ESPORTS GAMERS IN CHINA

CAREER, LIFESTYLE AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE AMONG PROFESSIONAL LEAGUE OF LEGENDS COMPETITORS

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INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF GAMING IN CHINA

The term "eSports" has recently become one of the most-frequently-searched internet keywords in China.[1] A portmanteau of the terms "electronic" and "sports," eSports carries a positive connotation at the lexical level, implying professional game playing as a form of organized sport and situating video games within the bigger picture of sports studies. The "e" in eSports refers not only to the electronic format of the sports in question, but also implies a relationship to the more complex socio-cultural context of virtual space and digital activities, encouraging public perceptions of gaming as a professional endeavor. In China, eSports seems an inevitable dimension of the progress of modernization. In many respects, China's emergence as a global power appears unstoppable, with the country's businesses having recently risen to challenge the dominant forces in a number of industries. Video games, characterized by researchers such as T. L. Taylor and Sue Schneider as one of the most appealing forms of entertainment for young consumers and global investors alike, perfectly illustrate this growing global dominance: China is now recognized as the largest national video game market in the world as well as the most potent challenger to the previously-dominant market, the United States.[2] In a 2018 report by investment researcher Newzoo, China was projected to reach US$37.9 billion in annual revenue, putting it at the top of all global game markets.[3] A 2016 report from the China Game Publishers Association highlights the astonishing fact that China's online gaming industry brought in a total of US$16.5 billion that year, with more than 566 million active mobile users consuming online games.[4] These data illustrate the prosperity that the Chinese game market has experienced as the state has begun open up its cultural policies. The significant economic impact of China's emerging game market is of particular interest to academics due to several latent factors that have catalyzed the abrupt rise of the Chinese video game market, making up its formula for success.

Although limited in scope, previous academic research has focused on different factors related to the topic of China's emerging gaming industry. For example, Yong and Downing, whose work is recognized as the one of the key structured studies analyzing the emerging Chinese game industry, have examined public perceptions of virtual gaming.[5] Fung and Liao have also highlighted the impact of cultural policy on the economics of the game industry in China, discussing how the market has expanded and gaming culture has grown to include more players, promoters and game companies.[6]

2. T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (MIT Press, 2012); Sue Schneider, "Social Gaming and Online Gambling," *Gaming Law Review and Economics* 16.12 (2012): 711-712.
3. See Newzoo, "Top 100 Countries/Markets by Game Revenues," *Newzoo*, 2018, https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-100-countries-by-game-revenues/.
4. See Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Guangzhou, China, "China: Top Sector Games," 2014, https://www.rvo.nl/sites/default/files/2014/12/china-top-sector-games-opportunity-report-cg-gz-20141023.pdf.
5. Yong Cao and John D. H. Downing, "The Realities of Virtual Play: Video Games and their Industry in China," *Media, Culture & Society* 30.4 (2008): 515-529.

Research conducted by Dal Yong Jin, Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan have explored gaming culture in Asia and how electronic games' transition to mobile devices has triggered massive growth in the popularity of gaming throughout Asia.[7] Still, relatively little research has focused on how game users, including both common players and professionals, have participated in sustaining or transforming perceptions of gaming culture in the regional context. How do gaming professionals develop careers in eSports and related entertainment businesses, such as livestreaming? How do players deal with social pressure in order to succeed as professional gamers? How does the growth of the Chinese video game market illustrate the ways economics can serve as a driving force behind political change? And what cultural and societal transformations can result from governmental changes to cultural policy in response to economic concerns? This chapter responds to gaps in existing research by exploring the development of eSports in China since the loosening of restrictions on imported media and controls over public discourse in 2009, pointing to cultural policy as the most significant factor in bringing about China's gaming boom.

Research for this chapter was based on two methods. First, textual analysis was used to examine public discourse on eSports in China collected from major news web sites and search engines, which evidenced the impact of the significant distinctions in the Chinese government's posture toward public discourse in cultural policy drafted before and after 2009, helping to sketch a general portrait of how professional gaming has been officially conceptualized. Second, participatory observation was used to understand professional gamers' lifestyles behind the masks of their public images and beyond the uproar surrounding their glorious victories. These methods point to the conclusion that, in response to the enormous revenues of the video game market, public discourse regarding "gaming" has refocused on the discussion of eSports and pro-gamers in China, while amateur gaming is still widely regarded in a negative light.[8] This analysis helps explain how gaming culture, which had been perceived in the past as vulgar, violent, non-productive and lacking in cultural sophistication, became one of the most prominent emerging sectors of the entertainment business in China, as well as the key role cultural policy played in this transformation. To understand the changing landscape of Chinese gaming, it is essential to take into account the polarization of public discourse on gaming, which is the focus of this chapter.

