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THE SUCCESS OF CHINESE MOBILE GAMES IN INDONESIAN ESPORTS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of Chinese mobile games on the Indonesian gaming market and esports scene. The impact is evident in the widespread adoption of Chinese mobile games, the community of Chinese game developers and grassroots gamers, and government policy resulting from collaborations between Chinese game developers and the Indonesian government. The introduction of the Chinese mobile game *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* (Moonton 2016), hereafter *MLBB*, played a crucial role in

developing the Indonesian esports scene and bringing gaming into the mainstream, to the extent that the current Indonesian gaming market would not have taken its present form without *MLBB*. This claim is evident in *MLBB* competitions, which grew exponentially between 2016 and 2018 from sporadic local activities to a national circuit (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). This growth provided mainstream exposure to Indonesian digital gaming culture after decades as a niche activity (Rakhmani & Darmawan, 2015). Because of this exposure, *MLBB* esports has attracted attention from Indonesian mainstream media since it became a national circuit (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020), and it maintains a strong presence among Indonesian social media users (Andreas & Arymami, 2021).

KEYWORDS

China, mobile games, esports, Indonesia, game culture, game community

INTRODUCTION

MLBB's success demonstrates China's growing soft power (Jiwandono, 2024). It reflects the recent sociotechnological power dynamic in the Asian gaming industry. While Indonesia has historically been "subordinate" to Japan in digital gaming and popular culture (Otmazgin, 2008; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2021), recent developments show a move towards digital games and popular culture products imported from China (Borrowy, 2017; Fung, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Wu & Chen, 2020). As Jin (2017) notes, the key factor in China's swift rise to leadership in the digital game industry in Asia is the success of its accessible mobile games. That accessibility directly stimulates the growth of esports in Indonesia, which hosts some of Asia's largest mobile gaming circuits (Borrowy, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020).

This article identifies three interconnected factors behind the success of Chinese mobile games in Indonesian esports: technolog-

ical compatibility, community building, and institutional collaboration. Technological compatibility enabled widespread adoption by aligning affordable mobile games with Indonesians' reliance on smartphones, particularly given their lower purchasing power compared with countries in the Global North (De Lange, 2015). This accessibility stimulated the growth of competitive gaming communities, whose activities expanded beyond competition to include social media content creation and other forms of digital entrepreneurship.

Technological accessibility alone, however, did not establish a durable esports ecosystem. Chinese game companies embedded their products socially by positioning themselves as active stakeholders in Indonesian esports communities. Moonton's Student Leader program and Tencent's PUBG Mobile Jawara Community program serve as information networks and activity hubs for esports practitioners. Both companies also recognise and reward proactive members, creating incentives for sustained participation and community leadership.

These publisher–community relationships subsequently acquired institutional legitimacy through collaboration with the Indonesian government. This collaboration is evident in mobile game-based esports programs that resemble Chinese esports structures (Yu, 2018; Zhao & Lin, 2021), direct partnerships between government bodies and Chinese game publishers, and the development of national mobile games for esports competition (Jiwandono, 2025). Collaboration between Moonton and Garudaku Esports Academy further extends this relationship into education through non-academic scholarships for students with recognised achievements in esports.

National game development also gained importance within this institutional landscape. The Indonesian-made mobile game *Lokapala: Saga of the Six Realms* (Anantarupa Studios, 2020), hereafter *Lokapala*, was regularly featured in Indonesian esports events between 2020 and 2024, before its server shutdown in 2025 (GGWP Editorial Team, 2025). Yet sustained grassroots entrepreneurship coexisted with the

game's rise and decline, encompassing hospitality, procurement, and event-planning businesses that served the esports industry. With national mobile game development paused, a central question arises: Does grassroots entrepreneurship represent the more durable Indonesian footprint of the Chinese mobile esports model?

