Master Thesis

eSports: the newest addition to China's Public Diplomacy

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Abstract

Electronic sports (or eSports), similarly to traditional sports, due to the extensive broadcasting of events internationally, has a potential of becoming a soft power resource in countries' Public Diplomacy (PD) endeavours. Sports diplomacy has been a popular topic in recent years, discovering states' ability to improve their international image, while players and teams do the same by winning international competitions. However, eSports has an additional value in PD as it can potentially sneak in cultural and political values through artistic video game content. Even so, there has been little to no research on the use of eSports in Public Diplomacy, which will be presented in this thesis. To achieve that, China has been used as a basis for this single-case study, as this country's eSports industry is the biggest in the world in terms of revenue and the size of audiences it attracts. Additionally, the introduced in August 2021 game restrictions for adolescents in China create a dilemma for the future ability of China's actors to use eSports in PD. Therefore, the research question, "how can Chinese state and non-state actors use eSports in Public Diplomacy (PD)?" explores this problem by taking non-state actors into consideration as important partners and independent actors that create PD. This also implies challenging the traditional, state-centric view on China's Public Diplomacy. The research was explored by using PD theories, with the inclusion of the Domestic Dimension concept that explains how non-state actors can be receivers of Public Diplomacy as well as partners and independent public diplomats. Concepts like soft and smart power and strategic narrative helped understand how eSports can be turned into a soft power resource, while fragmented authoritarianism was used as a framework to challenge the monolithic, state-centred view of China. The findings have shown that various state and non-state actors in China have already employed eSports in PD, however the start of the pandemic and the introduction of aforementioned restrictions have halted such endeavours. State actors like the Ministry of Culture adapted eSports into cultural diplomacy by giving it a label of a form of China's digital culture, which then was embedded in existing projects like the Belt and Road Initiative. Non-state actors like Tencent or city governments often supported state actors' strategies by organising internationally broadcast events. Moreover, Tencent owns many international and local game developers and focuses on creating eSports titles that present Chinese culture and China in a good light. Concluding, the research has shown that even while facing the current restrictive difficulties, eSports as a PD tool will continue to grow in China. The state will limit imported eSports titles, whereas companies like Tencent can keep creating eSports and video game content that acts as a part of China's cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: eSports, Public Diplomacy, China, Soft Power, Tencent, Diplomacy, eSports diplomacy, e-sports, non-state actors

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1.   Introduction

Stewart Brand, the organiser of the first ever video game competition of 1972 at the Stanford University in Los Altos, California at the time would have never expected that in 40 to 50 years the 'game competitions' could turn into an actual eSports *industry* with millions of dollars invested into it (Baker, 2016). He would have probably never expected that a video game title could fill up a 2002 Football World Cup stadium. We should all expect the unexpected, as in the 2014 League of Legends (LoL) World Championship this was achieved, with 40,000 people in the stadium in Seoul and another 32 millions watching the game from their homes (Evans, 2014). The growth of the eSport industry in itself is also unequivocal, as already in 2019 it broke the 1 billion yearly revenue mark (Kim et. al., 2020, p. 1861). For the players competing in the 1972 "Spacewar" tournament at the Stanford University, a yearly "Rolling Stone" magazine subscriptions and bragging rights after winning the tournament were enough of a prize. These days, eSports is by far an occupation for many people around the globe. That also goes for the country in the spotlight of this thesis - China. The aforementioned 2014 LoL World Championship final match (later: Worlds' finals) online viewership record was beaten by a large margin in the 2021 LoL World Championship organised in Iceland, when 170 million viewers from around the globe watched Chinese team Edward Gaming (EDG) beat Korea's Damwon KIA[1] (Xin et al., 2021).

After the Chinese government officially and quite surprisingly branded video games as a "cultural opium", and announced a limit of 3 hours gaming per week for adolescents, the home of the biggest eSports audience globally is potentially on the verge of collapsing (Newzoo, 2022). In the eSports competitions, where most players reach their peak performance in their early 20s, the crackdown impedes the development of young eSports talents in China, inviting questions whether the country can still support its eSports scene, with varying responses (Tiao, 2021; Riordan, 2021). This situation creates an interesting crossroad for the development of eSports in China, however this particular research will be conducted in a less known junction, which is the adaptation of eSports in Public Diplomacy (PD). We have seen the sports diplomacy academia grow in size, with many

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[1] The event was held with limited on-site spectators due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Xin et al., 2021).

interesting results, showcasing how sports have been used in diplomacy for hundreds of years. As we leap thousands of miles forward in technological development, the (e)Sportspeople of current days score their goals and earn trophies in front of computer screens. Notwithstanding its popularity worldwide, the topic of eSports is still rarely explored in PD academia. However, with the crackdown introduced in September 2021 and the Asian Games 2022 Hangzhou in September, which will include the first ever medal eSports competition in an Olympic-organised event, we are in the middle of a major transformation period for China's and world eSports scene. Closing on to such an important event, where Chinese and other countries' players can compete, wearing their flags on their chest, playing games developed in China clashes with the idea that in years the ability to 'produce' eSports talents might be disrupted because of the new regulations. This creates a dilemma that will be explored using the research question presented below.

1.1. Research question

The above considerations regarding the potential use of eSports as a PD tool invites a question that will be used throughout this thesis: **how can Chinese state and non-state actors use eSports in Public Diplomacy (PD)?** The current extent of regulations puts a question mark over the ability of Chinese actors to implement eSports in PD. Conversely, the fact that many non-state actors participate in creating the eSports ecosystem (Scholz, 2019), invites an assumption that this fact may challenge the traditional top-down character of Chinese PD. These considerations require identifying the stakeholders in Chinese eSports, whether and how they have used eSports in PD until now and conclude whether Chinese actors can still do that amongst the current official difficulties.

In order to reach that goal, a literature review will be conducted below, to explore intricacies behind eSports academic research. Following the literature review, methodological reflections will be explored, identifying the need to analyse the topic by including non-state actors into this equation. A presentation of the theoretical framework used for the analysis will be introduced in the next chapter. In the empirical chapter, a background history of Chinese Public Diplomacy and eSports will be shown, while also highlighting the economic development of the industry throughout the years. Next up, the most important findings will be presented and analysed in the analytic section. Finally, the conclusion

will summarise the thesis in its entirety, highlighting what has been discovered and what is still unknown in this broadly underanalysed topic.

2.   Literature review

It is important to briefly delineate the extent the international academia has explored the topic of eSports, eSports in China and eSports' use in PD. To achieve this, a literature review that encompasses these three topics will help to "survey the current state of knowledge in the area of inquiry" (Bhattarcherjee, 2012).

2.1.   What is eSports?

Delineation of eSports (or electronic sports, esports, Esports; throughout this paper "eSports" will be used) is a challenge that many tried to face, but due to its multifaceted nature, creating a concrete definition of the concept is near impossible. Wagner faced the challenge of defining eSports as early as 2006, when he argued that eSports is an "an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies" (Wagner, 2006). However, the rise of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) eSports games[2] that Cranmer et. al (2020) called "immersive reality sports" show that eSports can help develop both mental *and* physical abilities of the players. The starting point of defining eSports is by far the use of information technology (Witkowski, 2012; Hamari and Sjöblom 2017; Murray et al., 2020) with the variations in the comparisons to traditional sports, the extent of organisational supervision or spectatorship (Reitman et al., 2020). Witkowski simplifies the definition of eSports to "organised and competitive approach to playing computer games" (Witkowski 2012, p. 350). Hamari and Sjöblom, for example, argue that eSport is "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces" (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017, p. 213). Taylor (2016), however, associates eSports closely with media and spectatorship as it is a "spectator-driven sport, carried through promotional activities; broadcasting infrastructures; the socioeconomic organisation of teams,

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[2] Games' titles include but are not limited to the likes of Echo Arena, Pavlov and Onward (VRmasterleague.com, 2022).

tournaments, and leagues; and the embodied performances of players" (Taylor, 2016, p. 116; Reitman et al., 2020). Taylor's definition provides an important emphasis on the pageantry and viewership of the eSports events, as in the still underdeveloped eSports industry, viewership is one of the most important factors to consider for all the potential sponsors, securing eSports' livelihood. This explains why titles like Overwatch and Hearthstone are increasingly being considered as "dead games[3]" due to their constantly declining viewership on streaming sites like Twitch or Youtube (Borisov, 2021; Ashley, 2021). The volume of the different eSports definitions is also caused by the fact that the eSports research is embedded in a wide variety of fields. Reitman et al. has shown that until 2018, 150 tested publications concerning eSports were analysed in 7 different fields, whereas media studies, informatics, business and sports management were the four most popular ones (Reitman et al., 2020, p. 33). For example, the question whether eSports is a 'real sport' has been one of the most popular dilemmas in the field (Jenny et al., 2016; Hallmann & Giel, 2017; Thiel & John, 2018; Willimczik, 2019; Tjønndal, 2020). Jenny et. al (2016) by exploring the similarities between sports and eSports has concluded that due to the "lack of physicality in eSports (...) a refinement of the definition of sport (...) will need to occur before eSports are totally accepted by the majority of society as authentic version of sport (Jenny et al., 2016, p. 15). While the resolvement of the dilemma is not a goal of this paper, the eSports-as-sport discussion is important and pivotal to eSports' acceptance by the general public and its inclusion in e.g. Olympic Games. Furthermore in business for instance, Scholz's book titled "eSports is Business" provides a macro-level examination of eSports' "business level network". His stakeholder analysis is particularly important as it showcases the plethora of actors the eSports industry involves and the interdependencies all across the eSports ecosystem. He argues that game developers provide the foundation for events, they create the rules of competitions, while also providing the most crucial piece of pro-gaming: the eSports titles themselves (Scholz, 2019); Peng et al. (2020) build their analysis on Scholz's work and argue that in order for eSports industry to achieve sustainability, governments must take the central role of administrative organisation. Kim et al. (2020) measure the growth of eSports throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential to sustain the growth in the following years; media researchers have explored e.g. the eSports media consumers' perception of media offerings (Ji & Hanna, 2019); Scholz (2020) explores the uniqueness of eSports as a media source due to the amount of shareholders it concerns, requiring specially tailored media management

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[3] "Dead", as in steadily losing players/viewership, i.e. "not played nor watched".

strategies. Some researchers also brought up the idea of "eSports tourism", where various stakeholders can promote themselves through online and stationary eSports events (Becka et al., 2021; Masłowski & Karasiewicz, 2021). Finally, a small fraction of publications mentioned the potential use of eSports in the topic of public diplomacy and soft power creation. Murray et al. (2020) called for adaptation of sport diplomacy techniques in the eSports ecosystem to assure the sustainability of the industry, whereas Furrer (2020) explored the potential use of eSports in China's public diplomacy strategies. More recently, Wong & Meng-Lewis (2022) have analysed China's eSports soft power creation using a sports diplomacy model.

On China's key research publishing website, CNKI.net, media-related research also proves to be one of the utmost concern. Xie's (2017) research concerns the intellectual property rights on popular Chinese streaming websites (like Douyu or Huya); Zhang (2015) researches the "platformisation" of Chinese streaming sites whereas Ding (2016) analyses the development models of said websites. In a different fashion, He and Cao (2018) follow the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official newspaper People's Daily discourse change of the video game and eSports topic in years 1982-2017. Some other research papers concern the need to institutionalise China's eSports industry in order to counter the negative influences (like game addiction) (Yi, 2018); general development of the eSports industry in China (Yang et al., 2014; Chen, 2015; Zhang, 2016) or the analysis of the development of China's eSports events (Tan, 2018).

This part of the literature review has briefly explored the mainstream discussions and the extent of eSports research. The eSports industry's multifaceted nature and the plethora of actors and stakeholders involved invites a wide range of researchers to delve deep into the topic to lift the veil of secrecy of the industry's intricacies. The opportunities of actively partaking in the industry continuously emerge, with the possibility to showcase countries' ability to organise events, promoting locally made computer components or just the ability to follow current trends can potentially boost cities' and countries' image internationally. Sports diplomacy has already shown the substantial value of sports as a diplomatic asset and a prominent tool in soft power creation (Murray et al., 2020). Considering that, countries can potentially also use eSports for promotion and improvement of their own image internationally by organisation and active participation in the eSports industry. Testing that in turn would require an eSports research that would use diplomacy and public diplomacy as a starting point. Therefore the below subchapter will explore the current extent of diplomacy and PD related

eSports research. Before doing that, the core differences between the potential of using eSports and sports in PD will be discussed below.

2.2.   Current research on eSports-related diplomacy strategies

Stemming from the argument that eSports is in fact a sport, however characterised by the use of information technology, eSports also shares the positive features that *traditional* sport does. What eSports does not share with traditional sports is the content and the hidden messages eSports games may convey - most traditional sports disciplines have been played in a more or less unchanged manner for the past decades. eSports however, has a strong ability of implicit cultural promotion as many games presented in eSport are based on certain values, political backgrounds, alternative history settings that may affect the average eSport consumer (Wang, 2020). For example, Call of Duty game series, a popular eSports title, produced by an American developer Infinity Ward usually portrays alternative history war settings from a point of view of a Western soldier, where the usual villains are pictured as Middle-Eastern, Russian or Chinese, thus heavily influencing the player's imagination of real-life events (Mayall, 2021). To put it differently, a traditional sportsperson has to play by the rules, compete in a set venue with certain tools (e.g. balls, rackets, bats etc.). eSportsperson's "tool", however, not only implies using an IT device (PC, Mobile phone etc.) created by companies from certain countries, but also playing games created by developers who have their own political, financial and cultural backgrounds or aesthetic values that are consciously or subconsciously conveyed through their work (Wang, 2020). Scholz summed up this phenomenon by arguing that "in traditional sports, nobody owns football, for example; therefore there is a process for making a product *out of it*" (Scholz, 2019, p. 50). Moreover, eSport title designers have full control over the changes in their games - this could be likened to the process of changing the shape of a hockey puck every season in NHL, whereas in League of Legends, rule-changing tweaks are introduced every two weeks (Scholz, 2019), very often forcing the teams to adapt to a new strategic environment. This sets a very visible border between sports and the potential use of eSports in diplomacy: consumers watching an eSports match have more exposure to potential promotional content than an average football match viewer, as the game itself may convey implicit promotional value. Due to that and many other factors, namely: eSports industry still being in an early development phase and scarcity of international eSport regulation policies, thus

cannot be handled with the same tools as traditional sports (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022; Wang, 2020; Murray et al., 2020).