GAMING IN CHINA PRIOR TO 2009: GOVERNMENT POLICY, PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND MORAL PANIC

As mentioned above, 2009 was a watershed year for the Chinese gaming market, while prior to 2009 there were a number of strict policies and regulations that prevented the growth of gaming businesses. The year 2004 marks a turning point for governmental censorship of gaming content through the implementation of cultural policy in China, with the publication of the "Government Notice Prohibiting the Broadcast of Television Shows on Video Games" by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of People's Republic of China (hereafter SARFT). However, the "censorship war" between game companies, game users and the Chinese government has been going on since the very onset of video gaming in China, when arcade games entered the Chinese market in the 1980s following its post-Mao opening and reform drives. As Yong Cao and John D. H. Downing have suggested, at that time privately-owned arcades featuring coin-operated games from the U.S. and Japan began to have a significant impact on youth entertainment culture in China, and gaming soon earned a negative reputation as a threat luring children to addictive lifestyles.[9] This widespread

6. Anthony Y. H. Fung and Sara Xueting Liao, "China," in *Video Games Around the World*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (MIT Press, 2015): 119-135.
7. Dal Yong Jin, "Mobile Gaming in Asia: Politics, Culture and Emerging Technologies," in *Mobile Communication in Asia: Local Insights, Global Implications*, ed. Sun Sun Lim (Springer, 2016); *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific*, eds. Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan (Routledge, 2009).
8. "Pro-gamer" is the term most frequently used in China for eSports professionals.
9. Cao and Downing, "The Realities of Virtual Play."

public stereotype led to a push for the establishment of governmental regulations controlling the importation of game consoles. Tracing back to policies like the 1990 "Government Notice Strengthening the Regulation of Billiards and Video Games"[10] and the 1992 "Government Notice Prohibiting Gambling in the Use of Video Games,"[11] as well as further legislation strengthening regulations on commercial video gaming businesses and internet cafés in 1996 and 1998, the state has sought to hinder the development of gaming in Chinese society for the purpose of "protecting the ideological thinking and morality of young people."[12] During this period of time, many foreign games were banned and could not be imported to China, while domestic games received official warnings requiring publishers to modify game content related to the depiction of violence and sex to make it more "healthy."[13] Local television broadcasting companies were also forbidden to produce programs about digital gaming.[14] These measures clearly reflect China's official viewpoint prior to 2009, which treated video games and gaming as a problematic social ill or as a dangerous form of cultural importation, without recognizing the strengths and potentialities of the medium.

The Chinese news media fanned the flames of this negative public discourse, helping to hinder the development of gaming at that time. As in several other countries in global south, the Chinese government maintains complete control over all forms of publication in order to ensure the strict adherence of all publications and broadcasts to party ideology. Looking back at Chinese news media from this period of time, it is common to find articles labelling video games as a form of "heroin targeting children" or a "threat to public wellbeing."[15] Other news reports commonly associated gaming with other societal taboos like crime, violence, juvenile delinquency, lack of education and gambling. In at least one case, governmental restrictions on gaming were formulated in response to a major news story, namely a 2002 fire at an internet café in Beijing, an act of malicious arson that left 25 dead and 12 injured. The case attracted national attention, culminating with Beijing Mayor Qi Liu's announcement cutting support for further development of internet cafés, prohibiting their business permits and shutting down all such establishments in existence at that time. Not long afterwards, this policy would be executed on a national scale.

This overwhelmingly negative public discourse on gaming in Chinese society led to a state of "moral panic," which Stanley Cohen has defined as a kind of exaggerated social reaction through which "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests."[16] More recent research by scholars such as David Garland and Sean Hier characterizes moral panic as a tactic frequently provoked by the elite or dominant classes, who use it when their own interests are threatened as a means of controlling the mediated distribution of information in support of grassroots organizations.[17] In the case of China, gaming has been "demonized" through association to "online addiction" or "digital addiction," perceived as a sickness with potentially long-lasting and even fatal consequences. This viewpoint is reflected in the Abstinence Center of Internet Addiction, established in 2006 by Yongxin Yang, a self-proclaimed medical therapist who applies electroshock to heal those who suffer from "digital addiction."[18]

10. Ministry of Culture of the People Republic of China (hereafter MCPRC) and Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China (hereafter MPS).

11. See MCPRC and MPS, 9 December 1992.

12. Fung and Liao, "China."

13. Controls on internet and gaming content got even stricter under the "Regulation on Publishing of Digital Publication" in 2008 and the "Administration of Software Production" in 2009, which limited certain issues and ideologies, along with visual practices that could give rise to violence and sexual arousal, or those that could be judged to go against dominant Chinese ideologies.

14. Xinhua Net, "Announcement from SARFT: Forbidding Broadcasting Programs about Computer Online Game," 2004, http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2004-04/21/content_1432492.html.

15. Zhouxiang Lu, "From E-Heroin to E-Sports: The Development of Competitive Gaming in China," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 33.18 (2016): 2186-2206.

16. Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (Paladin, 1973).

