


## Article

# Korean Golf Tourism in China: Place, Perception and Narratives

Jinah Park <sup>1</sup>, Alastair M. Morrison <sup>2,\*</sup> , Bihu Wu <sup>3</sup> and Yeung Kong <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Tourism Management, Shenzhen Tourism College of Jinan University, Shenzhen 518053, China; jinahpark@sz.jnu.edu.cn

<sup>2</sup> National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Kaohsiung 82444, Taiwan

<sup>3</sup> International Centre for Recreation and Tourism Research, College of Urban and Environmental Sciences, Peking University, Beijing 100871, China; tigerwu@urban.pku.edu.cn

<sup>4</sup> Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 999077, China; ykong@polyu.edu.hk

\* Correspondence: alastair@belletourism.com

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**Abstract:** Tourism is a critical, cross-cultural social behavior in contemporary society and provides diverse experiences based on different regional resources in destinations. This research identified the attributes associated with Korean golf tourists' images of seven destination regions in Mainland China. A content analysis of 328 golf tourists' blogs indicated that each region had different combinations of destination attributes, but these were partially hidden in vivid descriptions of playing experiences. The narratives were coded with 15 golf destination attributes with 136 headwords and they reflected both place-centred images and interactions through perceptual experiences with different social groups. The golfers greatly appreciated *congestion control* at courses and social interaction during their tours, including the services of local *human resources* and *play partners*. The seven Chinese golf destinations had different perceived characteristics and relationships with South Korean society. Thus, they had dissimilar destination images for Korean golf tourists. Historical ties and geographical proximity played important roles, including, for example, the significant presence of ethnic Koreans in northeast China.

**Keywords:** golf tourism; destination image; content analysis; South Korea; China; blogs

## 1. Introduction

To understand how international tourism shapes the destination images of regions with dissimilar cultural values and socio-economic issues, it is important to consider people's 'ways of seeing' [1]. Very few scholars have analyzed the significance of broader contexts of international relationships and their impacts on tourism [2]. The close relationship between south Korea and China, including political, historical, and economic relationships, as well as geographical proximity and cultural affinity, has generated two-way flows of various types. The economic and cultural ties have especially encouraged Korean golfers to choose China as a golf destination for leisure, social, and business purposes.

Golf was regarded as an exclusive sport in South Korea up until the late 1990s, and it used to be a status symbol in Korean society. Events in the late 1990s led to it becoming popular and available to the public in Korea. SeRi Park became the first Korean golf player to win two LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) Championships in 1998. In 1999, the Korean government proclaimed the popularization of golf. Previous studies have investigated several push factors motivating Korean golf tourists to travel overseas, such as the imbalance between supply and demand of domestic

golf courses, interest in overseas golf courses through the media, as well as social networking and health [3–5]. Statistics from the Korea Tourism Organization [6] indicate that China is Korean tourists' most popular destination overall. China also has become the prime destination for Korean golfers due to its geographical and industrial resources as well as climate, ease of accessibility, cultural proximity, and business opportunities. Shandong Province receives more than one million Korean tourists annually. More than 60% of guests at Shandong golf resorts are from Korea, and 80% of the golf resort memberships are Korean businessmen with investments in Shandong [7].

Despite different regions emerging as attractive and competitive golf tourism locations, previous research has regarded China as a single golf tourism destination, and comparative analyses of regional differences and images are rare [4,8]. Although these studies have acknowledged China's special position among overseas golf destinations, they have not intensively examined the unique features and motives for golfing in China. Empirical studies have also been constrained by domestic golf course related policies, as the national government in China has had a moratorium on golf course development for more than 10 years, although courses are continuing to be built [9,10]. Golf-related policies in China implemented since 1992 are reflective of the serious strife that can occur between golf development and governments on land use issues [11] as well as environmental concerns [12]. However, the Chinese Government recently recognized that a unilateral decision would impede the sustainable development of the golf sector in China and limit the country's ability to attract foreign golf tourists and satisfy the rapidly growing domestic golf playing market. An official document issued in October 2016 delivered a positive signal for golf development in China, defining golf as a special sport and proposing the "healthy development" of golf [13].