Because of that, Stuart Murray, James Birt and Scott Blakemore (2020) proposed an abstract theory of "eSports diplomacy". In their idea, eSports diplomacy's goal is to focus on the means, 'how to' reach a positive policy outcome. Since the industry concerns a multitude of actors, it is required to tackle problems from multiple points of view, e.g countering malicious businesses practices in the eSports ecosystem through policy as a government, promotion of positive attitudes towards games by eSport celebrities or organisations and organisation of bottom-up events that promote sportsmanlike conduct among adolescents from the very inclusion into the eSports world. Despite being just an early, abstract theory, eSports diplomacy helps to shift the focus from constant monetisation and commercialisation of eSports towards a more sustainable model that promotes interpersonal communication and fair competition rather than just vain money grabs. Their theory focuses more on how to create a sustainable and inclusive eSports industry rather than understanding the processes behind converting eSports into soft power and international recognition (Murray et al., 2020). In their own words, eSD theory "can be defined as conscious, strategic and regular use of diplomatic techniques, skills and functions to inform and create a favourable image among the general public, states, and organisations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to the eSport industry's desired goals (...) [and] describes and frames the networks inherent to the esports ecosystem and (...) encourages integration of systems, visions, policy goals, cultures, values, needs and fears, for all concerned (Murray et al., 2020, p. 13)".

Looking at the topic from a completely different perspective, Wong and Meng-Lewis created a model of eSports diplomacy to theorise the use of eSports in diplomacy to showcase how China converts eSports into soft power. They put forward a model of eSports diplomacy based on Abdi et al.'s (2018) sports diplomacy model while simultaneously adapting it to the context of eSports in China. They identified three eSport resources as eSport events (e.g. hosting and/or participation in international events; prestigious domestic leagues), eSports human capital (e.g. players and organisations, fans, academics etc.) and finally, eSports producers and products (for example, game developers, media platforms, hardware and software or eSport related movies and TV programmes) (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022, p. 6). Those three categories of resources are "generally deployed by the governments to extend their soft power reach" (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022, p. 6). Those resources can

be then converted by implementing three "skillful conversion strategies": first, in which messages disseminated through officials must be identical as the core diplomatic messages from the represented country; second, employment of eSport stars/celebrities as ambassadors; and third, split into *Best Record* and *Best Management* (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022, p.4). Best Record emphasises the news coverage of winners to "create positive impressions", while Best Management similarly focuses on highlighting the positive aspects of eSports event organisation. Subsequently, the aforementioned resources can be converted into explicit outcomes (cross-cultural communication, trust building), generally created by state-driven endeavours, or implicit outcomes (industry development, tourism and socio-economic development) usually "derived from initiatives outside the MFA" and other state agencies (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022, p. 6).

However precious the implementation of Abdi et. al's (2018) sport diplomacy model into China's eSports ecosystem is, as it is a step into formulation of a concrete eSports diplomacy theory, Wong & Meng-Lewis' approach puts emphasis on state control of eSport diplomacy resources and the utilisation of sport diplomacy theories that do not necessarily work in the eSports context, due to the differences between eSports and traditional sports.

The single academic article concerning the use of eSports in PD (concretely, China's PD) on CNKI.net is published in 2020 Wang Yanbo's "Opportunities and Choices for the Strategic Communication of China's eSports in the Perspective of Public Diplomacy[4] (公共外交视域下中国电竞战略传播的机遇与抉择)" is an invaluable piece of work that helps us understand some insights on the matter from an insider's point of view. He believes that raising the importance of eSports to the rank of "strategic communication" is crucial these days, as eSports "has already changed the lives of the Chinese people (...) [and] and its increasing influence on society has extended from entertainment to a political level" due to the huge audiences it attracts (Wang, 2020). According to Wang, grasping the opportunity of eSports can substantially enhance China's image internationally (Wang, 2020, p. 1). Additionally, his previously mentioned idea that eSports content has more promotional value than traditional sports due to implicit values it conveys provides a beneficial insight for the entirety of eSports academia.

Just like Murray et al. (2020) and Wong & Meng-Lewis (2022) he emphasises the lack of organisational clarity of eSports in China (Wang, 2020). He explains this by showcasing that China's

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[4] Own translation.

eSports is being managed by multiple administrations (among others, General Administration of Sport in China [GASC]; Ministry of Culture [MOC] or Ministry of Education [MOE]). Because of that, the regulation and management of the industry is disorganised and lacks a centrepiece (Wang, 2020). Additionally, processes like the management of eSports organisations, pro-players' retirement or the development of the eSports industry do not have any official supervision at all, allowing malicious business and managerial practices to emerge (Wang, 2020).

Wang argues that since most of the popular eSports titles in China are produced abroad, China needs to boost its own game creation capabilities to be able to simultaneously boost its cultural promotion ability. To achieve that, China needs to create concrete regulations and long-term development strategy to double down on domestically-produced eSports game titles (Wang, 2020).

2.3.   Conclusion

The information provided in the above chapter has introduced the scope of research that has been already carried out in the topic of eSports use in diplomacy, public diplomacy and strategic communications, mostly in China's context. The mentioned articles have briefly shown the potential of eSports in PD but also have highlighted many shortfalls of the industry's regulation globally and in China. Despite using the concept of PD, above research papers are still more inclined into sports diplomacy (Wong & Meng-Lewis, 2022) or media research (Wang, 2020) or directly express the need to consider eSports and sports diplomacy independently from PD research (Murray et al., 2020). This is why after assessing the dearth of knowledge in eSports-related PD research, this paper will set out to address it by undergoing a case study of how Chinese actors use eSports in PD.

3.   Methodology

Subsequent to what the literature review chapter has shown, the lack of proper explanation of how China can use eSports in its Public Diplomacy while taking into consideration its regulations of the game industry is evident. However the intangible topic of eSports is, due to the high number of stakeholders it involves, the revenues it makes and the number of audiences it draws to the screens cannot go unnoticed by government officials and other actors in China. Therefore, by undergoing a single case study of how different Chinese state and non-state actors apply eSports in PD, finding out the possible directions of Chinese actors to continue using this potential PD tool will be made possible. This will simultaneously imply a hypothesis that using eSports in PD challenges the traditional top-down structure of creating PD strategies in China, by including various non-state actors into the equation. The analysis requires a broad number of theories to be employed, especially theories and frameworks that inquire PD in a multi-actor approach. Such theoretical lens tailored for the sake of this research will be presented in the 3.2 subchapter down below, preceded by a presentation of the research method employed in this thesis.

3.1.   Research method

The research design will follow a single-case study. Despite rather limited options of generalisations in a single-case study (Bhattacherjee, 2012), the field of the use of eSports in PD research is in its nascency and therefore requires broader considerations to further uncover the lack of knowledge in more nuanced topics. A case study is understood here as a "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 13). Following the notion that case study should be embedded in a level of spatial and temporal boundedness (Gerring, 2004), this research will use China's eSports market evolution phases put forward by Xin et al. (2021), namely: early period (1998-2008); growthly stage (2009-2013); explosive stage (2013-2016) and mature stage (2017- now). The events considered in this thesis will mostly focus on the explosive and

mature stages, but some crucial happenings from before that time will also require consideration. The spatial boundaries limit the research to Mainland China, as for example the Taiwanese and Hongkongese League of Legends (LoL) leagues are governed by an independent organisation, Pacific Championship Series, with the inclusion of Southeast Asian countries[5] (PCS) (Tan Guan Hao, 2019). The study will use qualitative data to gauge and pinpoint the uses of eSports as an asset in various PD-related uses. The different types of such uses will be further explained down below in the choice of theories subchapter.

3.2. Choice of theories

Firstly, PD theory encompasses a wide range of different concepts that, just like the eSports industry, originate from many types of scholarship, like: media research, international relations and business research among others. This requires a limitation on the scope of conceptual considerations - the "new public diplomacy" will be introduced as the main theoretical approach to PD. In recent years, the general reconceptualisation of the field created a more lenient approach to what we should consider as the "Public" in Public Diplomacy (D'Hooghe, 2016). Thus, the 'new' PD approach will be introduced with concepts like digital diplomacy, and the domestic dimension of PD, that will explain PD practices in the virtual world and the notion that PD strategies may concern local audiences, rather than only foreign ones, respectively. The concept of domestic dimension will be introduced with greater level of accuracy, as it is crucial to understand the direct connection between China's official PD endeavours and the domestic legitimacy. Domestic dimension also reconceptualises non-state actors as independent PD-creating entities, which is crucial for the sake of this research. Furthermore, the concept of soft power and smart power, alongside stakeholder engagement will be presented as a way to understand what is a soft power resource (used interchangeably with PD asset) and how certain non-state actors may be employed to enhance the message of the sender. Finally, the framework of fragmented authoritarianism explains the way certain actors can have an influence over policy making processes, which will help to understand how stakeholders of Chinese eSports can influence the use of eSports in China's PD. Using this theoretical framework of PD can help properly identify the most important state and non-state actors in Chinese eSports, analyse the messages they disseminate locally and

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[5] However, Vietnam has its own independent league, Vietnam Championship Series (VCS).

internationally, and paint a picture of how those different actors can act as public diplomats in the times of heightened scrutiny over online video games.

3.3. Types of data

Throughout the thesis, mostly qualitative data will represent the increasing official interest in regulating and participating in the eSports industry. To achieve that, newspaper articles regarding the eSports industry from official CCP newspapers like People's Daily will reflect increasing interest and the context of official eSports publications. Furthermore, official papers and articles regarding eSports industry originating from the industry's main organisational bodies, namely: Ministry of Culture (MOC); General Administration of Sport of China (GASC); and China Culture Association eSports Management Committee (eSMC) among others. This will then allow us to inquire about the way the government has been managing the eSports industry to its own benefits, while also resolving issues that come with the development of this young industry.

Non-state actors, namely: local and city governments, companies and communities will be represented by official government posts from the cities in question (Chengdu, Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou), event-specific websites and news coverages. In PD, media coverages are an important way to gauge how narratives have changed regarding a topic and, in this case, how eSports is being turned into a valid PD asset. Secondary data will be used alongside above examples of qualitative data to support the empirical findings. A prominent article of this type will be e.g He & Cao's (2018) discourse analysis of People's Daily reports on video games, that includes many archived articles and reports.

3.4.   Data Collection

Data was mostly collected using internet browser inquiries in two main search engines: Google (Google Scholar) and due to the fact the author can read Mandarin Chinese, China's most popular search engine, Baidu.com was also used.

Google was used mainly to find secondary data like articles and research. To reach that, the inquiries were tailored to fit the areas of interest. The inquiries used were "esports diplomacy china";

"esports in public diplomacy". Due to the scarcity of available resources on this topic, the entirety of the findings has been already described in 2.2, identifying the lack of research in this field. Google Scholar was used afterwards to further identify the current state of knowledge in the eSports industry in general, leading to the findings in the rest of the literature review.

Baidu.com was used with the use of built-in search features that enable the user to search in a set timeframe. This in turn helps the researcher to inquire in a more effective and accurate way, by using the same inquiries in an interval. The inquiries are split into two groups: prefix inquiry and suffix inquiry. Prefix inquiries in question are: "中国电竞；中国电子竞技" (China eSports; China eSports Competitions)　these are then supplemented with suffixes: "规定, 法律, 限制, 外交, 研究, 公共外交" (regulations, law, restrictions, diplomacy, research, public diplomacy), prefix inquiry is then tested with each of the suffixes, looking for relevant articles and information each month since 2009. Media's reports on the eSports topic were also taken into consideration as media is the vessel for narratives and communication with audiences in PD (d'Hooghe, 2016). The findings were then organised, grouped and set for a further inspection and finally for analysis.

3.5.　　Limitations

Due to the multifacetedness of the eSports ecosystem, an eSports research requires a number of limitations. Temporal and spatial boundaries have already been discussed, however there are other limitations to consider while approaching such a wide and opaque topic.

Discussing eSports as sports is counterproductive as eSports' specific nature requires completely new types of points of departure to properly see through the intricacies of eSports. Continuing to look at eSports through the governance and management models of traditional sports may not only impede the research of this young field and industry, but also hurt its development (Scholz, 2019). Therefore, this research will not seek out to use sport-related theories nor propose solutions stemming from sports diplomacy research. Another limitation that requires a separate reflection is the fact that eSports require to consider many opaque relationships between state and non-state actors - many data needed for a further analysis are not open to the public.

Additionally, the problem of distinguishing eSports between "gaming" is also an important one. "Gaming" can be boiled down to "playing video games at a competitive level thanks to an online

infrastructure" (Llorens, 2017, p. 467), rather than eSports' organised and spectator-based nature. Similar to the esports-as-sport discussion, this dilemma impedes broader acceptance of eSports as sports and a profession, as eSports are often mistakenly considered as synonymous with recreational gaming, which is frequently presented as a gateway to gaming addiction, escapism, mental issues and gambling (Llorens, 2017; Wang, 2020; Murray et al., 2020). While the clear difference between gaming and eSports seems to be also emphasised by China's state media (CCTV Youtube, 2020), this duality poses to be out there to draw potential investors away from the negative side of things among other cases (Llorens, 2017). However, the connection is still there and is very visible. Games require to be played by people online to get to the level of an eSport. It does not happen to be picked by anyone, as games *reach* the level of eSports popularity. Similar to how some sports are added to the Olympic Games, some competitive online video game titles *become* eSports (Gilroy, 2019). However, there are no regulations nor rules that limit this process and new games emerge and fall as eSports titles way faster than the processes of adding e.g. skateboarding as an Olympic sport (Ross, 2021). Therefore eSports titles mentioned throughout this thesis will not be limited only to the event and organisational side of things: eSports' titles' livelihood are also decided whether they are played online. Football or cricket can exist without amateurs recreationally playing them on a field next to their homes; but free-to-play eSports titles, like most of the popular games (League of Legends, Dota 2, CS:GO), require players and their in-game transactions for the companies to be still standing. Therefore for the sake of clarity in this research, cases like e.g. official video game regulations, even though they might seem to be concerning the *gaming* side of things, if something concerns the online games industry, then it also directly concerns eSports itself.