17. David Garland, "On the Concept of Moral Panic," *Crime Media Culture* 4.1 (2008): 9- 30; Sean Hier, "Thinking beyond Moral Panic: Risk, Responsibility, and the Politics of Moralization," *Theoretical Criminology* 12.2 (2008): 173-190.

Hundreds of parents have sent their children to this center to seek treatment, where "patients" were treated inhumanely and punished with detention, electroshock, starvation and other forms of physical, verbal and mental abuse. It was not long before an "addicted" youth was beaten to death, ten hours after entering a secured camp in Nanning in 2009. Discussions regarding abstinence centers bloomed all over the country, and as a result, the moral panic surrounding gaming then began to decrease.

THE DAWN OF A NEW (GAMING) ERA: ECONOMICS, CULTURAL POLICY AND ESPORTS IN CHINA AFTER 2009

In 2009, a number of blockbuster multiplayer online battle arena video games including *League of Legends* (Riot games, 2009; hereafter *LoL*) and the new All Pick version of *Dota 2* (Valve, 2013) sparked enthusiasm for the development of a more competitive gaming culture, connecting China to global cultural and economic trends in gaming. The pool of online gamers and gaming revenues alike have expanded sharply with the loosening of official policies toward games, such as granting official governmental approval for the importation and distribution of Western games like *Dota 2* and *LoL*. Since then, the Chinese government has begun to reconsider and even redefine gaming as an important cultural industry with economic potential, as evidenced in 2011 by the "12th Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Economy and Society," which names the cultural industries—including film, animation, comics and video games—as the most important sphere for further development.

One renowned example of China's intensive devotion of resources to the cultural industries is the "quota policy," by which Western game publishers are permitted to distribute their games only through vendors affiliated with one of the China-based gaming agencies.[19] As a consequence, some of the world's most popular games—including *LoL*, *Dota 2*, *Starcraft* (Blizzard, 1998) and *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2009)—are franchised in China through national publishers Tencent and NetEase, who receive a significant portion of the games' national revenues. On the one hand, this policy aims to protect Chinese game developers, especially those belonging to the Chinese Cultural Cluster, which is a specific technological zone in which the Chinese government situates various companies and supplementary infrastructure for running cultural business; on the other hand, it helps strengthen China's soft power by promoting the development of more domestic games using funds raised through the commissioning and taxation of vendors and gaming agencies.[20] This policy has helped local game companies develop rapidly, improved social views on participation in the game industry and increased overall domestic revenues and employment opportunities in this sector.

However, this improvement in social perspectives on gaming has focused only on professional gameplay, while recent public discourse related to amateur gamers remains negative. For instance, the news media has published stories that paint gaming in a negative light, such as "Game-Addicted Adult Stole to Buy Gaming Equipment,"[21] "18-year-old Girl Raped and Impregnated after Meeting In-Game Friends"[22] and "Young Video Game Addict in Hangzhou Stole from Villagers."[23] As can easily be seen in these headlines, the news has tended to link playing video games with crime or other negative behaviors. Meanwhile, the government has passed a series of measures maintaining prohibitions on

18. W. Q. He and T. J. Ma, "The Development of Chinese Online Games Industry and the Stigmatization," Paper presented at the 2017 Chinese DiGRA Conference, Hong Kong, 2017.
19. Peichi Chung and Anthony Fung, "Internet Development and the Commercialization of Online Gaming in China," in *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place*, eds. Nina Huntemann and Ben Aslinger (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 233-250.
20. Anthony Fung and John Erni, "Cultural Clusters and Cultural Industries in China," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14.4 (2013): 644-656.
21. *Chutian Daily*, 11 May 2017.
22. *Dayue Net*, 8 April 2017.
23. *Mass Net*, 9 May 2017.

internet cafés and controlling the content of the imported games, especially those that include sexual and criminal content. Obviously, negative public discourse on gaming has still continued to exist after 2009.

The emergence of eSports has helped gaming professionals shake social critiques of their gaming behavior. Due to its competitive nature, eSports is similar to traditional sporting competition in terms of satisfying people's enthusiasm for play, risk-taking and excitement. Borowy and Jin reviewed the historical commercialization and spectacularization of the digital game industry from the era of arcades in the 1980s through the 21st century, arguing that eSports was originally born in the tradition of spectator sports.[24] On the one hand, eSports stimulate and engage fans by offering them a public and spectacularized representation of professional gaming lifestyles. On the other hand, the commercialized format of eSports leads to potential economic benefits, including jobs not only in competitive gaming, but also in related areas. The social view of gaming has thus shifted from viewing it purely as a form of entertainment to understanding it as a professional occupation, leading to greater public acceptance of gaming as a potential entryway into a productive career path. Therefore, with the aid of the national government, the public discourse surrounding video games has shifted toward a positive depiction of eSports. National news stories such as the "Report on Chinese eSports, January-March 2017" predict that the market value of Chinese eSports could soon reach 70 billion RMB (US$11 billion).[25] Meanwhile, once the MSPRC named eSports as one of the country's top cultural development projects, Chinese society as a whole gradually began to express a more positive attitude toward the industry. More recently, several educational institutions, including three universities and colleges in Sichuan, have begun to establish eSports-related courses.