To address these literature and practical gaps, the main research goal of this study was to explore the regional characteristics of China's golf destinations based on the perceptions of Korean players. Destinations are defined as geographical regions of China recognized by Korean golf tourists as unique entities. Recent statistics show that 59.2% of beginner golfers in Korea are in the 20–30 age group [14]. This reflects a shift in the traditional perception of golf tourists as being only middle-aged men [15]. Accordingly, this research selected blog users who were mainly from the younger generations of Koreans. Blog content analysis was used to portray Korean golfers' contemporary and realistic descriptions of Chinese destinations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Destination Image and Its Attributes

Destinations are geographic concentrations of interconnected markets and institutions in a specific region. From the supply-side perspective, destination image is essentially made up of regions, resources, and a combination of tourism facilities and services [16]. Image can be an important asset for positioning by allowing a destination to create a unique identity. Additionally, image may influence tourism development through the need to connect resources with the positioning. For example, when positioning for tourists with special interests such as golf, destination planners and stakeholders must ensure an appropriate and sustainable supply of golfing facilities and services.

From the marketing perspective, researchers have identified the relationship between the projected and perceived images of tourism destinations and recommend marketing strategies that minimize the gaps between them [17]. Communicating effective images solidifies a destination's brand personality among consumers. Tourists associate certain images with well-positioned destinations; for example, St. Andrews in Scotland has become a brand known as the "home of golf" [18]. From a consumer's perspective, therefore, a destination is not only a geographical region with physical resources and facilities, but also a perceptual concept. This concept can be interpreted subjectively by tourists, depending on their travel itineraries, cultural backgrounds, visit purposes, educational levels, and past experiences. Through careful research, destinations must identify these differing perceptions among potential tourists and cater to diverse needs and requirements.

For consumers, destination images are “mental pictures” or their cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal perceptions of places [19]. Based on Gartner’s research [20], many studies have provided empirical evidence on the cognitive, affective, and conative components of destination image formation [21]. Previous studies indicate that image formation is a process based on acquiring impressions from multiple information sources provided by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and other channels, including media, brochures, travel agents, etc. [19]. Destination images are not only forged from information sources, but are also connected to interaction experiences with destination resources, such as human resources (service providers and local residents) and physical resources (tourism facilities and attractions) [22,23]. Actual experienced images are affected by tourists’ subjective perceptions of functional and psychological dimensions, including any gaps between their expectations and satisfaction levels [24]. The resulting images determine the holistic impressions from the consumer perspective, which tend to be more realistic, complex, and not stereotyped [19,25]. Moreover, previous research indicates that destination images influence tourist decision-making processes and intentions, and may positively or negatively influence destination satisfaction and evaluation. Consequentially, researching destination image attributes is critical for both for measuring tourist behavior and for planning the tourism marketing of a region.

Hunt [26] was among the first scholars to indicate the relationship between destination image and tourist decisions, and he also elaborated upon the different determinants of perceived images. Numerous subsequent studies have identified the attributes relevant to measuring destination images and their implications for destination positioning and development [27–30]. Several previous studies have measured destination images for selected geographic areas, including cities, states, regions, and countries; some have also analyzed tourists’ geographic origins to determine types of image strategies [19,31]. However, destinations are often artificially divided by geographical and political dimensions in such a way that they mask a true understanding of tourist preferences [16]. In some cases, a specific resort or attraction can be a prior determinant of destination image if it is the tourist’s main object for their travel. For example, golfers going to the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia, USA know beforehand that it is the storied home venue for the US Masters. Therefore, for a complete view of destination images, the most important components are the recognition of unique place identities as well as tourists’ perceptions and needs related to the destinations.

Previous research has focused on destination image attributes by applying a variety of approaches. Gallarza et al. [32] reviewed tourism destination image (TDI) studies published over 20 years, and recommended that it is necessary to continue TDI research since there is still no consensus on the nature and process of destination formation and measurement. They identified the functional or psychological, and common or unique attributes applied in previous studies to explain the meanings and measures of TDI. A destination’s resources determine its features and characteristics, which can be classified into primary and secondary categories [33]. The primary category includes innate characteristics, such as climate, environmental and natural resources, and cultural and historical features. The secondary category contains manmade resources such as hotels, infrastructure, shopping, and entertainment [29,34]. In tourist behavior studies, previous scholars have emphasized the pull force of destination attributes in image formation and consumer decision-making processes and also have investigated the correlations between individuals’ images and pre- or post-travel evaluations of factors, such as satisfaction, loyalty, and revisit intentions [30,35–39].

## 2.2. Destination Planning and Golf Tourism Development

Traditionally, tourism planning research has put an emphasis on land use zoning, regional development, accommodation and construction policies, tourism development density, and infrastructure. This has been extended to the impacts of tourism on culture, heritage, and natural environments [40,41]. Sustainable development has become a major issue in tourism and it is certainly an important topic for golf course and golf resort development. In this respect, planners and government officials must

understand social trends such as changing values and lifestyle trends, as well as carefully monitoring tourism development processes [41].