4.   Public Diplomacy theories

        To this day, the discussions between 'traditional public diplomacy' and 'new public diplomacy' have been on the rise, presenting a plethora of different delineations of the field and e.g. the range of actors that partake in public diplomacy processes (Wei, 2019). Traditional PD theories, for example, suggest that a lion's share of PD agenda is created in a top-down, state-centred manner, with the government (for example, the Foreign Ministry) being the main source of messages being sent to target audiences abroad (d'Hooghe, 2016, p.18). It is characterised by "a focus on strategic and mass communication", and is seen as competitive as different states may compete for the same target audiences abroad (d'Hooghe, 2016, p.18). The 'new' PD theories propose a completely different viewpoint on the matter, with the inclusion of different actors like NGOs, companies etc. that also have their say in these processes. This version of PD theory argues that it should be used for lasting relations built on mutual trust and communication (Wei, 2019). With the inclusion of new actors, government strategies that were previously seen only as competitive, now "are complemented by collaborative strategies involving multi-stakeholders" (d'Hooghe, 2016 p. 19), as diplomatic messages are not only disseminated by the governments, but also through popular companies and content creators, for example. Owing to that, the messages reaching the target audiences are seen as far more legitimate and appealing, rather than in the case when the government is the sole messenger (Wei, 2019).

        The differences between the traditional and 'new' PD could also be explained by using communication as the basis. Informational (traditional) approach to PD is characterised usually by a single messenger (e.g. a government) that controls the way a message is shaped through mass communication, but cannot control how it is received by the target audience (d'Hooghe, 2016). The relational, or network approach, on the other hand, is focusing on network and relation creation that aims to build a lasting relationship rather than just to send a message directly to a receiving audience. This process "*ends* with a message or a story", whereas the informational paradigm starts with one (Zaharna, 2007, in: d'Hooghe, 2016, p. 20). However, as this thesis takes non-state actors as possible independent creators of PD, the definition of PD used throughout this research will be Bruce Gregorys argument that PD is "an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviour; to build and manage relationships; and

to influence thoughts and mobilise actions to advance their interests and values" (Gregory, 2011, p. 353). This ecompasses both the role of governments and non-state actors in creation of relevant PD strategies. However, this is not to say that the more 'traditional' concepts will not be applicable, especially in a state-centred system like China. Therefore, a combination of both state-centred and network-based public diplomacy theoretical paradigms will be used, as proposed by d'Hooghe: "state actors are usually the initiator and/or supporter and/or coordinator of public diplomacy actions, but they increasingly develop and conduct public diplomacy in close cooperation with members of networks that include both state and non-state actors" (d'Hooghe, p. 21).

4.1.1. Activities of Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy also includes a number of different activities used in the process (Gilboa, 2008). Due to the fact eSports-related content is tightly connected to the Internet, actors concerned with creating PD strategies need to be involved in digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is the notion of using Internet-based tools like social media, internet data analytics that amplify other PD activities due to the size of audiences it involves (Mazumdar, 2021).

Furthermore, international broadcasting, which is the "deployment of state-funded communication technologies to engage foreign publics in order to shape the international environment" (Mazumdar, 2021, p.3). In the context of broadcasting eSports events, like Worlds or the upcoming Asian Games 2022 in Hangzhou, international broadcasting is an important activity to create sound PD employing eSports, as they aid in showcasing technological prowess of the organising country or city and show the host in a favourable light, emphasising on the e.g. cultural heritage of a country (Wang & Meng-Lewis, 2022).

Nation-branding, which is the notion of "applying corporate branding techniques to countries" (d'Hooghe, p. 31). The way countries handle their reputation abroad in the 'nation-branding' subset of PD is similar to how companies strive to position their nation in the global market, while competing for the target audiences. As d'Hooghe points out, it is different from PD as it does not include a need for a lasting communication, but rather implies a head-on marketing strategy with simplified messages.

Cultural diplomacy, a very important activity for China's PD, could be explained as "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 2003, in: d'Hooghe, 2016, p. 29). eSports game

titles as a type of content certainly is a part of culture and sometimes even considered as a new type of art (Deardorff, 2015). Cultural exchanges in eSports are happening very often due to the international competitions players play in, or when e.g. Chinese LoL eSports teams employ Korean players who then learn to play in a Chinese environment, while at the same time often learning Mandarin language (Lim, 2021).

4.1.2. Domestic Dimension of Public Diplomacy

In the current era, the web 2.0 has immensely broadened the capabilities of non-state actors in the creation and dissemination of messages, blurring the boundaries of who can and cannot become a public diplomat (Huijgh, 2012). Domestic Dimension of PD introduces this notion, conceptualising non-state actors as both partners, and audiences. Partners, that is those who can influence the ongoing PD strategies but also as receivers of the messages, as domestic audiences' support for foreign policies is needed in creating legitimacy for the government (Huijgh, 2012). Non-state actors, used interchangeably in this text with domestic audiences, are understood as "non-sovereign entities that exercise significant economic, political or social power and influence at a national, and in some cases international, level" (USNIC, 2007). The inclusion of collaboration with domestic civil societies is "conditional" in successful PD. Generally speaking, the actions governments undertake internationally are not implemented in disregard with the domestic public. That is, domestic citizens are a "public of governmental public diplomacy" whereas "the government (...) conducts informational, educational or consultative and information-gathering activities involving the public" (Huijgh, 2012, p. 362). This is required to garner attention and support of the government's endeavours internationally as well as consent for undertaken actions.

Domestic civil society can be also included as a partner of state PD, but in order to become partners, they have to be a public (Huijgh, 2012). Activities that turn the citizens into partners include interactive programmes and conferences - such actions raise the support of foreign policy activities of the government (Huijgh, 2012). However, even more important is the recently emerging view of domestic publics as "independent public diplomacy actors" (Huijgh, 2012, p. 366). Those actors include companies or NGOs who independently conduct diplomatic activities with foreign publics, achieving positive diplomatic outcomes like improving the view of a country across foreign audiences.

Globalism and web 2.0 has increasingly blurred out the boundary between domestic non-state and state actors, as the former nowadays also has the ability to represent themselves and their country outside of the country's foreign policies - that is, PD does not *only* happen under the supervision of governments (La Porte, 2012). This notion makes way for a new type of "intermestic" actors, that is those who have "domestic interests with international projection" (La Porte, 2012, p. 444). La Porte argues that such actors could be for example domestic NGOs that "want to preserve their natural resources from the effects of climate change" (La Porte, 2012, p. 444). Interestingly enough, non-state actors can be even better equipped than states in creating messages towards foreign audiences, as they excel in actions that "require a rapid engagement of citizens" (La Porte, 2012, p. 446). Non-state actors, however, have to completely depend on their legitimacy and effectiveness to undergo public diplomacy, as they cannot use punishments or sanctions like the governments do, hence their ability to affect audiences is limited (La Porte, 2012). The case of eSports involves another consideration, which is the fact that the industry still does not enjoy full support from the societies around the globe due to bad press, connection with internet addiction, escapism etc., which requires the non-state actors to act as diplomats also for the industry itself (Murray et al., 2020).

Specifically in China, where PD is, in the words of Wang Yiwei, to be considered "the continuation of its internal affairs", domestic dimension is a key concept to explore (Wang, 2012, p. 459). PD in China serves both as a way to influence and attract foreign audiences and "ensure that the Chinese people gain a better understanding of the global situation and China's diplomacy" (Wang 2012, p. 464). As stated above, in order to garner consent and support for diplomatic endeavours, states create discussion platforms for citizens to inform about current diplomatic strategies - and that is what China also does. Wang notes that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) Office of Public Diplomacy organises conferences, internet discussions between MFA officials and citizens and Open House Days (Wang, 2012, p. 464). Due to China's political state-centrism, it still lacks a strong civil society that can lead diplomatic activities, nonetheless, Chinese cities and their local governments still can express their agency in the so-called "city diplomacy" where they can independently promote China abroad (Wang, 2012).

While considering eSports' multi-stakeholder nature, applying the domestic dimension in PD research is almost necessary, as it helps discover the relationship between state and non-state actors in this context. Especially in China's PD case, where the boundaries between domestic and international are seemingly blurred, PD cannot be taken into consideration as only directed towards foreign

audiences, but has implications for internal support and political stability. To further build this theoretical lens, the concept of soft power will be introduced below, to showcase how state and non-state actors can turn resources into influence and attraction abroad.

4.2.   Soft Power and Smart Power

The concept of soft power was coined by Joseph Nye and popularised by his 1990 book, "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power". He distinguishes hard power - the power to coerce, coming from military and economic might and soft power - the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye, 2004, p. 10). The key difference between hard and soft power is that in "hard power resources are most often kept in reserve and are used as specific moments (...) with specific strategic and tactical objectives in mind"; whereas soft power resources *must* be shared (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 73). That means if for example China's CCTV carefully creates messages towards a particular audience, they simply have to be released to reach their purpose, otherwise they are useless.

Moreover, Soft power is the source of influence of one country over another, a way to not only persuade but also "entice and attract" (Nye, 2008, p. 95). He expands this by delineating three main ways of affecting others' behaviour: "threats or coercion ("sticks"), inducements and payments ("carrots")" and previously mentioned attraction (soft power) (Nye, 2008, p.94). The difficulty of properly using soft power resources in the current technological development is rising, as with the increase of information, the attention of audiences drops (Nye, 2008). This is why PD acts as a method to properly utilise potential soft power resources. What is key for SP is that the subject of SP practices is more in control of their success (Nye, 2012). That is because "the instruments of soft power are not fully under control of governments" (Nye, 2012, p. 152). It can be noticed in the "diffusion of power to non-state actors", where states increasingly employ non-state actors in their PD strategies (Nye, 2012, p.152).

The important factors whether SP resources can succeed in affecting the view of target audiences is that of the messenger's credibility, the attraction of its culture, policies or institutions. Nye has further broadened this idea by adding the concept of "smart power" which explains soft power's

direct interaction with hard power. That is, a country's military and economic might works as an amplifier of its soft power resources (Nye, 2012). As discussed before, China puts a special emphasis on cultural diplomacy. Due to that, eSports can become a way to promote China's culture through video game content but also create an image of 'modern China' that also participates in the newest online trends. But whether China can or cannot succeed by adapting eSports into its soft power arsenal is also based on how it is perceived abroad — the cultural aspect is certainly important, but the fact that a prosperous state like China is involved in eSports enhances the message.

    4.3.   Strategic narratives and the problem of "counting" soft power tools

Nevertheless, simply analysing that eSports is a SP resource will end up being what Roselle et al. call a "sophisticated counting of tools or resources", without actually uncovering the intricacies of the SP resources themselves (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 71). One way of resolving this problem is the introduction of strategic narratives - every policy choice has to be communicated with a narrative to reach its audiences. Potential soft power resources "may be attractive because they fit within a preexisting or developing personal narrative" (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 74). Therefore, strategic narratives explain why certain ideas can be used as a SP resource, whilst also uncovering the practicalities behind "formation, projection and diffusion, and [their] reception" (Roselle et al., 2014). As this research seeks to find how eSports is used in PD, analysing the formation of narratives around eSports in China will show how Chinese actors can use eSports as a SP resource while simultaneously conducting a crackdown on video games domestically.

Narratives are structured by the people and environment they involve, the conflict or action (e.g. "importance of perceived dangers" and urgency) and the suggested resolution of the previously sketched out problem (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 75-76). Above structure of narratives "explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable and shape perceived interests" (Roselle et al., 2014 p. 76). This is modified by three levels of narratives: International System Narratives that usually concern describing the structure of the international system, thus eSports are not really included in such narratives. Second are National Narratives, that "set out what the story of the nation is and what values and goals it has". The third, probably most important for the context of this research are Issue Narratives that explain why policies are needed to tackle a problem at hand, and give a context (e.g

involved actors) of the said problem (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 76). Applying this approach explains how framing eSports in particular narratives (e.g. cultural narratives) can turn it into a SP resource, giving it a more legitimate undertone.

4.4.   Stakeholder engagement and the eSports ecosystem

Previously mentioned new PD theories argue that the government creates its own PD strategies but also employs non-state actors as agents to enhance the messages' capabilities (d'Hooghe, 2016). Nowadays, the introduction of 2.0 web tools like social media creates many modifications to the traditional, sender → message → receiver communication model in PD, as many non-state actors like companies or brands are more effective than states in creating long term networks and engagement (Zaharna, 2011; d'Hooghe, 2016). Therefore, in order to create long-lasting relationships and effectively use eSports as a smart power resource while also reaching domestic audiences, Chinese state actors need to employ various stakeholders in the eSports industry. A question arises, who is a stakeholder? Stakeholder can be understood as someone who has "a vested interest or stake in an organisation or program" (Zaharna, 2011, p. 205). In order for countries to have an influence over target audiences, they also need to engage them and let them participate in the message rather than simply send messages to them. To do that, public diplomats need to identify the stakeholders in the topic at hand and distinguish what organisations, companies and publics can be the most effective at diffusing messages and engaging the publics (Zaharna, 2011). Due to the complicated nature of eSports it is important to identify what stakeholders are involved in the industry and how important are they to pinpoint what actors have the most value for China's Public Diplomacy. This will further help in the analysis, where China's engagement of certain stakeholders will also be dissected in order to show how China can build its PD strategy with eSports as a tool. To reach that goal, Scholz's identification of primary and secondary stakeholders in the eSports industry will be introduced.