The differentiation between "gaming" and "eSports" in Chinese public discourse is abundantly clear, and it leads to our next concern: even while eSports has been reframed in public discourse as a component of China's cultural industries and professional landscape, amateur gaming is still devalued as a waste of time and money. Given this status, it is important to consider how current professional gamers have undergone changes in their identity, social status and cultural position during their transformation from amateur players to professional gamers.

LEGENDS OF CHINESE ESPORTS: MYTHS AND REALITIES OF PROFESSIONAL GAMER LIFESTYLES

To answer the questions mentioned above, we chose to focus this chapter's research on the *LoL*-focused Team WE, since they are one of the oldest and most famous eSports teams in China, and thus a paradigmatic case for understanding the world of Chinese professional gaming as a whole. The online participatory observation for this chapter began at the start of the summer season of the Chinese *LoL* Professional League (LPL) in May 2016, along with offline participatory observation of the regional qualifying game for the 2016 *LoL* World Championship and 2017 LPL finals. The observations provided insight into the ways professional gamers act before and after competition, as well as how they relate to their fans through online communication after failing in competition, in the face of social pressures to maintain their professional gaming careers.

As mentioned above, the data collected from gaming-related news outlets in China reflect a clear differentiation in the depiction of professional competitive gamers versus common game players. According to research on eSports in other countries by Ivo van Hilvoorde and Niek Pot, conditions

24. Michael Borowy, "Pioneering ESport: The Experience Economy and the Marketing of Early 1980s Arcade Gaming Contests," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 21.
25. "2017中国电竞发展报告," 13 July 2017, http://data.lmtw.com/yjbg/yeneibg/201707/146841.html.

for professional gamers in China, as elsewhere, are extremely strict and competitive: players are generally 15-30 years old, and the career of pro gamers usually lasts for only about seven-to-ten years.[26] This leads to the circulation of trade secrets and the development of particular practices within player communities. For example, one professional player interviewed for this chapter reported that every career gamer needed a fast average number of clicks-per-minute (CPM) on the keyboard. For pro-gamers, the basic requirement is 200 CPM, while outstanding players usually have to reach over 300 CPM through either talent or practice. Some Korean players have reported tying sandbags or weights to their wrists to train their muscles. Professional gamers also need to keep up with every software update to be competitive, and to develop their gaming strategies through repeated viewing of other teams' tournament play.

For professional gamers, every tournament has a potential impact on their popularity and value, which pushes them to fight for scores and ranking, even to the extent of playing all day long to earn those scores. Hong Kong-based player Gear points out that he would practice immediately after waking up in the morning, and kept practicing until midnight: "I spent all day on gaming without really knowing what I was doing."[27] Gear is now a professional gamer whose daily life is fully arranged and regulated by the team manager, including a strict daily schedule that requires him to play practice matches at 2pm, 4pm and 7pm, then review the matches with a coach and an analyst at 9pm. In addition to the effort dedicated to practice on an individual level, professional gamers need to learn different theories and strategies related to any number of situations that could potentially arise during competition. They also need to play practice matches with teammates to improve teamwork and collaborative dynamics. These types of intensive training regiments have created a number of career opportunities, including positions for game analysts, game designers, team managers, video anchors, coaches, judges and others. Retired professional gamers may turn to jobs like these as a way of continuing their eSports careers while helping new players by sharing skills and experience. This echoes the research of Seo Yu-ri and Sang-Uk Jung,[28] who have shown how computer games can go beyond the solitary nature of gaming and bring about concrete changes to social practices and the cultural landscape.

Each year, twelve LPL teams attend two seasons of tournaments, including the spring and summer split. Usually by August, three teams, including the champion of the summer split, the team with highest season score and the champion of the Regional Qualifying competition, attend the *LoL* World Championship. During the regular season, there are seven-to-eight tournaments held in Shanghai each week. The tournaments are regularly held from 5pm to 9pm on weekdays, and from 3pm to 7pm on weekends. There are two-to-three matches daily, playing Best of Three (BO3) per match, meaning each team has to participate in more than five games per week.

