

THE SUCCESS OF CHINESE MOBILE GAMES IN INDONESIAN ESPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction of a Chinese mobile game titled *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB)* in 2016 is pivotal for the development of Indonesian esports scene. *MLBB* competitions grew exponentially from sporadic local activities into a national circuit from 2016 until 2018 (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020), and they gave mainstream exposure to Indonesian digital gaming culture after decades of being a niche activity (Rakhmani & Darmawan, 2015). As a consequent of the exposure, *MLBB* esports has been receiving attention from Indonesian mainstream media since it became a national circuit (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020), and it has a strong presence among Indonesian social media users (Andreas & Arymami, 2021). *MLBB* is not the only popular esports game in Indonesia. It would be followed by the arrival and popularities of other Sinosphere¹ mobile games such as *PUBG Mobile (PUBGM)*, *Arena of Valor (AoV)*, *Garena Free Fire (FF)*, and most recently *Honor of Kings (HOK)* all of which have their own dedicated fanbases and competitive circuits.

The influence of Chinese mobile games in Indonesia is a reflective to the recent sociotechnological power dynamic among Northeast Asian gaming industry. While Indonesia had historically been “subordinate” to Japan in term of digital gaming and popular culture (Otmazgin, 2008; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2021), recent developments show a shift toward digital game and popular culture products import from China (Borrowy, 2017; Fung, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020; Wu & Chen, 2020). As Jin (2017) notes, the key factor of China’s rapid ascension as the digital game industry market leader in Asia is successes of its accessible mobile games. This is evident in the exponential growth of Chinese mobile games’ esports circuits in Indonesia which are among the biggest mobile gaming circuits in Asia (Borrowy, 2017; Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020).

¹ *Free Fire* is a Singaporean game, others are Chinese games.

But how do Chinese mobile games become so successful in Indonesia? My interviews with Indonesian esports practitioners in 2023 as a part of my digital ethnography PhD research discover three factors which inform the success of Chinese mobile games in Indonesian esports: technological factor, community factor, and institutional factor. The technological factor refers to the suitability between Chinese mobile games' technological features and economic values, and Indonesians reliance of smartphones due to their lower purchasing power compared to global north countries (De Lange, 2015). Chinese mobile games' affordability stimulates the emergence of competitive gaming community factor in which community would grow in size, and expand in scope to include activities beyond competitive gaming including social media content creation and other forms of digital entrepreneurship.

Mobile game esports communities would also receive support from Chinese game publishers such as Moonton through its Moonton Student Leader program and Tencent through PUBG Mobile Jawa Community program. Both community outreach programs become sources of information and activity hubs for esports practitioners, and both companies would recognize and reward distinguished members of the community. These recognition and reward mechanisms incentivize community members to be more proactive within their communities. Chinese game publishers' collaborations with Indonesian esports practitioners don't stop at community level. Moonton and Garudaku Esports Academy² collaborate and form the institutional factor which inform Chinese mobile games' success in Indonesia. Through the collaboration, they provide non-academic scholarships for students with recognized achievements in esports.

The success of Chinese mobile game publishers contributes to the Chinese-ness of the Indonesian mobile esports. Not only China has taken over Japan's place as the main digital game importer, Chinese publishers' proactive approach as a stakeholder in the Indonesian esports has solidified mobile esports as an Indonesian practice of Chinese origin. The Chinese digital gaming footprint is evident in the mobile game-based esports program that is similar to Chinese esports (Yu, 2018; Zhao & Lin, 2021), the direct working partnership between the Indonesian government and Chinese game publishers, and the development of national mobile games for esports competition (Jiwandono, 2025) that mimicks the Chinese esports formula of close partnerships among game publishers, the government, and esports organization.

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² The official esports academy of Indonesia

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