Scholz puts forward an important conceptualisation of how the eSports industry works. Scholz explains that the eSports industry is highly interdependent: "without an eSports title, no tournaments; without tournaments, no teams; without teams, no audience (...) [that can be] monetised" (Scholz,

2019, p. 44). Scholz identifies game developers as one of the primary, if not the most important actors in the eSports ecosystem, because they have the power to tweak and change the competitive environment of games — for example, LoL developer, Riot Games (RG) once two weeks publishes patches to the game that alter the strength of some in-game characters, changing the audience's and players' experience of organised play (Riot Games, 2022). The game developer directly owns the Intellectual Property (IP) of the eSports title, so there are also benefits from selling broadcast permissions for the interested parties (Scholz, 2019). The second main stakeholder group are tournament organisers. They have the right tools to connect game developers to their audience, as in many cases game developers do not have the knowledge nor resources to properly create an eSports show (Scholz, 2019, p. 60). Subsequently, the third and forth primary stakeholders are Professional Teams and Pro-Players - Professional Teams, also known as eSports teams or organisations are in charge of finding the right talents, supervising their training and acquiring sponsors to secure the livelihoods of the teams. Pro-players are the ones doing the job and hence have the most direct connection with the audience, while also having to force through a very competitive environment with not many career possibilities after retiring from eSports[6] (Scholz, 2019). Finally, infrastructure providers and communities — platforms like Twitch, Youtube internationally or Huya and Douyu locally in China provide necessary platforms for the eSports titles to be broadcast. Next, hardware providers are also very often sponsors of the events, while also mimicking the likes of Nike or Adidas in traditional sports, sponsoring individual eSports players with keyboards or mouses (Anastasopoulos, 2018). Communities "foster interactions" offline and online, with many online forums like Reddit promoting discussions regarding eSports, while also increasing interest in the eSports titles.

Secondary stakeholders most importantly include governing bodies, and Scholz's opinion echoes the common problem presented in the eSports research: lack of institutionalisation and organisation of the industry and events (Scholz, 2019, p. 73). Scholz points out that eSports is often mistreated by looking at it through the lens of sports, trying to institutionalise it within a single body. However, as there are many eSports titles with completely different sets of rules, it is extremely hard to create a single, international regulating system (Scholz, 2019; Peng et al., 2020). Scholz further

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[6] The peak performance of eSports players is usually argued to be early 20s, often forcing the players to resign from their education due to the highly competitive environment - because of that, they also face many difficulties to 'rejoin' the society after an eSports career, let alone an unsuccessful one (Scholz, 2019; Irorita, 2020).

includes Sports Organisations that create their own eSports teams like Barcelona, Schalke 04 or Wisła Kraków in Poland, trying to build another franchise with the existing brand. There are also cases where sports teams are creating eSports teams abroad, allowing for exposure in other places but also allowing international exchanges, like in the case of a Hongkongese LoL team Talon that is now partially owned by the French football giant PSG (TALON, 2020). Furthermore, the group of sponsors, entrepreneurs, media and shareholders is a group of stakeholders that is mainly focused on benefiting financially from eSports. However, sponsors are still very important because they are the ones funding a substantial share of the events (Scholz, 2019).

As it has been shown, the eSports industry involves a plethora of different shareholders and owing to Scholz's model, identifying interdependencies in China's eSports will be more comprehensible. This, with the concept of strategic engagement will show how Chinese actors use foreign and domestic stakeholders in order to engage audiences.

4.5.   Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0

Many above theories take PD into consideration from a Western point of view, without taking into consideration states with a more state-centred political system like in the case of China. Fragmented authoritarianism can help fill this gap by presenting how non-state actors influence the state in its policymaking processes, as the Chinese government is "responsive to the increasingly diverse demands of Chinese society" which can change the way the government approaches issues at hand (Mertha, 2009, p. 995). This framework asserts that "policy made at the centre becomes increasingly malleable to the parochial organisational and political goals of various vertical agencies and spatial regions charged with enforcing that policy" (Mertha, 2009, p.996). That is, the actors that were excluded from the policy-making equation have now found their way into the process, being able to shape the policy to match their expectations. Such actors are hence called "policy entrepreneurs", who "advocate proposals or form the prominence of an idea", with their characteristic being the "willingness to invest their resources — time, energy, reputation and sometimes money — in the hope of a future return (...) [including] in the form of policies of which they approve" (Kingdon, 1995 in: Mertha, 2009, p. 996). The three types of such policy entrepreneurs are: government officials that are against implementation of a certain policy and "are able to voice their opposition" thanks to their

"political cover"; second are journalist and editors who can give a certain notion more power and recognition by using narratives that forward other entrepreneurs interests in the policies in question; and NGOs (Mertha, 2009, p. 997). However in the topic of eSports, corporations are by far more influential actors in the sphere, as they have a major say in eSports related media, then for the sake of cohesion, they will be considered as the third type of policy entrepreneurs. In fragmented authoritarianism, policy entrepreneurs frame the ideas by using existing narratives, to gain support or legitimacy for the cause. To do that, they use "articulation" - which is using a "persuasive narrative" to give "an alternative perspective on the issue in question"; and amplification of the narrative by "boiling it down to core components" and use "deliberate references to historical antecedents, metaphors and images" (Mertha, 2009, p. 998).

With these tools, policy entrepreneurs can affect and change the policymaking process which is extremely important to highlight in eSports-related research, as a plethora of different stakeholders have an influence on the industry and on the policies relating to it. This also challenges the notion that China's policy making process is completely monopolised by the government. By applying this framework alongside domestic dimension and stakeholder engagement the intricacies behind how different actors can influence or lead the creation of China's PD by using eSports as a resource can be properly showcased.

4.6.   Conclusion

The aforementioned theoretical approach helps uncover the intricacies of China's use of eSports in its PD strategies in multiple ways. Firstly, PD theories explain certain instruments used in PD help in disseminating messages, while concepts like Domestic Dimension indicate that messages are not only directed towards abroad audiences, but have an effect locally as well. Domestic Dimension also allows for considering non-state actors as partners of states in creating PD strategies, while sometimes also being able to independently undertake PD related actions. Concepts of soft power, smart power and strategic narrative help understand how certain ideas can be developed into resources of PD, whereas stakeholder engagement shows how certain influential stakeholders might be engaged in creating a more extensive approach to PD. Finally, the fragmented authoritarianism framework challenges the

top-down structure of policymaking in China — combined together, this theoretical lens allows for a proper delineation of state and non-state actors' use of eSports in PD in China.

5.   Empirical data of China's eSports

This chapter will present the gathered data and with the help of the theoretical approach presented in the above chapter. Firstly, the background history of Chinese PD endeavours will be briefly explored by a subsequent presentation of the eSports industry's market size. This will further support the idea that its presence and size cannot be ignored in PD strategy creation. Secondly, the historical background of eSport's institutionalisation is required to showcase the complex nature of the industry in China.

5.1.   China's Public Diplomacy

China's Public Diplomacy, which is focused on improving own image abroad could be characterised by 4 "sub-goals": to "present the country as a stable, reliable and responsible economic partner (...) that the international community does not have to fear" as opposed to negative western representations of the country; then "a trustworthy and responsible member of the international political community, capable of an willing to contribute actively to world peace; thirdly, "promotion of international understanding for China's political system and policies"; and lastly, which is strengthening own understanding by conducting PD abroad (d'Hooghe, 2016, p. 101). An important notion of China's current PD is "telling China's story adequately (讲好中国故事)" put forward by President Xi Jinping in 2013, calling for strengthening China's discourse abilities by using e.g. Chinese culture and economy in promoting China abroad (DiResta, 2020; QSTheory.cn, 2021). Since then CCP focused on expanding its official TV channel, CCTV now broadcasts in 6 different languages while the international radio service, China Radio International, broadcasts in 61 languages all over the world (d'Hooghe, 2016). This type of international broadcasting activity allows for a constant flow of messages that may influence the way foreign audiences view China, fulfilling both first and second goals of China's PD. Moreover, China's most characteristic and extensive PD asset are the Confucius

Institutes, that are Mandarin language schools spread all over the world that also teach the culture and history of the country. These schools allow to tell "the stories of China adequately" using international exchanges and cultural diplomacy, changing China's reception among young foreign audiences (d'Hooghe, 2016). Cultural diplomacy or cultural soft power is by far one of the most valuable tools in China's PD toolkit, and many actors capitalise on it while creating PD strategies (d'Hooghe, 2016). Strengthening China's cultural diplomacy is also a way to counter the "(perceived) global dominance of Western culture", protecting cultural heritage (d'Hooghe, 2016, p. 118). Other strategies also consist of more palpable endeavours, like infrastructural investments alongside the Belt and Road Initiative, funding projects all over Africa, Europe and South America, with various outcomes (Xi, 2020).

To sum up this brief summary of Chinese PD endeavours abroad, China's PD is mostly characterised by a top-down approach, where state actors usually are the senders of the messages with rare involvement of non-state actors. However, projects like Confucius Institutes that require the participation of foreign audiences and universities also show that non-state actors are increasingly engaged in China's PD. Therefore, considering the opaqueness of eSports and the amount of stakeholders it involves it will be interesting to uncover how Chinese actors can create PD strategies with the use of eSports.

5.2.   The Scope of China's eSports market

In the 2021 eSports market analysis conducted by iResearch provides some important insights into how the market was developing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Showing very fast revenue increase due to the omnipresent lockdowns, as traditional sports events were temporarily paused, eSports was steadily increasing viewership (iResearch, 2021). The market size of eSports grew by 29.8% relatively to 2019, amounting to around 150 billion yuan (iResearch, 2021, p. 7). The size of the eSports audience in China in 2020 rose by 5.5% to 500 million and it is by far the biggest eSports market in the world in terms of revenue and audience size (iResearch, 2021; Omdia, 2021). Tait has also provided information concerning the eSports revenue, where China has placed first since 2019,

with the US and South Korea behind. China's eSports revenue in 2020 amounted to over 350 million USD, whereas in 2021 it already topped the 400 million USD mark (Tait, 2021).

However, this positive trend has suffered a dip, as shown by the newest analysis provided by iiMedia (2022). The market in China has grown by a smaller margin throughout 2021 and is expected to grow only by 6.2% in 2022 to around 184 billion yuan. This could be partially caused by the video game crackdown in China, where the whole video game industry and automatically the eSports industry has been shaken by the government's decision. Ye (2021) points to the fact that the National Press and Publication Administration would usually provide a list of around 100 games that would get licensed for publishing. That list was "frozen" from July 2021 until 11 April 2022, where finally 45 games were licensed (Ye, 2022) — within this timeframe, over 14000 small and medium game companies had to close the businesses (Ye, 2021).

This shows how suddenly the market situation has changed for all stakeholders involved. Even though players under the age of 18 take up only 7.3% of the audience in China, and even though the crackdown is directed towards video games, not eSports, it is impossible to limit the video games market without inflicting some damage on the eSports industry as well (iResearch, 2021). For example, the owner of Riot Games, LoL's developer, Tencent, is closely cooperating with the Chinese government and has already implemented monitoring systems for adolescent gamers (Sina, 2021; Deng, 2022). China's eSports is in a very turbulent phase and needs concrete strategies to be able to use the charm of still the biggest eSports market in the world. The following analysis will further explore how China organises its eSports and how it can overcome this current challenge in order to keep using eSports in its PD.

5.3.   Early history of China's institutionalisation of eSports

The history of China's eSports proves to be laden with many turning points and surprising policy choices. In the early history of China's eSports, internet cafes marked the very beginning of competitive gaming in China — cafe owners were acting as eSports organisations, employing local 'pro-players', while also organising tournaments with other cafes (Ismangil & Fung, 2021). However, as the number of unlicensed cafes were steadily rising, their existence soon became a national problem. A very influential Guangming Daily newspaper article reported back in May 2000, that many teenagers

in Wuhan skip school to spend their time in internet cafes, while also citing local people calling video games as "electronic heroin" or "opium", that will "turn boys into thieves and girls into prostitutes" (Xia, 2000). Soon after this article surfaced, Wuhan's authorities announced that they will "root out the electric heroin" by cracking down on unlicensed internet cafes and cafes in 200 metre range from schools (Xia, 2000；Xu, 2021). The state has answered with an extended version of the regulations introduced in Wuhan, when in June 2000, the MOC, Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of Commerce among others published "Opinions on Introducing Special Governance of Video Game Business Premises Development" which implied additional fines and consequences for the owners of cafes that allow adolescents inside and proliferate prohibited video games that "violate the basic principles of the Constitution" or "harm national security" among others (MOC, 2000; Creemers, 2000). Moreover, the document implied that no computer-related products (e.g mouses or keyboards) should be released on the domestic market, seriously impeding the development of the industry in that period of time. From that point on, China banned game consoles from appearing on the domestic market for 15 years, until 2015 (d'Orazio, 2015; MOC, 2000; Xin et al., 2021; Xu, 2021).

Interestingly enough, this was soon about to change. As the Korean state supported tournament, World Cyber Games (WCG) was gaining popularity, the world started noticing the market and promotional potential of eSports (Hutchins, 2008, p. 865). In WCG 2001, with the first eSports national competition being held in Seoul, where four Chinese players had the honours to bear a gold medal after an eSports tournament (WCG, 2001). Wei Qidi (IGN[7]: Deep) and Ma Tianyuan (IGN mty) in Starcraft: Brood War; Yan Bo (IGN Tianqi) and Lin Xiaogang (IGN Windboy) in FIFA 2001 were the first Chinese players to win international titles in eSports. Especially Wei Qidi and Ma Tianyuan who held the Chinese flag at the medal ceremony contributed to the beginning of the recognition of eSports in China (Baidu.com, 2010). China seemingly took notice of those achievements and the popularity of eSports. On 18 November 2003, the General Administration of Sports of China (GASC), on the inauguration day of the China's Sport Digital Interactive Platform announced eSports as the 99th competitive sport (SinaSport, 2003). At the same occasion, the CEG (China eSports Games) tournament was announced to be held for the first time in 2004, organised by the All-China Sports Federation, marking a very sudden change in the official handling of the eSports/video game topic (SinaSport, 2004). Also in 2003, the 5th channel of official state television of China, the China Central

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[7] IGN means "In Game Name" which refers to the way players call themselves in the tournaments. Pro-players are usually called by their IGN by people in the industry.