One of the top-performing and also the most controversial gaming teams in the LPL is Team WE, who won their first championship in 2012, in the fifth tournament of the IGN ProLeague series. As their prominence grew, the team's pro-gamers began to face higher expectations and ultimately greater social and financial pressures. LPL tournaments are regularly held in broadcast studios with the capacity to accommodate live audiences numbering in the hundreds. Meanwhile, each LPL team has its own team bunker in Shanghai, which is basically a dwelling house where team managers, coaches and pro-gamers all live and train together. As a result, pro-gamers from other provinces in China frequently suffer from homesickness and preoccupations related to prolonged stays in an

26. Ivo van Hilvoorde and Niek Pot, "Embodiment and Fundamental Motor Skills in eSports," *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 10.1 (2016): 14-27.
27. "19歲電競選手月薪2萬, 靠打機搵食, 父母反對," *Apple Daily,* 30 August 2016, https://hk.finance.appledaily.com/finance/daily/article/20160830/19753793.
28. Yuri Seo and Sang-Uk Jung, "Beyond Solitary Play in Computer Games: The Social Practices of eSports," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 16.3 (2016): 635-655.

unknown and unfamiliar urban locale. To sustain their lives and keep a positive outlook, they rely upon their in-game ranking and performance, which in turn leads to an extremely high degree of devotion to the craft among Chinese pro-gamers.

Being a pro-gamer in China means much more than just making a living through gaming, and implies demands to be presentable, charming and interactive in order to satisfy the expectations of fans. As fan reception is one of the most significant factors in assessing the success of a gaming team, nowadays each LPL team uses its Weibo social network account to announce news, report game results and, most importantly, to interact with fans. On the team's social networking profiles, each and every post is an act requiring thorough consideration and careful editing. The primary function of these narratives is to reduce the isolation between the pro-gamers and fans and to form an emotional bond. This can be especially notable after a team faces a loss. For example, one of the posts on Team WE's Weibo account, posted by the team's commander after a loss in the Regional Qualifier in 2016, explains: "I opened Weibo on my way back. Many friends left messages to me, saying that they were crying and sad tonight. I also hear from others in passing that while most people were watching the game happily backstage, Su was hiding in the corner, with tears ruining her make-up."[29]

Social media posts such as this point to the reactions of several parties after the loss, with terms like "crying," "sad" and "tears" illustrating the feelings of sorrow that establish an affective relation between pro-gamers and fans as the former attempt to earn the forgiveness of the latter for their losses and the disappointment they have caused. They also show the serious effort put into image management, and how Chinese pro-gamers' job definitions have expanded beyond their original status as gaming professional to that of gaming idols, demonstrating the uniqueness of the demands on their lifestyles vis-à-vis those that face pro-gamers in other counties.

THE EFFECTS OF CHINESE PROFESSIONAL GAMERS' CONVERSION INTO CULTURAL ICONS

1. Market First, Play Later

The schedules of Chinese pro-gamers in famous organizations like Team WE are packed not just with training and competition, but also with the various commercial and marketing tasks involved in seeking sponsorship and increasing public exposure. The venue and promotional materials (see Image 2.6.1) help illustrate how pro-gamers, who often privately characterize themselves as shy gaming nerds, have to portray themselves as superstars and publicly perform their coolness, which can involve increasing fan awareness and appreciation through acts such as giving hugs, signing autographs or posing for photographs using the Korean heart sign, a hand gesture commonly used by cultural icons in Korea and elsewhere to display the message of love for their admirers. The functions Chinese pro-gamers perform in public correspond to the expectations for idols or celebrities in other spheres of popular culture. Thus in the eyes of fans, pro-gamers are regarded as the true idols of the game industry and of game culture in general.

2. Don't Speak, Just Play

Given the fact that non-gaming activities are generally managed and organized by team managers who are responsible for maintaining the team's public image and marketing value, it could logically be expected that the team members, who are under constant supervision, would not be permitted to take

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29. WE_Smallorc, "今年结束了，总得说点啥吧," 29 August 2016, https://www.famulei.com/p/485130.

Image 2.6.1. Team WE's venue for fans gathering before the LPL tournament in 2017.

part in any "unauthorized" interview or other business function. Still, the state media is sometimes granted opportunities to interview pro-gamers, since official attention can serve both as a promotion of the gaming team and as a form of political propaganda promoting China's national image. Image 2.6.2 shows the transcript of an interview in *China Daily* with a member of another prominent organization, Team RNG, explaining that "he is honored to participate in competitive gaming at the global level, and will try his very best to win for the country."[30]

Meanwhile, fans frequently revel in celebrations of the off-stage and off-screen lives of pro-gamers in China. For example, after the 2016 LPL final, in which Team WE won the Nanjing-based tournament, hundreds of fans gathered around the back door of the arena where the team was about to be picked up. The fans hands were filled with supportive signs and glow sticks as they awaited the team's appearance. After 30 minutes, the players finally came out of the door, at which point the crowds went crazy, chanting "WE! WE!" until the bus left. During these five minutes, the players simply got on the bus, without any interactions with fans. Every outward communication by the pro-gamers is strictly controlled, and the messages and information transmitted to the audience have already been manipulated by other power-players, for example the team managers and the team's chief sponsors.