Competition among golf destinations has intensified based on the recognition that the market is growing and offers significant positive economic impact [4,42]. However, according to Markwick [43], golf tourism development has caused conflict among different stakeholders including tourists, golf developers and operators, governments, and society at large. The major issues include the negative effects on rural areas and local people [44], competing use of resources (particularly agricultural land and water) [45], balance between second-home real estate property development and local residential needs [46], and golf tourism development in environmentally and culturally sensitive areas [47]. Golf tourism development has provoked controversy due to the often large-scale projects with multiple impacts. There are potential conflicts in golf tourism development in certain destinations, for instance, there are different costs and benefits to stakeholders within destinations, as well as overlapping governmental responsibilities. Specifically, golf course facilities require substantial amounts of land and water, leading to clashes between golf development and government policies on such items as agriculture and suburban growth.

Understanding the differences in motivations, experiences, and preferences among distinct groups of sport tourists provides valuable insights into niche market segments as the basis for making market segmentation decisions [48]. As one of the largest and fastest growing of these segments, golf may be a major tourism activity for a destination which can either represent special interest tourism or be an adjunct to other forms of travel [49].

Some past researchers have emphasized the understanding of tourists' characteristics to enhance the level of sustainable golf tourism development [50]. Others have focused on demand aspects, including golfers' behavioral and perceptual characteristics [51–54]. Jorge and Monteiro [55] identified the main influencing factors in golf tourists' destination selection from three dimensions: golf (prestige and competitiveness of golf courses); hospitality and value (quality, price, and hospitality in destinations); and entertainment and leisure (complementary activities). Based on differing motivations (internal and external forces), golf tourists can be classified into three types [49,56–58]. First, the *golf enjoyers* decide to travel to personally or officially participate in golf. For these multi-motivation tourists, golf is often a major determining factor in choosing destinations, but it can also be a subordinate activity, such as golf combined with business, social interactions, conventions and meetings. Nice [58] indicated that golf is the most popular extracurricular activity for meeting and convention attendees because of its benefits such as health, socio-cultural and community, economic, and environmental components. Second, *golf spectators* travel to watch professional golf tournaments, such as the PGA (Professional Golfers' Association) and LPGA Championships. This segment has grown significantly since tourists increasingly enjoy large sport events. As 'pilgrims' seeking championship courses or new golf events, they are willing to travel the world in pursuit of their values, such as prestige and social status. Third, *golf vacationers* choose to relax at golf resorts and golf is their primary activity on trips. This may be combined with other types of tourism depending on tourists' interests and itineraries, such as family holidays. *Golf vacationers* often select overseas destinations to have new playing and other personally meaningful experiences.

Destination attributes not only reflect destination features, but also affect tourists' image formation and behavioral intentions. Geissler [59] found that golf vacationers take into account several attributes in their decision-making processes, including climate, accessibility and availability of golf courses, price, dining and nightlife, and time constraints. Richard and Faircloth [60] identified four selection factors which were accessibility (price and time), course (greens and fairways), people (accompanying players), and ancillary facilities (pro shop and restaurant services). From the review and comparison of several related studies, 28 core golf destination attributes were identified [4,8,15,57,61], and they provided the literature support on the determination of destination attributes for this study. The previous studies have divided destination selection attributes into two dimensions: *common tourism* attributes and *golf specific* attributes. Beyond the common factors that are considered by tourists,

such as travel cost, climate, accessibility (geographical location), price, shopping, food and so forth, golf destinations need to be evaluated by more specialized attributes, such as course design, quality and quantity, convenience of reservations or tee times, reputation, etc.

### 2.3. Tourist Blogs and Content Analysis

In the age of Web 2.0 or the so-called user-centric communities, the Internet provides limitless opportunities for sharing and social networking services (SNSs). Blogs, for example, can have a powerful ripple effect throughout all areas of society as well as within business communications. They represent a useful communication technology as well as offering a unique channel for developing and maintaining relationships. Blogging has become an aspect of tourist behavior and activity; blogs are also influential information sources. Bosangit et al. [62] indicated that many tourists keep e-journals of their trips for sharing travel experiences and perceptions on blog websites, and blogging activity among tourists is increasing and represents an important aspect of marketing communication in tourism. For tourism destinations, Web 2.0 communication technologies can broaden their marketing horizons and can be a critical research resource for tourists' destination images. Tourists' narratives in blogs are freely expressed and vivid, and provide realistic viewpoints on destinations from the consumer perspective. Blogs represent a relatively new and useful data source for tourism research. They are perceived to be a "conversational human voice" and correlate significantly with relational outcomes, such as trust, satisfaction, and commitment [63,64].