METHODOLOGY

This research employed digital ethnography to examine the relationship between Chinese mobile games, esports practices, and gaming communities in Indonesia. Fieldwork was conducted in 2023 through participant-led interviews and researcher-participant observation, following established approaches to ethnographic research in digital gaming and mobile media (Thornham, 2011; Hjorth & Richardson, 2014; Pink et al., 2016).

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012). Recruitment began with a varsity esports administrator and expanded through participant referrals to include regional esports administrators, academy trainers, coaches, esports athletes, community organisers, and casual players. The dataset therefore encompassed participants occupying different positions within Indonesia's mobile esports ecosystem.

The data were analysed using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Interview and observational materials were coded for recurring activities, relationships, institutional arrangements, and participant interpretations associated with the distribution and use of Chinese mobile games. Three principal categories emerged from this process: technological compatibility, community engagement, and institutional collaboration.

The following section will explore how China's gaming industry has concentrated on mobile gaming and its growth as a major exporter to Southeast Asia. I contend that Chinese game companies' successful entry into Indonesia was not sudden but the result of 30 years of evolution in China's gaming sector.

CHINESE GAME INDUSTRY

The game industry in China is closely tied to its state-driven cultural industry model (Fung, 2016). In this context, the state-driven approach refers to a top-down initiative from governments to implement their national creative visions by delegating tasks to and supporting game developers and publishers (Fung, 2016, 2017; Zhao & Lin, 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). The seed was planted 30 years ago, in the 1990s, when the largely unstructured gaming industry in China began to emerge (Cheung & Fung, 2016).

The Chinese government first became involved in the early 2000s by regulating and censoring the influx of imported online games into China (Cheung & Fung, 2016). The regulation mandated that imported games represent Chinese cultural identities and be distributed through local publishers (Cheung & Fung, 2016). This method of distribution set the stage for reverse-engineering and the development of Chinese online games (Cheung & Fung, 2016). Eventually, the Chinese game industry gained sufficient recognition through its efforts to enter the global market by hybridizing Chinese identity with global gaming tropes (Cheung & Fung, 2016).

Chinese game companies began to establish international footholds during the 2010s (Cheung & Fung, 2016). This significantly expanded their business reach and talent pool (Cheung & Fung, 2016). A good example of this strategy is Tencent's acquisition of Riot Games in 2011 (Cheung & Fung, 2016). This foreign direct investment model overcame the limited human resources in the Chinese game industry by allowing international talent to work on Chinese games, thereby accelerating their development, production, and marketing (Cheung & Fung, 2016). Additionally, the Chinese game industry gradually shifted its focus toward mobile game production during this period in response to the rise in global mobile gaming (Juul, 2010; Richardson, 2011; Cheung & Fung, 2016; Fung, 2017).

This shift decentralized the Chinese game industry, benefiting both smaller studios and major publishers by enhancing collabora-

tion in the development, distribution, marketing, and expansion of the intellectual property catalogue of Chinese mobile games (Fung, 2017). The growing recognition of the Chinese game industry, the globalized talent pool, and the export strategies have resulted in Chinese mobile games becoming decontextualized (Cheung & Fung, 2016; Borrowy, 2017; Fung, 2017). This means that Chinese mobile games began to resemble globally popular online games and mobile games, rather than continuing to showcase Chinese cultural identities.

The decontextualization of Chinese mobile gaming is apparent in *MLBB*, which adapts gameplay conventions associated with *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009), hereafter *LoL*, to mobile devices (Berida, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). This approach efficiently leverages the existing LoL fan base by offering a more accessible alternative (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). This has proven to be a massive hit in Southeast Asia, and Chinese game publishers have begun exporting their mobile games to the region (Berida, 2017; Borrowy, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020).