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30. China Daily Weibo, "对话RNG成员严君泽：亚运会，我准备好了！," 16 July 2018, https://www.weibo.com/1663072851/
Gqcluhsgf?from=page_1002061663072851_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime; image translation: "'China Daily Interview with RNG Player Letme: I am Ready for the Olympics.' China national gaming member Letme was interviewed by China Daily, and exclaimed he was honored to wear the national gaming team uniform and represent China in worldwide competition: 'I will win the game for the glory of homeland.'"

中国日报 V

【对话RNG成员严君泽：亚运会，我准备好了！】电子竞技国家队与RNG战队成员严君泽
（Letme）接受中国日报专访，严君泽表示能穿着印有"中国CHINA"的国家队服站在亚运会赛场上
会特别自豪，一定要为国争光。采访中，他提到电竞选手一天至少需要训练14个小时，四处奔波
比赛保持竞技状态也并非易事。亚运 ... 展开全文∨

7月16日 17:02 来自 微博 weibo.com

收藏   转发 2074   评论 1032   👍5543

Image 2.6.2. Screen capture of a news thread on weibo.com.

3. Keeping up Appearances

Pro-gamers also need to put significant effort into maintaining the appearance of their faces and bodies, as their personal charisma can be as significant a factor as their gaming techniques in generating fan support and sales of merchandise related to the players and teams. In Image 2.6.3, a screen capture of Team WE's online store, demonstrates how pro-gamers, in full make-up, are required to act as fashion models to sell team jackets with their names and other similar products. According to interviews conducted for this chapter, pro-gamers can receive considerable commissions if they promote a hot-selling product, while those with lagging sales record may be classified as less valuable to the business, which can be a deciding factor in the signing or extension of team contracts.

This is highly unusual when compared to the cases of players of games like *World of Warcraft* and *Dota 2* analyzed in other chapters of the present anthology, such as Verónica Valdiva Medina's work on *WoW* in Chile and Jules Skotnes–Brown or Jerjes Loayza's work on *Dota 2* in South Africa and Peru, respectively. Unlike gamers in other countries, Chinese pro-gamers in a competitive setting just step onto the stage, sit down and start playing. Two teams occupy the two sides on the stage, while the center of the stage is dominated by a large screen displaying the gameplay. When the competition ends, the winner goes to shake hands with the loser, and then goes to the middle of the stage to take a bow. The only conversation, or rather the only chance for the audience to communicate with
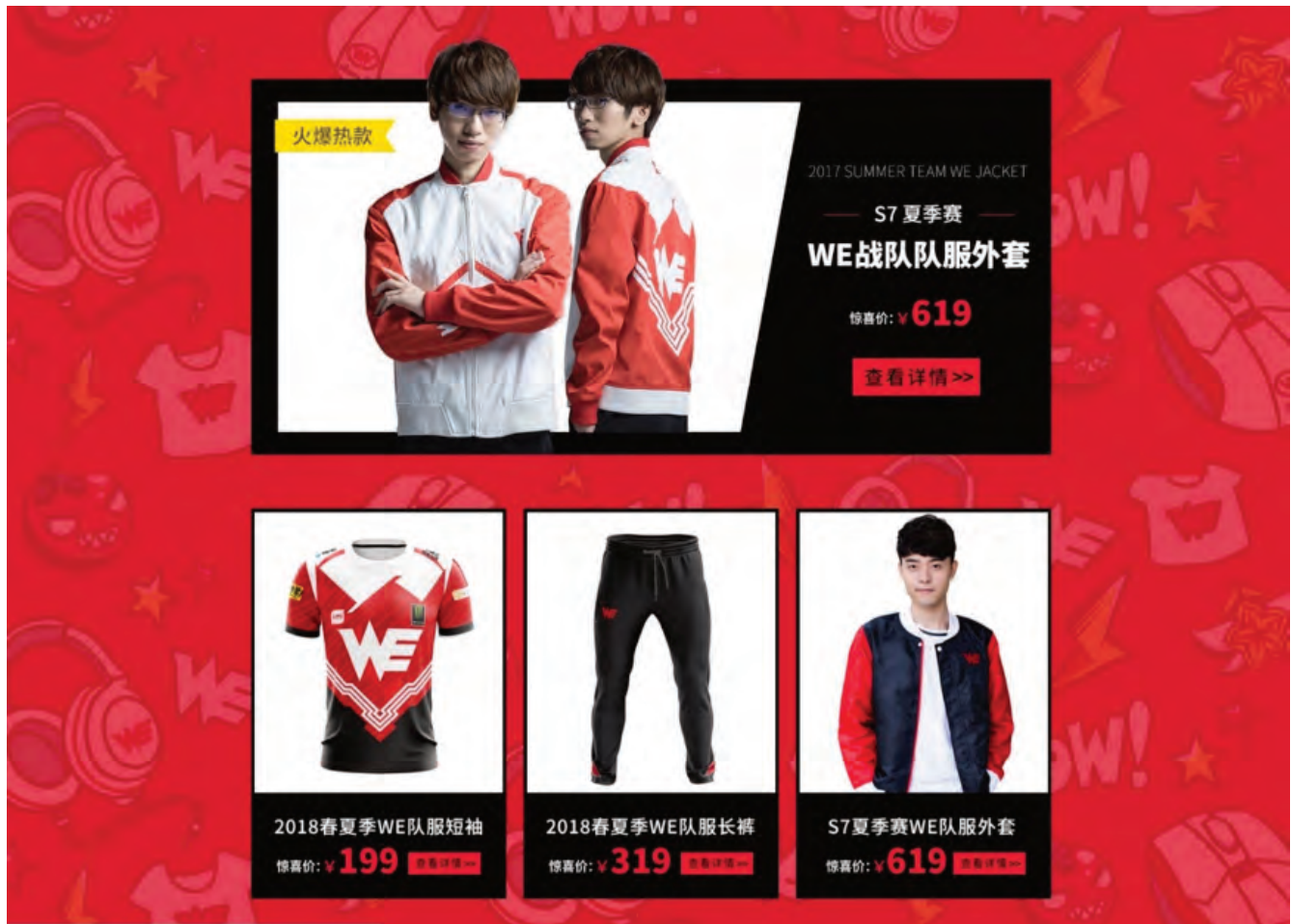
Image 2.6.3. The e-shop of Team WE on Taobao, featuring players as models.