Television (CCTV) aired the first episode of a TV programme called "The World of eSports", inviting eSportspeople and experts while also discussing current trends and tournaments of the rising industry (Tianya.cn, 2003). This was certainly important, as for many people airing eSports-related content on the main television channel equaled government's support for the industry (Xu, 2021). Two online game technology development projects were also listed on the 863 high tech development list, an important highlight of the government's early effort to monetise the business (People's Daily, 2003). An official with the Ministry of Science and Technology identified the need to develop games domestically, as "nearly 80 percent of game software in China's online game market are foreign developed" (People's Daily, 2003), potentially marking a new era for China's eSports and video game market.

However, the eSports industry in China took another blow after those events when on 12 April 2004, State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) published "Notice on the Prohibition of Broadcasting Online Video Game Type Programs", stating that those programs "bring about negative influence to healthy development of the adolescents" and the public "has a strong opinion" on the topic (Gamelaw.cn, 2020). This turn of events was announced 5 days before the first official CEG match — which clearly shows the confusion and the amount of different official institutions involved in regulating the Chinese eSports market. Nonetheless, it did not stop the People's Daily from starting its official video game webpage in late 2004, called game.people.com.cn, sharing news from the world of gaming and eSports (People.cn Games, 2005). This was followed by three subsequent regulations on eSports and online games in the upcoming years: "Notice Regarding Purification of Online Games" posted jointly by MOC, Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization (CSC), Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Information Industry and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce in 2005. This notice used similar explanations to frame the introduction of such policy, explaining that many video games have pornographic content, promote gambling, have big impact on the life of students and caused grave concern for their parents (CSC, 2012). This policy also introduced stricter supervision and screening procedures of video game content, ultimately raising the difficulty of obtaining a licence for video game titles (Xin et al., 2021). This also included more control of all the eSports events, announcing the cancellation of all events that did not receive prior licence (CSC, 2012).

In the year 2006, the next stage was marked by the introduction of an audit system for eSports competitions, stating that the GASC required each event to be separately licensed. Such an audit

system implied e.g. proper safety of event stages and the usage of government-accepted software in all the matches (Games Sina, 2006; Xin et al., 2020). This solidifies the notion that video game regulations in China do have a major influence on eSports, as the regulations control what kind of software can be used in the competitions. Furthermore, MOC implemented another regulation, this time requiring the importers of video games to acquire "Network Culture Business Licence" and the start of a so-called "Review Committee" that issues the licences after an audit (Gov.cn, 2006ab).

In the meantime, Li Xiaofeng (IGN Sky) managed to win two Warcraft 3 WCG titles in a row (2005, 2006), becoming the most popular Chinese eSports player at the time (Chen, 2015). Despite those successes, in later interviews he mentioned that the only way to earn money through eSports at the time were tournaments and as there were not that many tournaments in China, keeping an eSports career back then was really hard (Liu, 2015; Pan, 2021). Luckily for Sky and other players at the time, the times were about to change. In 2007, GASC invested in eSports, resulting in an increased number of official tournaments; at the 2007 Indoor Asian Games, eSports were included as 3 medal competitions, where Chinese players won all of them (Chen, 2015). The year 2008 marked a turning point in the early management of eSports in China. From the "e-heroin" narrative of video games in 2000, to professional Warcraft 3 players Sky and Zhang Zaihao (IGN moon) bearing the Beijing 2008 Olympics torch to its destination, all that while being broadcast on national television (Sina Tech, 2008) — the official narrative has reached a 180 degree turn.

To conclude, China's early institutionalisation of eSports was extremely fragmented, with many different government bodies implementing contradictory or similar regulations on the topic of video games, that directly reflected in the eSports world. Most of the positive narratives were developed bottom-up, with players like Sky or Moon paving the way for the official representation of eSports in China. The industry was starting to bloom — with the development of streaming platforms, more audiences started to flock to eSports (Chen, 2015). First eSports organisations in China were sprouting up, with no one other than Sky co-founding one of them back in 2005 - team World Elite (WE) (Dan, 2019). With the Olympic torch as a key symbol of institutional support, the eSports industry in China was about to boom.

5.3.1.   Growing stage (2009-2013)

After being listed again on the official list of competitive sports in China, this time the 78th, eSports was facing a new era of institutional management (Chen, 2015). Earlier in 2008, Chengdu applied to host the 2009 WCG and succeeded in doing so, marking the first time a major international competition was held in China (WCG, 2009). Later, in 2010 a National eSports Conference was held in Beijing, where the discussion was centred around active development of the eSports industry, with e.g. construction of eSport venues and promotion of international exchanges included in the talks (Gov.cn, 2010). eSports Champion League (ECL) was held in Beijing, where an official, as reported by Szablewicz, mentioned that eSports is good and should be promoted, while online games are addictive and inherently bad (Szablewicz, 2016). In 2011, Tencent's 400 million USD bid to buy LoL developer Riot Games was accepted by the latter, making Tencent owner of one of the biggest eSports titles in the world (Russel, 2015).

Soon after, a known billionaire Wang Sicong, son of Wang Jianlin, chairman of Dalian Wanda Group, one of the largest conglomerates in China, began to heavily invest in the eSports industry (Xu, 2020). He created Invictus Gaming (IG), an eSports organisation that set a template for others in the industry: he established a "model in which players no longer needed to worry about making ends meet" (Xu, 2022). Players would finally have an environment to train, a team consisting of psychologists and physiotherapists and, more importantly, an actual contract and did not have to worry to have their income consist only of tournament rewards. His team managed to win the 2012 Dota 2 International (akin to World Championships), just a year after its formation (Zalamea, 2021). Other most awarded eSports organisations in China like the 2021 LoL Words victor Edward Gaming (EDG) were also founded by the second generation of nouveau riche (also called 富二代, *fuerdai*), setting a trend in the industry in China, while also creating new important actors and stakeholders in the industry.

Coming back to the national stage, 2012 had also seen the second time a WCG tournament was held in China, this time, surprisingly in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province (WCG, 2012). The idea to organise such a tournament was most likely a way to promote and develop some less known parts of the country, inherently working as a soft power resource to both the city and the country (Szablewicz, 2016). The end of this era can be marked by eSports' comeback to the CCTV broadcasting program called "Run on the Road of Pursuing eSports Dream", describing lives of eSports athletes and the challenges they face (Xin et al., 2021). Once again, broadcasting eSports related programs and documentaries on state channels is crucial for creating a favourable opinion of the industry throughout the general populace.

This era marked a complete shift in the narrative regarding eSports in China. Governmental actors have clearly noticed the potential of eSports as an investment, resulting in increased financial support and development, even using eSports as a way to promote less known Chinese cities abroad, like in the case of Kunshan.

5.3.2. The explosive stage (2014-2016) and the mature stage (2017-)

The beginning of 2016 has seen the regulations of selling imported video games loosened, as well as almost completely lifting the ban on foreign hardware, further implementation of official eSports competition rules by GASC and the introduction of a first eSports TV channel (Xin et al., 2021). GASC did not stop there and a plethora of new policies have been introduced, promoting new tournaments to be held in China, whereas MOC, also in 2016 has promoted the rules of online streaming platforms, requiring them to apply and undergo an audit for an official platform status (Xin et al., 2021). The State General Administration has also expressed support for the industry in the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, whilst the Ministry of Education (MOE) officially accepted eSports-related higher education programs for Chinese universities (Xu, 2020). Similarly to that notion, The support and popularity of eSports rose to another level in China when LoL Worlds 2017 were held at the Beijing National Stadium, the same which held the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Furthermore, 2018 was a year of success for Wang Sicong's investment in the IG LoL team, when for the first time in history, a Chinese team won the World Championships, drawing the attention of millions of people online (Xu, 2020). In 2018 Ministry of Culture was dissolved and replaced by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, however it still remained closely connected with eSport and video game industry regulation (MOC, 2018) (will still be referred to as MOC for the sake of cohesion).

In 2019, the first major package of online game regulations was introduced by the government, banning overnight gaming sessions between 10pm and 8am and instructing game developers to introduce systems that require the users to register with their real life data to play the game and turning it off in case they reach the restricted time (Gov.cn, 2022). The regulation also imposed restrictions on in-game transactions, including completely ruling a possibility of games for under eight year olds to have such possibility (Gov.cn, 2022).

Subsequently, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic slowed down the development of on-site competitions, but the size of online events was continuously remarkable. As shown in the previous subchapter, the market in China back between 2020 and 2021 expanded immensely. However, the unrestricted growth of the market and the rise of adolescent gamers was seemingly noticed by the government. Just a few months before China's EDG victory in the 2021 Worlds, where around 170 million people around the world watched the final matches, China announced a crackdown on video games, where gamers under 18 years old could only play 3 hours on the weekends (Gov.cn, 2021). New livestreaming restrictions were similarly introduced in April 2022, where unlicensed games in China were announced to be banned from any livestreaming platforms, while also the same platforms to introduce "real-name login" to properly manage the time Chinese youth spends on video game content (National Radio and Television Administration [NRTA], 2022).

6. Chinese eSports industry stakeholders and their use of eSports in PD. The analysis.

The data shown in the above chapter paints the image of Chinese eSports history in its development period and allows for some generalisations. It can be seen, for example, that the official regulations come from a number of different government bodies and in some cases, they nullify or contradict each other. This background data showed how fragmented the eSports industry and its management in China is, as even in the case of state actors, there is not a single authority that regulates video game and eSports industries. It is now also evident that non-state actors played a major role in creating and shaping the industry in the way it looks right now. Despite an extremely tough beginning in terms of relationship with the government, misunderstanding of the concept of eSports by the general populace in China, people like Sky, Moon or Wang Sicong had crucial contributions to the unprecedented economic boom of the industry in China that could be seen in subchapter 5.3. This involvement of different actors in building the industry supports the idea that Chinese actors' use of eSports in PD needs to be considered not only from the perspective of the state, but also all the other possible actors. The following chapter will in detail go through different events or cases in which eSports stakeholders in China use eSports as a resource in PD, including: state actors, city and local governments, investors and the community.

6.1.   State actors

Looking back at the historical chapter, there are many state actors that participate in regulating and managing the eSports industry. MOC is one of the most prominent regulators, as it is not only allowing or disallowing the type of video game content that goes through onto the Chinese market, but also encourages promoting Chinese culture through games (Gov.cn, 2022). The MOC, however, does not only act as a regulator, as it actively implements the idea of using eSports as a cultural content abroad. For example, established by the MOC, National Technical Committee for Internet Culture Standardisation co-hosted the "One Belt One Road International eSports Competition (BREC)" in

Jiaozhou, Shandong province (Sina eSports, 2018). The president of the China Cultural and Entertainment Industry Association (CCEIA; also established by MOC), Liu Jinhua, who attended the inauguration ceremony, said: "[the competition] is China's first eSports competition dedicated to building dreams of the New Silk Road, inviting teams and players from along the Belt and Road Initiative to participate, responding to the diversified needs of the world's cultural exchanges, which has an important innovative significance" (SIna eSports, 2018). This event is a direct example that China state actors can use eSports in its pre-existing PD campaigns, just like BRI (One Belt One Road Initiative had its English name changed to Belt and Road Initiative; BRI).

Year later, in 2019, an event called "Forum on Digital Culture and Tourism Industries" was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by the CCEIA, China Arts and Entertainment Group[8], Kuala Lumpur Chinese Culture Centre (CAEG) as well as Tencent eSports and consisted of "Silk Road Digital Culture Tourism Industry Cooperation Forum", "China Digital Culture Tourism Product Technology Display" as well as a friendly demonstration match between Chinese and Malaysian eSports teams (Tencent eSports, 2019). Official representatives of both sides, like the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia or the Ministry of Youth and Sports were both present at the time, supported by representatives from Tencent or Central Academy of Fine Arts of China (Tencent eSports, 2019). At the event, the Secretary General of CCEIA, Kong Ming has emphasised on the importance of eSports and other digital content in cultural exchanges between young people:

"The formats of digital cultural industry like animation and games, eSports and internet music are not just the popular forms of entertainment for the youth of the world, but it is also the exchange and cooperation platform that matches the interests and habits of young people" (Tencent eSports, 2019).

Subsequently, in 2020, this event was held the second time, however this time it was only held online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (MOFA, 2020a). Bai Tian, China's ambassador to Malaysia spoke at the event, emphasising the importance of the forms of digital culture in connecting people and countries during the pandemic, however did not directly mention eSports (MOFA, 2020a). This event was also partially sponsored by Tencent, the company used the event to showcase its game, Honour of

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[8] AKA "China's only central state-owned cultural enterprise that has performance and exhibition business worldwide" (CAEG, 2022).

Kings' tournaments format and another presentation match (MOFA, 2020a).

These state actors over recent years have increasingly considered eSports as a viable carrier of Chinese culture that could be inserted into bigger PR campaigns, like the BRI that at least in the beginning was mostly focused on assisting other countries in building ambitious infrastructure projects (Xi, 2018). eSports however has been identified as a valid cultural diplomacy asset by the same institutions that regulate the industry (MOC). Now that it has been identified as such, it can be subsequently used in the context of "youth exchanges" as shown above.

