is impossible to quantify, though the manifestation of those interactions can be illustrated to some degree. Hence, this section is dedicated to providing relevant quantitative data reflecting China's soft power deriving from esports.

First, I collected all the Tweets on the topic of "China esports" or "Chinese esports," published during the period from April 21, 2006 (when Twitter was launched) to April 21, 2021. The total number of Tweets observed is 14,027. Figure 7 shows the total annual number of Tweets posted on Chinese esports from 2009 to 2021. (There were no Tweets on Chinese esports prior to 2009). As seen in the data, the number of Tweets on the topic of Chinese esports has increased each year. The discursive volume appears to

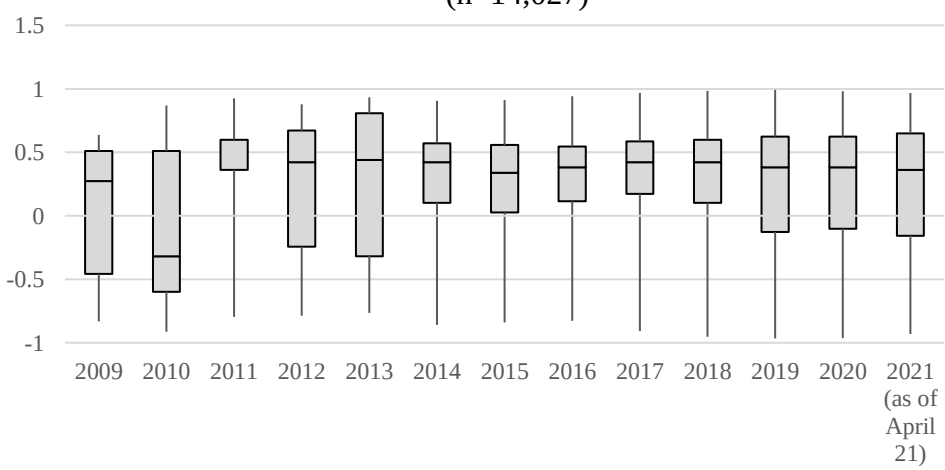
[Figure 8] Volume of Tweets, based on sentiment
(n = 14,027)



have increased exponentially from 2017 to 2018. This may be attributed to iG's victory of the 2018 World Championships—though the Tweet data extracted is not limited to merely the LPL or LoL.

After scraping and cleaning the textual data (removing emojis, punctuation marks, etc.), I conducted a sentiment analysis using VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary for sEntiment Reasoner), "a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool" (Hutto and Gilbert 2014). VADER analyzes the sample text and presents two major points of data: the first is the polarity, which assesses the positive or negative sentiment of the text, while the second has to do with the intensity of the sentiment. For purposes of this research, I only focus on the first set of data. The results (positive > 0, negative < 0) are shown in Figure 8.

[Figure 9] Sentiment Analysis, Tweets published in 2009 - April 2021
(n=14,027)



Tweets on the topic of Chinese esports generally convey positive sentiments. This is true across all observed periods of time, with the exception of 2010, where the median sentiment score is around -0.3. Ever since then, however, all median sentiment scores have shown positive values.

I conducted a similar analysis using results from Google News using the keywords, “Chinese esports” and “China esports.” As seen in Figure 9, the total number of articles observed between the years 2012 (no data exist pre-2012) and 2021 is 1,531. Similar to the first analysis, there is a significantly larger volume of articles with positive headlines than those with negative headlines on the topic of China’s esports. The total number of articles published on the matter has also dramatically increased from 2016 to 2017, and between 2017 and 2018—similar to the results shown in Figure 7.

[Figure 10] Volume of Articles, based on sentiment (n = 1,531)

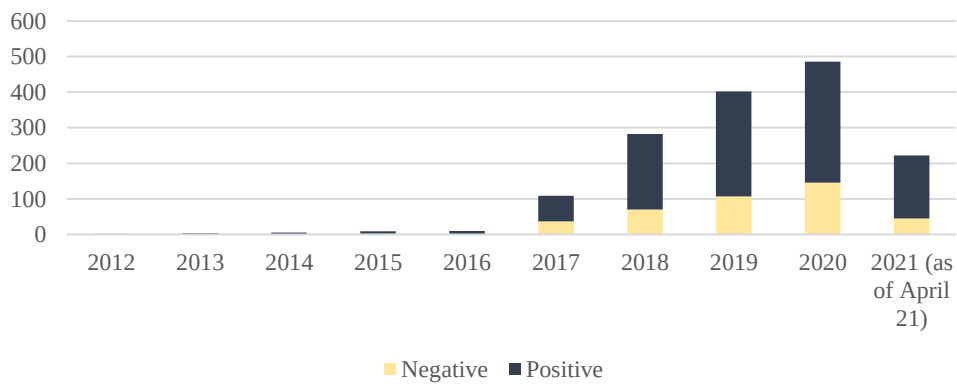
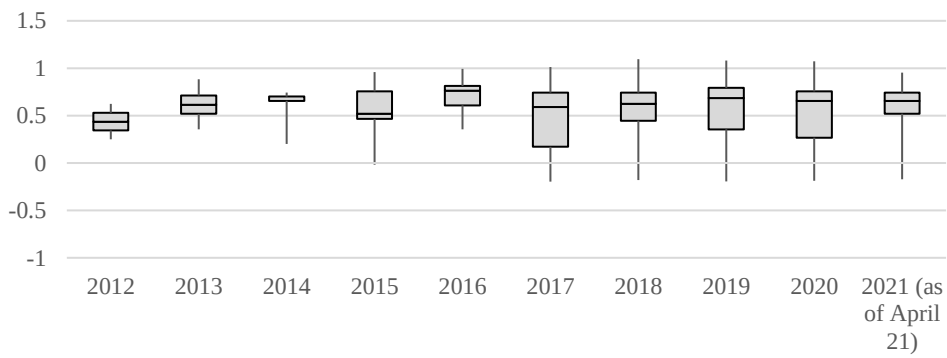