The export of Chinese mobile games to Southeast Asia and their positive reception reflect the Chinese game industry's opportunistic approach (Cheung & Fung, 2016). The expansion to Southeast Asia became a cultural blueprint for the Chinese game industry. Similar to the game industries of South Korea (Jin, 2010; Cheung & Fung, 2016) and Japan (Iwabuchi, 2016; Hutchinson, 2019; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2021), which have deliberately designed their game productions and export strategies, the Chinese government incentivizes its game industry to identify opportunities and navigate new frontiers (Cheung & Fung, 2016; Borrowy, 2017; Fung, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020).

Indonesia presents both opportunities and a new frontier. It is recognized as a stronghold for mobile games, even within the Southeast Asian market (Berida, 2017; Borrowy, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). Indonesia has a rapidly growing mobile media ecosystem, with mobile internet penetration increasing dramatically

from 11% in 2018 to over 60% by 2024 (Kemp, 2024; Nurhayati-Wolff, 2024). This growth parallels Indonesia's transformation into the largest mobile game market in Southeast Asia (Berida, 2017; Borrowy, 2017).

This transformation is not incidental; it was incubated at the intersection of the Chinese game industry's export strategy and Indonesia's media ecology (Borrowy, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Zhao et al., 2023; Jiwandono, 2025). Evidently, *MLBB*, *PUBG Mobile* (Tencent Games and PUBG Corporation, 2018), hereafter *PUBGM*, and *Free Fire* (111dots Studio, 2017), hereafter *FF*, are among the most popular digital games in Indonesia, based on the download-per-capita ratio (Hasanudin et al., 2024; Mahadewi, 2025). Each has its own esports scene, with *MLBB*'s latest Mobile Legend Professional League Indonesia (MPL Indonesia) becoming one of the most-watched esports events of all time (Esports Charts, 2025).

Chinese mobile games aligned with Indonesian purchasing power and media habits because they were affordable and accessible on budget smartphones (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). Their resemblance to already familiar PC games, particularly *LoL* and *Dota 2* (Valve 2013), further reduced barriers to adoption. Because Indonesian players were already accustomed to mobile gaming, *MLBB* could subsequently be appropriated as a competitive platform rather than remaining solely a form of casual entertainment (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). The following section analyses the technological compatibility between Chinese mobile games, Indonesian digital game culture, and the growth of esports in the country.

TECHNOLOGICAL FACTOR: DIGITAL GAME CULTURE AND MOBILE ESPORTS SCENES IN INDONESIA

Indonesia is a significant hub for Chinese mobile gaming. That is because China's products and esports play a crucial role in integrating digital game culture into the mainstream in Indonesia. In

return, Indonesia has become a strong market for Chinese games. Digital gaming has been present in Indonesia since the 1980s (Rakhmani & Darmawan, 2015), primarily due to an asymmetrical cultural relationship between Indonesia and Japan (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2021). However, Japanese digital game culture in Indonesia was obscure and niche (Rakhmani & Darmawan, 2015; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2021). Chinese mobile esports, on the other hand, has sparked strong public interest and gradually increased the visibility of gaming among Indonesians (Kurniawan, 2019; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Andreas & Arymami, 2021; Jiwandono, 2025).

Indonesian mobile esports started as regional competitions across Indonesian provinces in 2017. Afterward, it would quickly grow into the national and international circuits by 2018 (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). The Indonesian *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB)* major league and its Southeast Asian regional competition made history as the first two nationally broadcast games and esports competitions (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020).

Furthermore, the Indonesian government acknowledged the legitimacy of esports through its inclusion in the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta and Palembang, Indonesia. The utilization of Chinese mobile games in esports from 2017 to 2018 brought more visibility to digital gaming than it had in decades prior. As a result, digital gaming is now widely practised by the community, the government, and the public (Jiwandono, 2025).

The wide practice of digital gaming highlights the vital role of mobile media. As a Global South nation, Indonesia has lower average incomes than North Americans, Europeans, or Australians, often compelling Indonesians to consolidate their media consumption onto a single device: mobile media (de Lange, 2015; Tapsell, 2015; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Jiwandono, 2024). This consolidation is evident in Indonesia's digital gaming trend.