the players, comes during the short interviews that follow these competitions, in which the host frequently invites one player from the winning team to answer a few questions from the audience.

4. Public Life and Private Matters

Due to the commercialization of eSports, pro-gamers today have become idolized figures in the eyes of fans. Their performance and even their personal relationships have thus become the focus of online gossip or the subject of critique on social networks. One example is the case of player retirement. At the end of 2014, the captain of Team WE, Weixiao, announced his plans to withdraw from professional competition. Weixiao was one of the best players in the world, and was responsible for China's first *LoL* World Championship win. During his last year of professional competition, when his old teammates had all left the team, Weixiao was not able to build on his past successes and lead the team to a better place. Despite having been such a high-performing player in the past, he became the target of online criticism from fans due to his poor performance. During the entire season, the most common comment under his Weibo was "Retire and go sell snacks!"[31] In his retirement announcement, Weixiao wrote: "I am a competitive and ambitious person, but I've been through a lot. I think it's time to give up… I'm not defeated, but I have decided to leave."[32] His explanation

31. Selling snacks online is one common career taken on by previous pro-gamers following retirement in China.
32. Weixiao, " 。," 31 August 2014, https://www.weibo.com/p/1001603749754428380601.

made clear that his retirement was not about a losing record in competition (defeat), but rather his disappointment in the face of continued online abuse that, ironically, came mainly from fans who had previously acted as some of his most vocal supporters.

Since the value of pro-gamers in the fans' viewpoint is largely related to their performance in competition, they frequently face online abuse when they make mistakes during gameplay, especially if any non-gaming-related factors are seen as intervening in their performance. One such instance is illustrated in Image 2.6.4: during the summer season of 2017, a player known as Condi went to his girlfriend's place for the weekend and his girlfriend posted a photo on her Weibo account, saying that they had enjoyed a lunch together at home. The following week, the player in question performed poorly and lost the game. Immediately afterward, fans began to express their fierce anger at the player for "being romantic" and "not focusing on practicing." They started to criticize the player and his girlfriend on Weibo, accusing the girl of inappropriate behavior in private life. One fan even expressed his wish that the couple would "die together." This story ended when the girlfriend closed her Weibo account, and the team manager offered an online explanation. Image 2.6.4 is a screen capture of the discussion on Team WE's official Weibo account, in which a fan explains, "I would not criticize him if he did not go to find his girlfriend before the competition. I can forgive him if he is just not good enough, but I cannot bear it now as he lost for other reasons other than the game."[33] For this same reason, a Team WE fan drafted a thread with the title "Being a noob is a crime in eSports" (in Chinese 電子競技，菜是原罪),[34] criticizing players and attributing their in-game losses to their private lives.