Figure 10 conveys the median sentiment scores of article headlines by year. Interestingly, the sentiment scores seem more versatile than those appeared in our analysis of Tweets. The statistical data suggest that international perceptions on China's esports seen both on Twitter and in news articles appear to be overwhelmingly positive throughout the past nine to eleven years.

[Figure 11] Sentiment Analysis, Headlines of Articles published in 2012 - April 21, 2021 (total n = 1,531)



In addition to the numerical data, a couple of incidents are worth examining, as they depict China's soft power in the international esports community. In as early as 2015, the game developers of Dota 2 posted a one-minute video to celebrate the Lunar New Year (or Chinese New Year). The video was entitled "Dota 2: The Coming of the Year Beast" while the event surrounding it was referred to as the "New Bloom Festival" (Valve 2021). In a similar vein, Riot Games released seven more champion "skins"—or

aesthetic overlays—in League of Legends in celebration of the Lunar New Year (whatacoolwitch 2021). The company also released a number of skins for its mobile game *Wild Rift*, in addition to creating a "cinematic" that would be broadcasted in between matches in most, if not all, leagues around the world (League of Legends 2021). The cultural motifs, the setting, even the language that appear in the three-minute clip are distinctively Chinese. The graphics especially show the contrasting elements of China's traditional culture and its highly-developed metropolitan cities. Symbolizing China's rich history and promising future, Riot Games' illustration influences the discursive narrative revolving around China in a way that is favorable to the state. But no propaganda is involved; it is merely the outcome of China's soft power.

Last year, Riot Games released a new champion (refers to the characters played in the game) by the name Seraphine. Her release was so-called *hyped* after a mysterious computer-graphic "influencer" named "Seraphine" appeared on Twitter in June.

[Figure 12] Twitter account of a computer-graphic influencer "Seraphine"

On this Twitter account, images of a clearly animated character, through meticulous renderings, had her posing in front of buildings, cities, and even restaurants that existed in real-life. The extent to which this artificial character was anthropomorphized by these renderings made it all seem too real. Riot Games soon announced that Seraphine was their newest release, all the while continuing to manage her Twitter account to prolong the narrative of a virtual reality. She was clearly "treated" differently, as she fit nowhere in the League of Legends universe populated by champions wearing rags allusive of Greek gods, medieval crowns and shining armor. Seraphine, on the other hand, was both temporally and spatially present, with us, idolized as the new member of K/DA, a virtual girl band composed of four LoL female champions. Then

Riot recruited a Chinese singer to embody Seraphine in the human world, adding a layer of ethnic and cultural symbolism to this token idol. Seraphine represented the girl next door but one who was also modern, international, influential; she represented China, in the way the country was seen in the world of esports.

VII. Conclusion

The path following the development of China's esports illuminates how the nonstop, cyclical interplay of the three dimensions—structure, culture, and society—has resulted in a greater vigor of China's soft power. At the end of this seemingly artless transformation, China is at the very center of global esports, as a gatekeeper of the esports market, the "meta-changer" of esports culture, and the leader of the esports community. Most importantly, China's image as an esports powerhouse has translated into real soft power, as members of the esports enterprise "co-opt" to Chinese interests.

One may reasonably argue that the subject being observed (China's esports development) and the framework being employed (a three-dimensional model of soft power) are incompatible in terms of scale. To respond, I do admit that the paper analyzes a niche to explain a system. Nonetheless, that does, in no way, invalidate the explanation since, oftentimes, it is the microscopic findings that uncover truths about nature's entirety.

From a policy standpoint, the story of China's esports development offers an extremely important lesson to those striving to increase national soft power using cultural resources. Unfortunately, it seems that a conspicuously government-sponsored approach is not effective. Rather, the attraction, for the most part, needs to be galvanized organically, similar to how China's esports gained international popularity and authority. This does not necessarily mean governments have absolutely no role to play. The same way

the Chinese government officially recognized and thus legitimized esports in the country, the state can contribute to the establishment of relevant legal and political institutions that support the development of cultural industries. Nevertheless, cultural developments that are not apparently operated by the government are more likely to be successful in enhancing soft power.