From the early 2010s to 2025, the gaming trend in Indonesia has been dominated by mobile games such as *Clash of Clans* (Supercell 2012), hereafter *CoC*, and *MLBB* (Fahmi et al., 2018; Jiwandono, 2025).

This trend reflects the global shift in digital gaming from consoles, PCs, and dedicated portable devices to mobile media (Juul, 2010; Richardson, 2011; Consalvo, 2012). It also illustrates the success of the Chinese game industry in penetrating the Indonesian market by aligning their products with the Indonesian mobile media ecology, spurred by the rise of mobile esports (Borrowy, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Jiwandono, 2025).

The visibility of mobile esports in Indonesian digital gaming and media ecology is increasing. The increase is a consequence of two mobile media affordances: the appropriation of mobile gaming into competitive gaming and the commodification of mobile gaming spectatorship (Andreas & Arymami, 2021; Sari et al., 2022). The following section will discuss those affordances.

TECHNOLOGICAL FACTOR: MOBILE MEDIA AFFORDANCES

Mobile media affordances facilitate the entry of mobile media into the gaming domain. This trend is evident in the global shift towards mobile gaming as the primary gaming device, broadening its demographic to include casual gamers who are also general mobile media users (Juul, 2010; Richardson, 2011; Consalvo, 2012). In Indonesia, the Chinese mobile game industry has seen tremendous success, initially leveraging the existing mobile gaming ecosystem from the early 2010s (Fahmi et al., 2018; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2018) and subsequently importing and localizing Chinese mobile games in the Indonesian market (Jiwandono, 2024).

The localization of Chinese mobile games takes place at both industrial and community levels. It is a mutualistic symbiosis in which one level benefits the other. Chinese mobile game companies quickly legitimized themselves through branding and collaboration with Indonesian companies to promote their games (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Jiwandono, 2025). This branding was largely successful because Chinese mobile games have been accepted as

esports games by Indonesian gaming communities, and have also gained strong momentum among the public as a form of digital interactivity (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Andreas & Arymami, 2021; Sari et al., 2022; Jiwandono, 2025).

Esports, mobile games, and digital media have a threefold relationship shaped by technological affordances. That is, esports' success in Indonesia is driven by the utilization of mobile games and their increasing prominence in the Indonesian media ecology. The rapid adoption of mobile games in Indonesia has significantly elevated Chinese mobile games to prominence. Indonesia has been a significant mobile media market since the 2010s (Fahmi et al., 2018; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). However, the arrival of Chinese mobile games has truly integrated mobile gaming into Indonesian media society.

This integration stems from the compatibility of Chinese mobile games' technological features and affordability, considering Indonesians' reliance on smartphones as a one-stop media device, given their lower average incomes compared to those in countries in the Global North (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2018; Jiwandono, 2024). Two factors enhance the compatibility of Chinese games with the Indonesian media ecology and their integration within Indonesian society. These factors are the Indonesian media ecology and the affordability of Chinese mobile games.

Indonesian media ecology is marked by the convergence of media productivity, leisure, and information gathering into mobile media (Puspitasari & Ishii, 2016; Onitsuka et al., 2018). This convergence plays a crucial role in bridging the digital divide in Indonesia through a process called 'digital leapfrogging,' where Indonesians quickly catch up with global digital media dynamics by accessing mobile media (Puspitasari & Ishii, 2016; Ariansyah et al., 2019).

Digital leapfrogging is essential because Indonesians previously had limited access to global media culture during the era of wired connectivity due to deeply unequal network infrastructures (Ariyanti, 2013). The impact of digital leapfrogging is also evident in mobile gaming. Since the 2010s, mobile gaming has thrived in Indonesia.