我他妈分锅了？队员谁有女朋友我清楚的很，之前condi表现不好的时候我说他女朋友了？可笑，要不是他赛前去找女朋友我才懒得说，他要是纯粹表现不好我P话不说，小伟要是因为其他因素表现不好我照喷不误
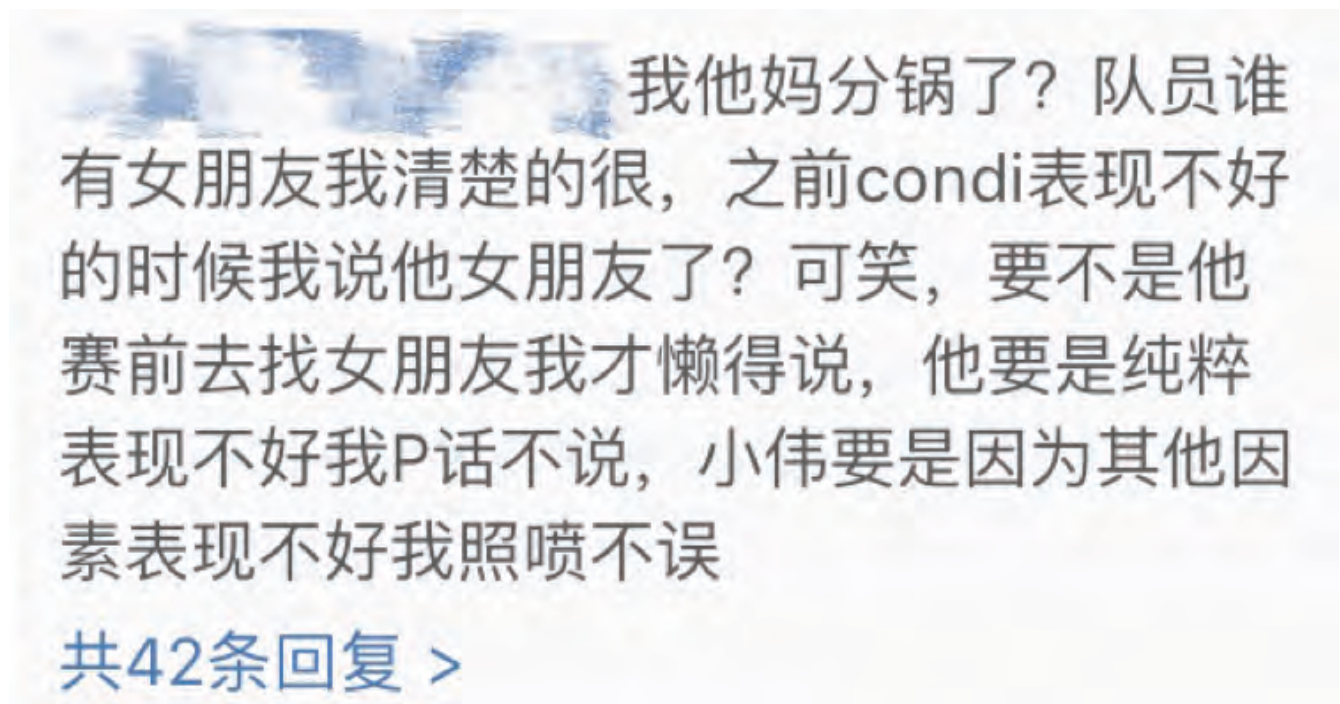
共42条回复 >

Image 2.6.4. A fan criticizing pro-gamer Condi on Team WE's official Weibo account.

33. Team WE Weibo, 17 August 2017, https://www.weibo.com/u/5870389740?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1&is_search=1&key_word=风花雪月#1549770094891; image translation: "I know pretty well about which [players] dates a girl and which ones don't. Did I blame Condi [the player] last time when he didn't hang out with his girlfriend? I can forgive him if he just played badly for a game. I wouldn't blame him here if he hadn't played with his girlfriend before the competition."
34. fx.weico.net, 12 September 2017, https://fx.weico.net/share/57335980.html?weibo_id=4283391816120881.

CONCLUSION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF GAMING IN CHINA, FROM SOCIAL ILL TO CAREER PATH

This chapter analyzes two major facets of eSports gaming in China. The first half illustrates the change in public discourse surrounding gaming, from its perception as a form of "digital heroin harming the lives of youth" in the past to the current view of gaming as "a professional avenue with a bright future." This contrast in public opinion, in turn, highlights how cultural policy has played an important role in bringing about change by providing education, career training and job opportunities after retirement, as well as by promoting gaming culture through the loosening of restrictions on imports and making an effort to fight negative stereotypes surrounding games and gaming in China. The second half of the chapter separates myths about the practices of pro-gamers in China from the difficult realities of the lifestyles they must take on, particularly when compared with pro-gamers in other countries, showing how the idolized view of pro-gamers in China can differ significantly from the realities of professional players' lives. Pro-gamers must pay constant attention to functions unrelated to their gameplay abilities in order to maintain audience support and comply with commercial interests, while at the same time all of their outward communication is strictly limited and controlled. Pro-gamers are also vulnerable to online abuse, due in part to the large population of players in Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean gaming communities who see themselves as skillful and potentially capable of doing a better job than existing pro-gamers who have earned renown in eSports. Indeed, now more than ever there are many Taiwanese and Korean players coming to China to seek their fortunes in professional gaming, as many Chinese game teams are openly recruiting players and offering highly competitive salaries. In such an environment, pro-gamers in China are easily replaceable, and their performance in gaming is the only guarantee of their popularity and, ultimately, of their chances to enjoy a successful career in eSports.

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