Apart from its policy implications, the paper is also a starting point for the political science discourse on esports. Tencent's quasi-monopoly of the esports and gaming market warrants discussion about China's political economy. For example, to what extent is Tencent and the global esports industry vulnerable to the one-party government of China? How do government actions, such as antitrust crackdowns, impact the stability of the domestic and international esports market (Li and Zhu 2021)? Related to geopolitics, China's concentration of power in the esports world may imply its ability to drive the cultural narrative. Esports is a much more advanced form of entertainment when compared to music and films; in fact, not only does it possess elements of both music *and* film, esports is inherently a social activity, entailing a much deeper level of engagement. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has, unlike traditional sports, barely interrupted global esports leagues, which again proves the resoluteness of this form of digital media entertainment. Considering these traits, it may be worth exploring how esports shapes the overall digital cultural landscape in the coming years and

what kind of domestic and foreign policies states implement to resist or adapt to these changes.

Another important subject is the role that esports plays in diplomacy. International esports events, where different peoples come together with a united passion for games, essentially epitomize people-to-people exchange and cooperation. In the way the Olympics has oftentimes become platforms for summitry and peacemaking (i.e., 2018 PyeongChang Olympics), will mega-events like the LoL World Championship be used as diplomatic opportunities? Already in 2019, during the 12th Trilateral Cultural Content Forum, the governments of Korea, Japan, and China agreed to launch a trilateral esports competition, although the tournament—now titled Esports Championships East Asia 2021—was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (KeSPA 2019). Once the tournament takes place in September 2021, it will become the first esports event to be held through trilateral efforts at the state-level. What is of particular interest is whether the event will serve to thaw intraregional tensions or, on the contrary, deepen nationalistic sentiments—at this point, all we can do is wait and see.

At the end of the day, the world of esports is vast—and it is only getting bigger. Hence, there is so much to learn and explore. Gaming is central to esports, but esports is not entirely about gaming. More accurately, esports is about the gamers and game-lovers, the sensational victories of underdogs and the legends of unstoppable champions; it is about the team's perforamce

during the season *and* about players' movements off-season; it is for the homebodies cheering in front of a screen as much as it is for the fans shouting in a stadium. Esports is ultimately about the people, and as long as the people are there, esports will be too.

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초 록

이스포츠와 중국의 소프트파워 부상

현재까지 논의된 소프트파워 연구는 문화자원에서 비롯된 소프트파워 전환 메커니즘을 지나치게 간소화한 이론적 모델에 의존하고 있다. 때문에, 실제 소프트파워 증강 과정을 이해하기 위해서는 구조적·문화적·사회적 변화를 중심으로 한 3차원 모델을 통한 분석이 필요하다. 본 논문은 이와 같은 3차원 모델을 기반으로 이스포츠를 통한 중국의 소프트 파워 부상에 대한 사례를 연구하고자 한다. 결과적으로, 중국의 이스포츠 발전이 이루어진 네트워크 구조의 특성과 문화적 전파에 따른 신·구 문화의 공존과 융합, 그리고 시류에 알맞은 사회적 변화가 중국이 세계 이스포츠의 중심축으로 성장하는 토대가 되었다. 즉, 이러한 이스포츠 발전 배경 속에 중국은 21세기 문화적 자원을 통한 성공적인 소프트파워의 향상을 낳았다.

주요어: 중국, 소프트파워, 이스포츠, 게임, 문화, 디지털 미디어

학 번: 2019-28586

Acknowledgements

The journey following the development of China's esports has been long, and one that would not have been possible without the invaluable guidance of my advisor Professor Seong Ho Sheen and committee chair Professor Jiyeoun Song, both from whom I still have much to learn. I also express my sincere gratitude to committee vice chair Professor Diana Kim, whose knowledge and kindness have been a source of inspiration since my undergraduate years.

I send my warm thanks to the members of the Institute of International Affairs (IIA), especially Professor Cheol Hee Park, Dr. Tae Hee Yoon, Dr. Youn Ki, and all my fellow colleagues for their endless generosity and wise advice.

I extend my utmost appreciation to Dad, Mom, and my two lovely grandmothers for their unconditional love and enthusiastic support. Special thanks to my brother, who introduced me to the world of games and esports. And of course, I thank my four endearing dogs, for staying by my side throughout all the sleepless nights.

I am extremely grateful to my friends and close acquaintances for their loyalty and laughter, which have made this journey all the more worthwhile. I am greatly indebted to the teachers and mentors that sparked and encouraged my intellectual curiosity, the fuel that continues to push me forward.

Finally, I send my regards to all the people who conceived, cultivated, and contributed to the universe of esports, to which I dedicate this quest of the Ionian Enchantment.