The thriving industry has made Indonesia a central hub for mobile gaming worldwide (Borrowy, 2017). *CoC* dominated the Indonesian mobile gaming market from 2014 until it was eventually dethroned by *MLBB* in 2018 (Fahmi et al., 2018; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020), primarily due to *MLBB*'s more affordable pricing (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). Affordability is also a point of divergence between Western mobile games and Chinese mobile games. While the affordability of mobile games in general is not new (Juul, 2010; Richardson, 2011; Consalvo, 2012; Richardson & Keogh, 2018), Chinese mobile games such as *MLBB* and PUBGM provide a novel form of gameplay at an affordable price because they resemble popular desktop computer games such as *LoL* and *Counter-Strike* (Valve 2000). This similarity facilitated the transition and significantly expanded their target market (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020).

The migration of desktop gamers to mobile has solidified mobile gaming as a digital norm in Indonesia. This solidification has arisen from the connection between mobile gaming and Indonesian esports communities (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Jiwandono, 2025). Casual mobile gaming has evolved into competitive gaming as Chinese mobile games have been adapted for esports by these communities (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020).

The adaptation started locally and sporadically with one-off regional competitions (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). Soon, however, it developed into major events. 2018 was the turning point with the inauguration of the Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL) and the regional Mobile Legends Southeast Asian Cup (MSC) (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020). This inauguration demonstrated the commitment of Chinese mobile game companies, especially Moonton, to establish themselves in the Indonesian market.

Chinese publishers converted technological accessibility into a sustained market presence through three mutually reinforcing strategies: freemium distribution, social media promotion, and community engagement (Sabella, 2021; Halik & Daud, 2024). Freemium distribution lowered financial barriers by offering free access to games while monetising cosmetic items and in-game currency via Indonesian

vendors (Sabella, 2021). Social media influencers increased visibility by promoting Chinese mobile games across digital platforms (Halik & Daud, 2024).

Community engagement embedded these games within local competitive networks through tournament licensing and financial or organisational support for esports communities (Halik & Daud, 2024; Jiwandono, 2024, 2025). Together, these strategies transformed accessible mobile games into durable esports infrastructure.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENTS

The gaming community identifies itself and is established through communal identity (Xue et al., 2019). The communal identity of esports in Indonesia is closely linked to the relationship between Chinese game publishers and esports communities. An Indonesian esports pioneer I interviewed in 2023 stated that esports is essentially a corporate social responsibility (CSR) program of Chinese game publishers. This indicates that esports is crucial in connecting publishers with esports communities and fostering goodwill. This significance is reflected in the support from Chinese mobile game publishers such as Moonton and Tencent (Jiwandono, 2024).

Chinese mobile game publishers support communities through community outreach programs. Moonton implements these programs with its Community Hero, while Tencent executes them through the PUBGM Jawara Community (PMJC) program. In 2023, I had the opportunity to interview practitioners of those community programs, the essence of which is to connect the companies' visions by addressing the needs and aspirations of gaming communities in specific regions. This includes promoting their sponsors' mobile games, educating gamers on healthy gaming behaviours, organizing events, and mediating issues between communities and publishers. Moonton, in particular, provides university students with the opportunity to apply to the Moonton Student Leaders program, which often directly bridges Moonton with esports societies at universities.

Tencent's PMJC is also a nationwide program that has organized more than 200 community events since 2022 (Rifki, 2022). These are paid events that provide participants with a means to acquire valuable skills, reputations, and connections that can lead to opportunities as mobile game entrepreneurs, often through a game voucher and in-game currency sales business. Moonton also awards outstanding and engaging participants in the Student Leaders program with a non-academic scholarship called Moonton Care.

These approaches fundamentally change how Indonesian gaming communities connect with global gaming culture. In the past, Indonesian Nintendo Entertainment System communities were active, but Nintendo did not recognize them (Rakhmani & Darmawan, 2015). Outside of esports, retro Japanese games communities receive support from the Japanese government, but they are small and niche (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2021).