Following the same trend, MOC, alongside the Xinhua News Agency, Chinese Embassy in the United Arab Emirates and previously mentioned CCEIA, organised the Silk Road Cultural Tour — Chinese Digital Culture Exhibition Week in November 2020 (Xinhua Silkroad, 2020). This exhibition was executed in a hybrid fashion due to the pandemic, with online art exhibitions from China, UAE and the MIddle East, animation exhibits, but most importantly, a "friendly eSports match" between China and UAE that was also partially sponsored by Tencent (Xinhua Silkroad, 2020; Jia, 2021). The event's constituents were named "a popular form of social interaction and entertainment for the youth of China and UAE [that can] enhance friendship and adequately tell the story of both countries" (Xinhua Silkroad, 2020). Posted on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MOFAb), the speech made by China's Ambassador to the UAE, Ni Jian on November 26th 2020, also mentions the importance of eSports in cultural exchanges:

"President Xi Jinping mentioned that young people are the most active and dynamic force in the whole society (...) [This event] is aimed at the youth of China and UAE (...) focusing on innovative development, using digital culture as the carrier, practising people-to-people exchanges and creating meaningful ties, which is the best interpretation of President Xi Jinping's words. (...) The representative formats of digital culture, like animation and games, eSports or online videos have become a new fashion that drives economic growth and leads cultural consumption" (MOFA, 2020b).

Another event created in the same spirit, the "BRI eSports Invitational Tournament" was held in 2021 as an online event, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. This time, its organisation was undertaken by Jiangsu Province Sports Administration, Xinhua News Agency and the Chinese Sports Lottery among others and was inaugurated in Nanjing (GASC, 2022). The narrative behind this series

of events also builds on creating a "bridge" between the nations participating in BRI and cultural exchanges (Gov.cn, 2022). This is another example of using eSports in pre-existing official Chinese PD strategies while also characterising eSports as a cultural asset of China.

This shows that state actors like the MOC in cooperation with other representatives like ambassador Ni Jian are aware of the importance of eSports in cultural exchanges between the youth and can emphasise on this feature to use it in events promoting China and Chinese culture abroad. In the above speech specifically, the idea of eSports and other digital culture media is enhanced by embedding it in President Xi's speech, giving it a much more official undertone. The event went on to be organised in 2021, with friendly matches in e.g PUBG Mobile, a game that is published by China's gaming industry giant, Tencent (Jia, 2021). Those were not the only tournaments produced under the banner of BRI, as in 2019 Xinhua organised a smaller, demonstration tournament in 2018 in Tianjin and then, a second official instalment in Tai'an, Shandong in 2019, with no recent events related to the series (Sohu, 2018; Sina eSports, 2019).

Ni Jian was not the only ambassador that has came in contact with eSports — after browsing over 120 pages of search results on the MOFA's official website, apart from the aforementioned speech in Dubai and Kuala Lumpur, there were two instances of using the word "电子竞技 (eSports)": in 2009, PRC's ambassador to the Republic of Ireland, Li Biwei attended the 2009 WCG Ireland Qualification Finals that determined Ireland's representative to take part in 2009 WCG Chengdu Finals (MOFA, 2009). This event, deceivingly unimportant, was an unprecedented case of a Chinese ambassador to attend an eSports event that served as a promotion of the first major international tournament in China. The second event was 2019 "Oriental Charm — China Traditional Culture and Creativity Exhibition" inaugurated by China's ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Jing at which the BRI South Asian Championship was announced, adding to the already sizable number of events that incorporate eSports into the BRI project (MOFA, 2019).

eSports in China has come a long way from being called the "electronic opium" alongside online games to having it semantically separated from online games and subsequently turned into a respectable pastime that can be used to promote China and Chinese culture. The above subsection showed that MOC has already effectively identified that ability of eSports and had tried implementing it in pre-existing strategies of PD (BRI) as well as adapting it as a part of China's cultural diplomacy strategy. Nonetheless, it is hard to miss that Tencent and other actors were also heavily invested in

organising these events. Further analysing the influence non-state actors have in this process is required to provide a more detailed view of how eSports is used in PD in China.

6.2.   Non-state actors in China's eSports

In the few mentions above, local audiences were key in creating the popularity of eSports in China as the whole industry was built bottom-up by early internet cafe owners and players. The industry then piqued interest of the government as it was under regulated and started garnering too much attention, affecting the productivity of adolescents (Szablewicz, 2020). The economic and promotional potential of eSports was however too strong to be ignored by both state and non-state actors. This subchapter will show how the latter used eSports as a PD tool that attracted audiences and invited profitable investments.

6.2.1.   Cities and local governments

Following the concept of domestic dimension, Wang (2012) discussed Chinese cities' ability to conduct PD in the shape of "city diplomacy", whereas cities promote the country and the local areas in an independent manner. This chapter will highlight important cases in which Chinese cities' governments identified eSports as a viable PD tool and used it for their own advantage. The cities will be limited to Chengdu, Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou, however many other cities can showcase what capabilities local governments have in employing eSports for their and China's advantage.

Chengdu's government officially adopted organising World Cyber Games as a part of its plan of constructing a "Chengdu Communication Hub" as early as 2008 (Waizi.org, 2018). The official document that mentions this plan calls for immediate modernisation of Chengdu's internet infrastructure and high tech infrastructure to hasten its development efforts (Waizi.org, 2018). This modernisation plan was introduced in accordance with the 11th Five Year Plan (FYP), however the original FYP document never mentioned development of eSports and video game industry - nonetheless, Chengdu government's document states: "encourage carrying out eSports events and

introduce world-class eSports competitions as WCG and WSVG[9]" (Waizi.org, 2018). Local government had long before identified the potential of expanding the modernisation plan to include eSport events — before the WCG 2009, Chengdu also hosted WSVG 2006 and Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) Season IV Global Challenge in October 2009, however these were only parts of larger qualification series, not the actual finals (Liquipedia.net, 2021). Later in 2009, hundreds of players and teams from 70 different countries flocked into the city to watch the first major eSports tournament that was played in China, on 11-15 September 2009 (WCG, 2009ab). A separate editorial website was launched on Games People.cn to report from the event held at the Century City Convention Centre, however due to the website being discontinued only a part of the articles are now available through the Wayback Machine Internet Archive (Game.People.cn, 2009).

One of the available articles, posted two days before the tournament, showcases the narrative background of the event. Titled "WCG 2009 World Finals: Fighting in the name of the nation", it briefly highlights the history of eSports in China and the games played at the tournament, while explaining how China that was just following the Summer Olympics in Beijing will now get to experience the "eSports Olympics" in Chengdu (Cui, 2009ab). The historical and cultural background was also highlighted: "Chengdu, an ancient city with a thousand-year history was dreaming of becoming 'China's first eSports city'"; according to the text, thanks to that and "strong government support" Chengdu was chosen over other applicants for hosting the tournament (Cui, 2009a). It states that due to the increased support and professionalisation of eSports, the players can now "fight for the glory of their nations" (Cui, 2009a). Moreover, the president of Chengdu at the time, Ge Hongcai and the Deputy Director General of the State General Administration of Sports, Wang Jun were both present at the opening ceremony, alongside many other representatives of the local government and Samsung, the main sponsor of the event (WCG, 2009).

This event had historical importance for the development of eSports for both China and Chengdu but also highlighted the potential of eSports as a promotional tool - the city took the chance to present itself in a worldwide broadcast, showing off as an "eSports city", inviting a major sponsor in the shape of Samsung while also making a step towards becoming a "communications hub", getting to fulfil both domestic and international PD goals. This shows how a Chinese city can use eSports as a PD tool not only to attract audiences to the city itself, but also to China as a whole.

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[9] WSVG - World Series of Video Games, a tournament held in 2006/2007 and then in 2014, owned by an American game company, Games Media Properties (McElroy, 2007).

Creation of Sichuan eSports Association also took place in 2016, with the goal of improving the level of eSports in the province, implementing eSports education programs and creating a record of professional players, which had led to an even faster growth and development of the industry locally (Sina Sports, 2016). 2019 was an even busier year for Chengdu's eSports when the Dota 2 Major Tournament was held in the city, while a major promotional campaign for the city was created hand in hand with the national professional LoL league, LPL (Chen, H., 2019b). The city has also implemented more policies that support the emergence of new events and teams, like offering up to 8M RMB allowance for attracting international tournaments into the city and a maximum of 20M RMB for teams that have "Chengdu" in the name and participate in tournaments abroad (Chen, H., 2019; Chenhua.com, 2019).

Chengdu is still heavily supporting the gaming and eSports industry, even amongst the current crackdown — while gaming companies are having their investments cut in Beijing and Shanghai, Chengdu offers investment and allowances for the gaming and eSports industry (Che, 2022). Throughout the years, Chengdu has presented itself as a technological and communication hub, promoted its talents and the country abroad and managed to achieve all that by employing eSports, highlighting how Chinese non-state actors can use eSports as a PD to promote both itself and the whole country. Trying to build an "eSports city" or an "eSports capital" is not an exception for Chengdu, as it will be shown down below in the following examples.

Shanghai, similarly to Chengdu, has also been a very important centre for the video game and eSports industry. For starters, it is the home of the first major Chinese eSports organisation, Invictus Gaming (IG) that was created by Wang Sicong in 2011 (Sina Games, 2011). Shanghai has been historically deeply connected with the gaming industry, as since 2004 the biggest gaming and digital entertainment event held in Asia, ChinaJoy or China Digital Entertainment Expo & Conference, has been held in the city (Farrar, 2010a). The event, which was even held amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020, has been a major opportunity for foreign and domestic companies to promote their new titles, hardware and software (Ye, 2020a). Many eSports titles like LoL, or Blizzard's Hearthstone also were presented on the event in the past, attracting tens of thousands of potential Chinese consumers (Farrar, 2010b). Shanghai was the first city to plan creation of an eSport capital in 2017, while simultaneously having the most eSports-related policies among all the cities in China (Chen, M., 2021). This created a favourable environment for the creation of eSports teams, providing scholarships and allowances and

e.g record breaking, $1.5B eSports centre that is now under construction — an investment from EDG's owner, SuperGen property company (Chen, H. & Fudge, 2021). The city hosted a plethora of eSports events, like the Dota Major 2016, IEM Shanghai 2018, or the Worlds 2020, an offline event due to the pandemic that amassed more than 170 million concurrent viewers, topping that year's Super Bowl viewership of over 100 million (Roundhill, 2020).

However, probably the most eye-catching event regarding the PD endeavours that can be achieved through eSports was the second instalment of the Cross-Strait eSports Culture Festival held partially in Putuo District and in Taipei, with LoL, FIFA tournaments, cosplay shows and other cultural events and exchanges (People.cn, 2021; Yang, 2021; Shanghai.gov, 2021). The event was organised by the Shanghai Taiwan Affairs Office, the Shanghai Cross-Strait Communication Promotion Association among others and set to become a platform for cross-strait exchanges, while breaking the "social barriers" between the two coasts (Shanghai.gov, 2021; Yang, 2021). Shanghai Government's website article called eSports an "electromagnetic field" that pulls the two ends of the Taiwan strait closer together, whereas People.cn article notes that the event sponsors offered scholarships for participants from both teams (People.cn, 2021). The event was also a way for eSports academia and investors from both sides to discuss the topic of eSports and its development directions (People.cn, 2021).

This event in Shanghai is an even more concrete way of showing of eSports can be used as an PD asset — in such a complicated political issue as in the case of Cross-Strait relations, eSports can be used as a form of alleviating the pressure by implementing cultural diplomacy and exchanges in friendly but competitive events. While organising big international events is by far a valid option for promotion abroad and inviting foreign investment, initiatives focused on certain audiences or political issues like this eSports Culture Festival could be an even more effective way of creating eSports-based PD strategies.

The third city presented in this subchapter will be Beijing, as it is also one of the Chinese cities that battles for the "eSports capital" title (Ye, 2019). However, the case of Beijing is peculiar, as seemingly due to being the country's capital, it recently hosted more events with direct support of the state.

Beijing was the host city for one of the biggest offline eSport tournaments in the history, with the LoL Worlds 2017 being held at the National Stadium - a symbolic event for the history of LoL and eSports, with tens of thousands of fans on site, millions in front of their screens and an an

Augmented Reality (AR) dragon programmed on the scene (Van Allen, 2017). The year 2019 brought the release of "Several Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Beijing's Game Industry" announced by Wang Yefei, the deputy director of the Publicity Department of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee that put forward 13 measures to supervise the healthy development of the online game industry and aims to create an "international online game capital" in Beijing (Yang & Cao, 2019). The document also implied including online game developers from Beijing in the so-called "Beijing Cultural Development Fund" that would also support game developers who plan to "go out"[10] (走出去) with their games to abroad markets, while simultaneously inviting important foreign companies to the city (Yang & Cao, 2019). For eSports, more importantly, the document supports creation of eSports industry clusters, eSports events, eSports theme parks and the creation of "Beijing International eSports Innovation and Development Conference", AKA the BIGC (Yang & Cao, 2019; Ye, 2020c). The mentioned conference was held under auspices of the Communist Party Publicity Department in Beijing, whereas Microsoft, Tencent and Sony Group representatives were all present at the event (Ye, 2020c). An important notion presented at the conference was one of deputy director of Chinese National Academy of Arts, Yu Jiannan, who emphasised on the importance of content of games, as they should "adequately tell the stories of China"; and Ying Shuling, the founder of VSPN, a major eSports event organiser in Asia also provided a valuable insight: "In the process of internationalisation of China's eSports, China must have the courage to transform from *rule former* to *role receiver*. What is lacking in presented by Beijing Chinese urban eSports is not the technological hard power, but cultural soft power" (Chen Hang, 2020; Ye, 2020). This insight emphasises how important the eSports content is for Chinese state and non-state actors, as the cultural background behind the creative design of the video games can have influence over the audience of the games. At the event, many new eSports-related projects were announced, like an eSports centre in the Shijingshan district and government-backed eSports tournaments. This series of events was announced by the Beijing municipality and Fu Hua, deputy minister of at the Publicity Department, who at a conference argued that "eSports has already become China's cultural ambassador of "going-out" [strategies]", and added that Beijing, as China's capital of culture, should also be the city that promotes Chinese culture with the

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[10] Go Out Policy - developed in early 90s, the policy "encouraged Chinese enterprises to invest abroad", but now also has the (d'Hooghe, 76). It has been also often included in President Xi Jinping's speeches regarding strengthening China's communication capabilities in the spirit of "telling China's story right" (讲好中国故事) QStheory, 2019).

use of newest technologies and industries, like eSports (Mier Sports, 2020). The tournaments that were included in the "eSports Beijing" program was the 2020 Glory of Kings (王者荣耀) world Championship, that was co-hosted with the government or the Intel Extreme Masters XV - Beijing Online CS:GO Championship (Wang L., 2020). The former event is especially relevant considering the fact a Chinese-developed game received a direct green light from the state to conduct a major eSport championships in the capital, highlighting the negotiational capabilities of non-state actors in the industry.