On the other hand, mobile esports communities are nationwide and well-integrated into both the game publishers' corporate structures and the country's education and sports programs. The community support has increased the visibility of esports communities under game publishers' banners. This visibility has translated into increased credibility for Chinese game publishers and mobile esports communities due to the high volume of competition, consistency, and lively grassroots scenes (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Jiwandono, 2025).

Their credibility is crucial for gaining recognition from the Indonesian government. Mobile esports is not just an interaction between game publishers and esports communities; it heavily involves the Indonesian government. The government's involvement mainly happens through its relationships with Moonton and Tencent, among other Chinese game publishers. The government's role is to provide a legal framework for mobile esports in Indonesia. Meanwhile, game publishers license their games, and communities organize activities under this framework, as mentioned earlier. The following section will discuss the Indonesian government's legal

framework that legitimises mobile esports in Indonesia through institutionalization.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The legal framework for mobile esports has also been established via institutionalization (Jiwandono, 2025). This is done by creating an official esports federation, known as the Indonesian ESports Executive Board (PBESI Pengurus Besar ESports Indonesia). PBESI's primary role is to define the identity of Indonesian esports, primarily by distinguishing it from 'mere gaming.' This distinction is made by positioning esports as a productive activity with regular competitive circuits and real achievements. To support this, PBESI organizes year-round official mobile esports events at various levels. These include administrative regions such as national, provincial, and regional levels, as well as competitions for high schools and universities, as mentioned earlier.

The Garudaku Esports Academy administers this project. It is Indonesia's official esports academy, focused on providing esports education and supporting the practical side of esports competitions, as well as scholastic and varsity esports. I conducted several interviews with personnel from the Garudaku Esports Academy in 2023. In doing so, I gained insight into how it supports esports competitions across Indonesia, and what curricula it offers in establishing esports as a career path.

Garudaku Esports Academy's first project was its participation in the 2021 National Sports Week (Pekan Olahraga Nasional, PON). During the event, the academy identified two interdependent requirements for national competition: a unified regulatory framework and stable communication with game publishers. A comprehensive set of rules was therefore established, encompassing administrative regulations, codes of conduct, and referee discretion.

Stable publisher relations were equally important because esports games remain proprietary products that can be modified and rebalanced by their owners. Such changes complicate long-term

competitive preparation. Garudaku Esports Academy consequently acts as an intermediary, facilitating communication between communities and publishers.

Garudaku Esports Academy and Chinese game publishers also collaborate to support esports in Indonesian education. In 2024, Moonton and the academy worked together to organize the Hope Cup tournament (Moonton, 2024). The Hope Cup tournament was a joint program between the Indonesian government and Moonton as part of their Moonton Care scholarship (Moonton, 2024). It aimed to improve *MLBB* esports for students in rural East Java and West Java provinces (Moonton, 2024).

This improvement is essential. My research participants argued that mobile esports in rural Indonesia were hampered by insufficient infrastructure. The event was considered a success as it was able to raise hundreds of millions of Indonesian Rupiahs for the education fund by converting in-game gold that participants won into real money (Moonton, 2024).

Moonton's hands-on approach exemplifies how Chinese game publishers actively participate as stakeholders in the Indonesian esports industry. They do more than license their games for esports use in Indonesia, as they also actively collaborate with the government's representatives and communities to further advance the esports scene.

With the three-pronged model of the esports ecosystem established in Indonesia, it is crucial to examine how Chinese game publishers' success in establishing themselves and their games in Indonesia has set a model for the future of esports in Indonesia.

THE CHINESE MODEL AND THE INDONESIAN FUTURE

This section examines what happened when the publisher-supported Chinese mobile esports model was adapted to national game development in Indonesia. It contrasts the instability of *Loka-*

pala with the more durable grassroots entrepreneurial activities that emerged around mobile esports.

To summarize what has been discussed so far, technological, community, and institutional factors have integrated Chinese mobile games into both Indonesian esports and the broader Indonesian society. The technological alignment between Chinese mobile games and Indonesian mobile media preferences has allowed mobile esports to thrive.

Over time, the mobile esports communities in Indonesia have expanded in size and exposure, while also engaging with game publishers and the government. The Indonesian government's involvement in esports operates on two parallel tracks. The first track is what I have discussed so far: fostering Indonesian esports through support, taking an active role as a stakeholder, and collaborating with Chinese game developers.

The second track is through game development. This track mirrors the Chinese model of mobile esports, which involves intentionally developing and marketing mobile games specifically for esports (Fung, 2021; Zhao & Lin, 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). In Indonesia, it came to fruition with the launch of *Lokapala* in 2020. The game was created by Anantarupa Studio and published by PT. Melon (Jiwandono, 2025). *Lokapala* is similar to MLBB but differs primarily in its depiction of Indonesian mythologies (Jiwandono, 2025).

Although its community is smaller, *Lokapala* has been regularly featured in Indonesian sporting events since 2021. The game closely resembles *MLBB* and was managed similarly to how the Chinese game operates in Indonesia. It had an official community and was well-integrated into government-sponsored events.

Lokapala had a serious flaw, however. Unlike MLBB's organically expanding community, *Lokapala* relied heavily on institutional support through government-sponsored esports events and failed to achieve comparable grassroots adoption. Its subsequent financial difficulties and server shutdown demonstrate the limits of replicating the Chinese model through top-down domestic game development alone (GGWP Editorial Team, 2025; Saguni et al., 2024). The case also

highlights Indonesia's continued reliance on foreign-owned games in its esports industry.

On the other hand, various types of digital entrepreneurship in mobile esports existed before *Lokapala* and remain active today. My fieldwork in 2023 observed this phenomenon in Java and Borneo, two major islands in the Indonesian archipelago. The supporting industry includes food and beverage businesses, event organizers, outfitters, and procurement companies (Jiwandono, 2025). These businesses thrive due to increasing demand from the esports community and casual mobile game players, especially in competitions and social play.

Moreover, some of these businesses are involved in the larger structure of mobile esports communities and government programs. On Java Island, the local esports association actively partnered with local businesses to serve as official supporters of their esports initiatives. On Borneo, street food locations have become community hubs for local players.

This development is significant in two ways. First, it demonstrates a divergence from the Chinese model. While Chinese mobile esports focuses on government initiatives (Yu, 2018) and distribution of major games (Fung, 2017; Zhao & Lin, 2021), a small but sustainable grassroots esports entrepreneurship exists in Indonesia. Second, this "analog future" shows potential beyond the digital game development sector, which is often viewed through an overly optimistic lens when predicting Indonesia's next big breakthrough. Together, they form what I refer to as the Indonesian model of esports.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the success of Chinese mobile games in Indonesian esports cannot be explained by market penetration alone. Their influence develops through the interplay of technological compatibility, community embedding, and institutional collaboration. Thus, they become socially embedded through publisher-

supported communities and gain legitimacy through collaboration with esports organisations and government institutions.

These findings show that transnational games function not only as cultural commodities but also as infrastructural platforms around which communities, commercial activities, policies, and aspirations are organized. The Indonesian case, therefore, demonstrates that regional gaming power is exercised as much through the construction of local ecosystems as through the distribution of game content.

The contrasting trajectories of *MLBB* and *Lokapala* serve as evidence that the Chinese model cannot be reproduced through top-down national game development alone. Although *Lokapala* adopted publisher-supported and government-recognized structures, it lacked the extensive grassroots adoption that sustained *MLBB*.

Meanwhile, local organizers, vendors, equipment suppliers, and community businesses continued to generate value around mobile esports. The most durable Indonesian adaptation may therefore lie in decentralized entrepreneurial and community activities rather than domestic software production.

My three-factor framework offers a way to analyse how transnational games become locally embedded. Further research can apply or revise this framework in other Global South markets to examine how technological accessibility, community organisation, and institutional legitimacy interact, and how local actors transform imported platforms into distinct social and economic ecosystems.

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