The "eSports Beijing" event went on to be continued in 2021, also with the "Beijing International Student eSports Festival that invited Chinese eSports academia for discussions regarding the development of eSports in China (Digi.China, 2021). The Glory of Kings tournament had seen its second instalment in the Chinese Capital, whereas Intel had announced organising the Intel World Open Dota 2 Championship in 2022 (Weibo, 2022). The tournament would not have been this much of a surprise if it had not been directly connected to the Beijing Winter Olympics — Liu reports that it was not a coincidence that Intel sponsored the tournament before the Olympics (Liu, 2022). In the event, for the first time in China's eSports history, 5 olympic rings were shown at a competitive gaming match — months before the Asian Games in Hangzhou (Liu, 2022).

In times when video games are facing the hardest restrictions in years, eSports events in many cities in China are still omnipresent, which goes in line with the official video games/eSports dichotomy, where the games played recreationally are the bad influence, whereas eSports is a legitimate profession, with a chance for representation of the country internationally. Beijing is a special case as China's capital, as the government seems to directly support eSport happenings and the promotion of China based video game content as a "cultural soft power tool" (Chen, 2020).

As a final case of China's eSports cities is the host of the upcoming 2022 Asian Games, Hangzhou — with the first ever eSports medal competition in an official Olympic competition, it is a major event for the history of eSports industry, institutionalisation of eSports, and a success for diplomatic approaches that led the industry to this level. However due to the outbreak of the pandemic in China, the event has been postponed to 2023, which was announced on 6th May 2022, the fact that eSports made its way onto the Olympics is a historic feat (Ansari, 2022). The eSports competition was also held as a demonstration sport at the Asian Games 2018 Jakarta, however those medals did not count into the official medal classification of the event (Asian Electronic Sports Federation (AESF),

2018). The city was already well prepared for eSports events before the Asian Games, as Hangzhou is home for one of the biggest eSports infrastructure projects in China — The Hangzhou eSports City, a $280 million investment made by the city back in 2018, which was part of a larger, $1.3 B investment into the eSports industry (Game.People.cn, 2018; Kramer, 2018). With this level of support from the local government, Hangzhou appears to be one of the most supportive cities when it comes to eSports investment, with the city government openly aiming for the title of an "eSports capital" (Hangzhou.gov.cn, 2020). Coming back to the Asian Games 2022, the choice of games for the tournament is particularly important, as eight games will be played at the event: FIFA Online, Asian Games Version of PUBG Mobile and Honour of Kings (International name: Arena of Valor), Dream Three Kingdoms 2, Dota 2, League of Legends, Hearthstone and Street Fighter V, and two more as demonstration VR games: Robot Masters and VR Sports (Venkat, 2021). What strikes at first glance is that the majority of these games are created by Asia-based companies, namely: Honour of Kings, PUBG Mobile, Dream Three Kingdoms (China) and Street Fighter V (Japan), whereas on the demonstration event in Jakarta only two out of six games played were made in an Asian country. Out of these eight competition games, three of them in total are published or owned by Tencent (PUBG Mobile, LoL and Honour of Kings) and a very important fact is that Tencent, alongside AESF among others, was one of the actors that heavily contributed to make an official medal competition in Esports come true, by e.g. creating a Strategic Cooperation Partnership with the AESF and the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) (AESF, 2022b). The game Dream Three Kingdoms 2, on the other hand is developed by a local company Electronic Soul, enabling a local game to be played on an international eSport scene (杭州电魂网络科技股份有限公司) (Hangzhou.com.cn, 2022). Hangzhou is one of the most prominent eSports cities on the map of China, with very supportive policies for the eSports industry even while being amidst the uncertainties of the state's video game crackdown, which is why it is not a surprise that the first Olympic medal competition in eSports is going to be held in this particular city.

It has been shown throughout this subchapter that city governments can act as public diplomats, broadly using eSports as their diplomatic tool to promote the cities and China to foreign sponsors, audiences and potential tourists, but also a tool to represent and negotiate for the industry with domestic audiences and the government. However, after seeing the contribution of investors like Tencent in the Asian Games 2022 or Intel in the IWO Beijing event, exploring the extent of the power that those investors have in this complicated eSports equation is required to properly answer the

research question. Especially Tencent, whose negotiations helped eSports land in the Asian Games 2022, promoting its own eSports titles on the scene has to be explored. To do that, Tencent's endeavours in China's eSports and potential uses of eSports in PD will be uncovered in the subchapter below.

6.2.2. Companies, game developers and investors

The importance of platforms in the eSports industry cannot be understated, as streaming and video websites like Huya, Douyu or Bilibili constantly broadcast or let users share their eSports-related content to the internet (Zhang, 2015). Similarly, identified by Scholz as primary stakeholders in the eSports industry, game developers have the control over e.g. eSports tournament rules, main changes in the way the games are played or the type of content that is released into the game (like art or design) (Scholz, 2019). This means, having control over broadcasting sites, game developers or tournament organisers allows management of the content that is presented to the audiences. In China, there is one stakeholder that is able to get a hold of both eSports streaming platforms whilst also acquiring major eSports title developers, and that is the online services giant, Tencent Holdings (Zhao & Lin, 2020).

Tencent's share of the eSports and gaming industry in China and even on a global scale is unrivalled. As early as 2011, Tencent stepped into the international eSports scene by acquiring a majority stake in Riot Games, LoL's developer, finalising a full takeover in 2015, effectively becoming the owner of one of the biggest eSports titles in terms of both revenue and audience (Pearson, 2011; Wang & Meng-Lewis, 2022). This was followed by buying 24.7% share of Activision Blizzard, the developer of eSports hits like Starcraft, Hearthstone, Overwatch and Call of Duty among others[11] (Zhao & Lin, 2020); Finnish company Supercell in 2016 (creator of a mobile hit, Clash of Clans) and a 10% stake in South Korea's Bluehole, the developer of PUBG in 2018 — which are only the most recognisable games globally among Tencent's constantly growing gaming arsenal (Ji-young, 2018; Zhao & Lin, 2020). The reach of Tencent's ownership does not end at gaming companies, as Tencent Games organises most of the biggest tournament franchises like LoL Pro League (LPL) or PUBG Mobile World Invitational, while having a stake in one of the biggest streaming websites in China, Huya (Zhao & Lin, 2020). The company organised an event called "5 Golden Years of eSports" in 2017, at which Tencent has announced the beginning of a new era of the industry in China, with "internationalisation" of the eSports content, made available by acquiring new eSports game assets abroad among others (Tencent eSports, 2017). Tencent also introduced a broader platformisation of the

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[11] Activision Blizzard company's stock was bought out completely by Microsoft in January 2022 for $68.7 B (Microsoft, 2022).

eSports industry, creating a FIFA Online league with professional football clubs from the Chinese Super League or a Chinese NBA 2K League, with many other titles added to the equation (Tencent eSports, 2017).

Even the previously mentioned Asian Games eSports event was partially made possible by Tencent's contribution in negotiations with the Olympic Committee (AESF, 2021). Surprisingly, Tencent's own streaming website, Penguin eSports was announced to be discontinued in June 2022, which is a move reportedly connected to the 2021 gaming crackdown (Kaur, 2022). Tencent's eSports endeavours can also be found in TV series and animation with titles like Quanzhi Gaoshou (全职高手) or CrossFire series that follow the lives of fictional eSports players, topping viewership charts domestically while also pulling in foreign audiences to a complete new type of content (Ye, 2020b; MAL.net, 2022). To add to Tencent's already significant foothold in the eSports industry, the company also holds Tencent Gaming Awards (TGA), with awards for e.g. the best eSports associations in China (TGA, 2022). This means that Tencent has secured multiple ways to communicate with audiences locally and abroad and has become the biggest non-state stakeholder in the Chinese eSports ecosystem. (Zhao & Lin, 2020). This creates a situation where, as reported by Zhao & Lin, "most eSports club and athletes see Tencent as the industry leader", but it also challenges "the prevalent assumption that China is an authoritarian system which offers one-size-fits-all regulatory policies" (Zhao & Lin, 2020, p. 13). Tencent's sheer purchasing power and control is acting as a smart power resource for China, attracting various foreign partners to sponsor its eSports leagues like Mercedes-Benz, Mobil1 or KFC in the case of LPL (Chen H., 2019a; Mercedes, 2020). Moreover, Tencent's takeover had an influence to e.g. LoL's in-game content, as a complete revamp took the game from a look based on European fairy tales to a more a Japanese animation-like design, with playable characters based on China's literature or history, like Wukong (based on Sun Wukong from Journey to The West [西游记], a novel written by Wu Cheng'en published in 1592) or Xin Zhao (based on the general Zhao Yun from the Three Kingdoms era) (Smith, 2014; Leagueoflegends.com, 2022), actively promoting Chinese culture abroad while simultaneously transforming the game to match domestic audiences. The idea of showcasing Chinese culture through eSports content was presented at the 2019 "Forum on Digital Culture and Tourism Industries" in Kuala Lumpur, where at the Tencent eSports Exhibition Area it was shown that "eSports, as an emerging cultural carrier, is gradually becoming a new path for the output of Chinese culture" (Tencent eSports, 2019).

Therefore, Tencent has a high level of flexibility in the Chinese eSports ecosystem — even though it still has to directly answer to the government's regulations, it is hard to even find parts of the eSports and gaming industry when Tencent has not set up its business yet. The company at the same time also works well as a public diplomat for China, fulfilling the need of "adequately tell[ing] the stories of China" through video games, as the company does just that by promoting China-made games at international events (e.g Asian Games 2022) or promotes Chinese culture through in-game content (like in LoL).

The importance of Tencent makes it crucial and necessary for the company to work closely with the government and appropriately implement the changes implied in e.g. the anti-web addiction measures from 2019 or the gaming crackdown of 2021. For example, Tencent implemented rigorous systems that require players to insert their ID number and real name before registering an account to confirm their age, while in the recent restrictions, Tencent has posted a calendar that highlights the dates and time in which adolescents can play their games (Chen H., 2020). Whilst Tencent has to work and negotiate with the government the details of how this enormous Tencent Gaming platform can work in the current regulations, all the remaining stakeholders have to play into this Tencent monolith, or possibly attempt to find an alternative way around this leading eSports company (Zhao & Lin, 2020). This is the challenge that many face nowadays in China's eSports, as for example, the first representative of second generation nouveau riche Wang Sicong to create an eSports platform which would be independent from Tencent eSports.

This notion shifts the focus of this subchapter from Tencent onto another group of shareholders: investors. To be exact, the second generation nouveau riche (富二代; *fuerdai*) that has been introduced throughout the stories of Wang Sicong and his first major eSports organisation in China, Invictus Gaming. Fuerdai, simply speaking, are the children of the generation that acquired their wealth within the chaos of China's economic reforms in the seventies (also called 富一代; *fuyidai,* nouveau riche or the first generation rich) — a group that is often said to be rather frivolous in their spendings, with no serious obstacles in their lives due to the wealth their parents possess (Liu-Farrer, 2016). Peng Liangjie, in a 2021 article titled "The *Fuerdais* are Withdrawing from the eSports Scene" (富二代们正在撤离电竞圈) perfectly sums up the influence the *fuerdai* had on the industry, stressing the fact that they are a very China-specific stakeholder of the industry (Peng, 2021). Peng in his article provided a list of 12 different *fuerdai* that had invested in China's LoL eSports teams in years 2011-2021: including Vici Gaming's Ding Jun, who had major stake in his family's Yiwu Huading nylon company; EDG, the

2021 Worlds Champions CEO, Zhu Yihang, whose father founded the Hopson Development Holdings, one of the biggest companies in China; or, for example, He Youjun, the son of Macau's "King of Gambling" He Hongshen, investing in the V5 eSports organisation since 2018 (Peng, 2021). Since Wang Sicong entered the industry, all of these remaining investors also wanted a share of the possible income, however most of them realised that this implies constant and direct business with Tencent, and without a big platform it is almost impossible to go up against the Chinese gaming giant. Wang Sicong, who himself tried to create streaming platforms and rival Tencent eSports, ended up in enormous debts and had to be "rescued" financially by the rest of his family to keep Invictus Gaming alive (Peng, 2021). EDG's boss Zhu Yihang implemented a completely different approach, and his Super Competition Entertainment Group (超竞互娱集团) signed a strategic partnership with Tencent in 2017 — for example, the Shanghai Minhang eSports centre built for EDG is one of the project that were included in the strategic partnership of the two (Peng, 2021). Tencent also partially owns the 2022 Spring Split LPL Champions, Royal Never Give Up (RNG), also a very well known team internationally. As the risk and costs from owning an eSports team are constantly on the rise *fuerdai* are leaving the scene, replaced by big companies like BiliBili (BiliBiliGaming) Weibo (Weibo Gaming) or Jingdong (Jingdong Gaming), the biggest online retailer in China. While the *fuerdai* were crucial in creating the eSports industry in the first place, their influence is dwindling away, with bigger companies that can directly negotiate with Tencent or the government taking their place.

Despite being a disliked social group in China, the fuerdai historically were one of the most influential groups in the development of eSports. However, as it becomes clear now, these stakeholders need to closely play by the rules set out by the industry's main player Tencent, who also has stakes in teams within the eSports leagues they organise themselves. Thus, apart from owning broadcasting sites, tournament organisers, game developers, and leagues, Tencent also has the access to the main connection point to audiences locally and abroad — the teams and players themselves. Big share of the eSports content that comes from China comes from or through one or two Tencent's companies — this is why Tencent is a major stakeholder to consider while researching use of eSports as a PD tool in China. Asian Games 2022, EDG's success internationally, League of Legends development, impressive eSports events; all of these assets used by Tencent are a way to create a favourable view of China and can create a favourable picture of the country amongst eSports' audiences. Tencent is by far the key diplomat for the eSports industry in China as well, being the biggest player in the gaming industry,

Tencent gets affected the most when the industry gets hit by regulations and can earn the most when it is developing peacefully. It is possible that since none foreign games were introduced since April 2022 into the Chinese video game market Tencent and the state will expand their cooperation by approving more local-made game content over foreign titles to finally create an international eSports hit that "tells China's story adequately". Tencent, in turn will gain an even more palpable foothold in the industry, effectively being a stakeholder that can effectively implement local gaming restrictions but also promote China's cultural content through video games. Therefore, Tencent should be considered an "intermestic actor" as Tencent acts as a diplomat for the industry locally while simultaneously fulfilling the goals set out by the government using eSports and video game content abroad. This is also why it would be impossible to consider an eSports-related topic in a solely top-bottom manner, as the industry's highly fragmented nature requires to take non-state actors into consideration. Therefore, as the last non-state actor group analysed in this thesis, eSports organisations, pro-players and communities will be discussed below.

6.2.3. eSport Organisations and players

Up until this moment, the stakeholders presented in this thesis have had major influence on the development of the eSports industry in China or currently hold control over many nodes of content creation in the industry, effectively also controlling the way Chinese eSports is received domestically and internationally. However, as seen in the background empirical section, many individual players and teams can be important stakeholders in the industry, while also being relevant in PD strategies, like in the case of Sky and Moon bearing the olympic torch before the 2008 Olympic Games.

Throughout the years we have seen footballers like Cristiano Ronaldo, Messi or clubs like Real Madrid or Chicago Bulls in the NBA becoming representatives and ambassadors for their respective countries, improving the way people see their homelands or intensifying tourism in their respective home regions (Oliveira et al., 2017). eSports is no different with known all over the world South Korea's Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok often called the best eSports player in the world — flocking thousands of fans to watch his games in online and offline tournaments. In China, many teams have already made a name for themselves, China and the industry altogether. One of such teams is PSG.LGD, founded by the "first lady of China's eSports", Pan "RuRu" Jie and since 2017 co-owned by

the French football giant PSG — one of teams that has highest revenue in prize money globally; over $20 M since its creation in 2009 (Liquipedia.net, 2022). The team has won many major tournaments garnering many foreign fans, also due to the fact that PSG is now co-owning the team.

The case of sports teams owning eSports franchises is not that popular in China as it is in the west. For example, in the USA it is popular for NBA teams to own eSports franchises, where e.g. Mark Cuban, the owner of Dallas Mavericks, owns a NBA 2K League team Mavs Gaming, whereas in Europe many football teams have their own eSports teams, for instance AS Roma or 1907 Fenerbahçe Esports (Duran, 2021; Gravitywillfall, 2021). In China however, sport organisations do not have as big of an impact as in the West, but PSG co-ownership of LGD and the acquisition of a Fifa Online team by an English football team Manchester City in 2018 may change this trend, with foreign sports teams acting as intermestic actors for their own respective countries, also allowing international exchanges and popularisation of Chinese eSports in the West (MCFC, 2018).

The teams play a very important role, as they are the ones who are in charge of properly developing the players, including psychological help, dieticians, and care of their physical health (Scholz, 2019). Well-trained players can then act as a direct connectors with the audiences as it is players' performance that drives the eSports shows and makes audiences interested in particular organisations, leagues or players. China also has a personality that is on a similar level like Faker, at least at a national level. Jian "Uzi" Zihao is a professional LoL player that has played the game professionally since 2012 and has won the LPL multiple times, earning Most Valuable Player (MVP) awards multiple times and representing China at the demonstration eSport tournament in 2018 Asian Games Jakarta. However, he was recently picked as one of the candidates to become an "a cultural tourism ambassador" of the Yichang city in Hubei province (Luoye eSports, 2022). This shows that in China eSports players as stakeholders could be engaged for local city's PD endeavours to directly interact with target audiences.

Audiences and communities themselves can also be stakeholders in their own right as the whole industry is built around them — they are ultimately the target and consumer of all the messages being disseminated in the eSports ecosystem. However, the way local Chinese audiences interact with their counterparts can also be a factor that influences other actor's PD endeavours, under the premise of citizen diplomacy. For example, in the cases Chinese LoL teams won the Worlds, which are IG in 2018, FPX in 2019 and especially EDG in 2021 many domestic and Western news reported the way

Chinese fans expressed their joy with their team winning the finals, with Weibo reaching over 4M mentions of EDG's victory (Chu, 2021). The images and videos with half naked fans running around city centres in China, whole dorms and thousands of people in cities' market squares shouting EDG's name were circulating throughout Twitter, with comments in awe of the Chinese fans' extremely ecstatic reaction (Bolding, 2021; The Esports Writer, 2021; @niicolo, 2021; Reuters, 2021). However the same happening uncovered some very disturbing news with cases of sexual harrassment in reaction to the triumph (Chu, 2021). Reports like these create a very polarising view of China's eSports audience and it is bound to have some influence on the way the eSports industry is being conducted, possibly in the shape of less leeway and more regulations on gaming from the policymakers.

Nonetheless, this subchapter has shown cases where usually less influential stakeholders than previously mentioned Tencent also have a say in the way Chinese actors can conduct PD using eSports. That being said, even though the disparity between state, tencent and other actors is visible, the data shown throughout this chapter has shown that non-state actors have a substantial influence over what is happening in China's eSports and how it is broadcasted both domestically and globally.

6.3.   How can Chinese actors use eSports in Public Diplomacy (PD)? - Discussion

This research consisted of unveiling the intricacies behind the state and non-state actors' use of eSports in PD by answering the research question "how can Chinese state and non-state actors use eSports in Public Diplomacy (PD)"? This was made by identifying the main stakeholders and actors that take part in creating this complex eSports ecosystem and their application of eSports in PD. Firstly, state actors like MOC, GASC and MOFA were taken into consideration. It has been shown that the state is mostly a regulator, with exceptions of MOC that also used eSports in various abroad events, building on existing PD strategies like BRI-related happenings in Malaysia or UAE between 2018 and 2021. The narratives on those events signalled that the MOC had already identified eSports a viable way to conduct "youth exchanges" and a part of "China's digital culture", which in turn means that eSports, due to its cultural undertones and artistic values can be used as an asset in China's cultural diplomacy. State actors tend to use Policy Narratives as understood by strategic narratives to create a need for regulations of the industry, but also the same narratives shape how eSports can be understood

in its PD, and that is a "vessel for Chinese culture" that has to "adequately tell the stories of China" as argued by China's Ambassador to UAE, Ni Jian and the deputy director of Chinese National Academy of Arts, Yu Jiannan respectively (MOFA, 2020; Ye, 2020). Regulations implemented in 2021 at one hand could be understood as a way to counter the ever-rising statistics of young gamers, which can ultimately influence the productivity of the China's looming productivity productivity problems, but on the other hand it took the chance to block new video game titles to be licensed for almost half a year until April 2022 and now focuses mostly on licensing new Chinese-based games. Chinese state actors' PD using eSports in the future can be created by doubling down on Chinese-made games with foreign audiences in mind that could help promote China's culture abroad. The current regulations will most likely make the Chinese video game market less competitive for foreign video game developers and engage local stakeholders to create a platform that will make this available. This, however, creates a need to engage non-state actors in the process, challenging the traditional approach to PD with strict top-down processes like in the case of Confucius Institutes or BRI-related endeavours. As an industry that was mostly created in a bottom-up manner through the sheer interests of early gamers and internet bar owners, eSports challenge the traditional way PD was conducted in China, as it requires the state to seek actors that have more detailed expertise in the field outside the government. This can in turn create more lasting relationships with foreign audiences, due to the fact more than a single source of information disseminates similar narratives regarding eSports (Zaharna, 2007). That means the state has to engage non-state actors like Tencent to create more long lasting interactions with both local and abroad audiences. Tencent is then one of the direct centrepieces that is required for the extensive development and publication of eSports media and potential eSports game content, promoting China through the 'digital culture' cultural diplomacy asset of eSports. Even though it is the central government that exercises the most direct control of the industry with regulations of game time and the titles that make their way to the Chinese market, the Chinese government cannot use eSports in its PD without engaging major stakeholders like Tencent.

That means that non-state actors are also very important pieces of the puzzle as they are the ones who created this bottom-up pressure to institutionalise the industry, gave it a sports-like form and transformed it into the cultural diplomacy asset the MOC is now starting to use in some PD projects. Chinese cities are one of prime examples, as Chengdu, Shanghai, Beijing or many others have been implementing PD in its strategies for more than a decade now, not only acting as public diplomats for the city or China, but also for the industry — events like WCG Chengdu in 2009 heavily supported

China's early eSports industry and acted as catalysts for domestic interest in the electronic olympics, often won by Chinese nationals. The race for the "eSports capital" garnered local and international attention but also local support for eSports-related policies and investments. Individual investors like Wang Sicong or Zhu Yihang, despite using eSports to reach personal goals or cultivate hobbies, could also be understood as policy entrepreneurs that by investing into eSports and winning top flight tournaments create attention and a need to officially popularise Chinese eSports internationally. In Wang Sicong's case, being a policy entrepreneur is not a conjecture, as the day he created Invictus Gaming he explicitly pledged to aim for "unification of eSports", which could imply his goal to institutionalise eSports one way or another (Sina Gaming, 2011). Nevertheless, the most influential of non-state actors is by far Tencent who could be understood as the "intermestic actors", that is an actor that has "domestic interests with international projection" (La Porte, 2012, p. 444). As the biggest gaming company in the world, Tencent manages to create a huge video game platform with eSports, gaming-related dramas, animation and movies, music and other forms of digital culture content that is simultaneously being projected to abroad audiences, fulfilling the state's goal of "adequately telling China's story" with video game and eSports content. Finally, eSports organisations and players add to this complex equation by achieving international success or training class players like Uzi that garner attention of abroad audiences, promoting China and Chinese cities as eSports tourism destinations and eSports as an inherent part of China's digital culture.

7.   Conclusion

            To sum up, the findings of this thesis were combined to serve as an answer to the following research question: how can Chinese state and non-state actors use eSports in Public Diplomacy (PD)? Approaching this research question required to identify state and non-state actors in the eSports industry in China. Most influential state actors that applied eSports in PD consisted of China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism and its two related entities: China Cultural and Entertainment Industry Association as well as the National Technical Committee for Internet Culture Standardisation, who identified eSports as China's cultural asset, effectively applying it to existing cultural diplomacy strategies alongside the Belt and Road Initiative. However, it has been also shown that due to the industry involving a broad range of non-state stakeholders, in order to effectively employ eSports in PD, Chinese state actors need to work closely and engage important stakeholders like Tencent. Tencent has founded the biggest video game and eSports platform in the world creating their own eSports titles with content that promotes Chinese culture. Furthermore, Chinese cities and local governments independently create eSports strategies that set out to turn the cities into "eSports capitals", inviting international investors and tourists, but also act as diplomats to garner support for the industry itself locally. Such diplomats could also be players and eSports organisations who, by achieving international success bearing China's flag, can change the foreign audiences' opinion of China while painting a more positive picture of the industry domestically. In the context of China's crackdown on gaming in August 2021, where the underaged were banned from playing for more than 3 hours on weekends it may seem hard for Chinese stakeholders to keep using eSports in PD. However, considering that the Chinese government has also stopped giving out video games licences until April 2022 and since then has not given out licences to foreign video game companies, answering the research question becomes easier. Chinese state and non-state actors can continue using eSports in Public after applying restrictions on foreign video game content and doubling down on creation of local, Chinese eSports titles that "adequately tell the story of China", understood as eSports video game content that matches the official requirements set out by the government and serves as a form of entertainment that promotes China and Chinese culture abroad. This allows for interactive PD content that enables direct communication with abroad audiences using implicit (e.g. aesthetics) and explicit (e.g. eSports content relating to Chinese history) ways to improve the view of China internationally. The character of the eSports industry

requires the state actors to engage stakeholders like Tencent to jointly create video game content that matches this idea. Tencent acts as an intermestic actor that promotes the titles abroad and domestically and eSports organisations and players act as public diplomats who promote the new titles and promote China by winning international tournaments. The use of eSports thus requires a specially tailored, multi-actor approach that challenges the idea that China's PD has to be done in a top-down manner, matching the likes of student exchanges or Confucius Institutes and other types of state-organised people-to-people exchange projects.

Due to its nascency and lack of existing research, analysing eSports in Public Diplomacy turned out to be an extremely demanding topic, due to the sheer amount of stakeholders involved. Nevertheless, this thesis should be regarded as a springboard for further eSports-in-Public Diplomacy research, as there are more potential topics that could be expanded to shed more light on this rarely-explored analysis. For example, research could also be conducted only taking into consideration the contribution of cities, as many cities in China have extensive eSports strategies that have not been taken into consideration in this thesis (like Xi'an, Guangzhou or Chongqing). Conversely, comparing how Korea and China conduct PD with eSports would also be an interesting topic. Looking into the future, it will be exciting to see how different countries and actors can apply eSports in Public Diplomacy. For now, most countries of the world have only started conjuring strategies on how to score points in this Public Diplomacy game.

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