Blog monitoring is a cost-effective method for destination marketers to examine the competitiveness and positioning of their areas. Blogs are uncensored and rich expressions of visitors' travel experiences and are becoming accepted as meaningful data in tourism research to extrapolate tourist spatial and social behaviors [65]. They are not only an important channel for collecting visitors' feedback, but also can be a service quality control mechanism. Online 'story-telling' and electronic word of mouth (eWoM) provide new ways for individuals to learn about destinations and their images (including products and services) directly from other consumers [66,67]. They express consumers' perceived value and quality assessments of their tourism experiences and provide an information framework for sustained competitive advantage in destination management and marketing [68]. Gruen et al. [69] found that, as tools of customer-to-customer know-how exchange, eWoM plays an important role in forming customer perceptions and intentions.

As a social phenomenon, blogs have two advantages as a new information source and disseminator of destination images. First, blog content is created and popularized by consumers through their personal blogs. In the digital network age, people are no longer just content to be consumers but have become content producers. The information produced by consumers creates a "ripple effect" among other consumers. Second, blogs augment the traditional marketing communications system. They showcase regional products to consumers around the world without any local involvement, because individuals have their own communication media through SNSs. For these reasons, destination marketing is focusing more on blogs as a means of communications and for identifying the image representations of destinations [70,71].

This research placed an emphasis on blogs as an external information source, because they influence perceptions and decisions when planning travel, and since tourists make extensive use of informal information sources that they consider trustworthy. Based on the analysis of tourists' blog descriptions, the research attempts to distinguish regional destination images and has the following research objectives:

- (1) Define the destination attributes in golf tourists' image formation.
- (2) Investigate Korean golf tourists' perceptions of seven regions in Mainland China according to their experiences of destination attributes.
- (3) Examine tourists' perceptions of their interactions with different social groups.



- (4) Analyze golf tourists' views on destination regions through their own texts and photographs to more fully understand how they portray the experiences and how the experiences affect their images of destination regions.

### 3. Research Methods

This research used the contents of 328 blogs with 1491 photographs posted by Korean golf tourists who shared their golfing tourism stories in China within their personal blog sites. Blog contents were analyzed by content analysis and the semantic network analysis method to ascertain what bloggers were communicating about their travel experiences. There were three benefits from applying these methods. First, the travel blogs introduced new culture, sounds, images, and atmosphere to the research related to tourists' image. Open-ended blog contents provide a diversity of individual tourist images and reflect their special nuances with more precision. Second, the blogs of Korean golf tourists were based upon their actual experiences with golf tourism in China and therefore are a realistic portrayal of the research objects: the destination regions in China. Third, in contrast to scale items, which simply measure the degree of agreement with researcher-selected image attributes, the content analysis considers whole sentences and photographs with richer information about tourists' preferences and 'gaze' [72].

#### 3.1. Attribute Determination

The 15 attributes were selected based upon a summary analysis of previous studies (Table 1) and in-depth interviews with three representatives from specialized Korean golf travel agencies in China. To enhance the relevance of research objectives, the specialized attributes (both for golf and for Korean golfers) were combined with general image attributes. Furthermore, even the general attributes had some unique requirements for golf tourists. For instance, Table 1 and Figure 1 show that *climate* was of relatively high importance to golf tourists, and the mention of *wind* appeared frequently in blogs due to its significant effect on playing golf. The final 15 attributes included *climate*; *playing partners*; *course*; *facilities*; *human resources*; *price*; *catering*; *accessibility*; *attractions*; *reputation*; *service*; *environment*; *city image*; *entertainment*; and *congestion control* (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Summary of golf tourism destination attributes and details.

No	Attributes	Details (Words/Nuances in E-Blogs)
1	Climate	Weather; windy; mild
2	Playing partner	Golf partner; family; friends; business partner
3	Course	Course design; color/condition of grassland; length; scale
4	Facilities/amenities	Hotel; golf cart; club house; hot spring; luxury shops; souvenir shop; tennis court; driving range
5	Human resources	Staff; caddie; green keeper; manager; tour guide
6	Price	Price; travel cost; green fees; caddie fees
7	Catering	Food; restaurant; tasty; Korean food; rice wine
8	Accessibility	<i>Travel modes (origin-destination):</i> Airport; flight frequency; flight time <i>Transportation (within destination):</i> highway; shuttle bus; car; ferry <i>Transit time (downtown/hotel/airport to golf resort)</i>
9	Attractions	Sightseeing; historical/cultural attractions
10	Reputation	<i>Brand awareness:</i> 10 world renowned golf courses; China top 10 golf courses <i>Course designer (e.g., designed by Jack Nicklaus);</i> holding championships <i>Familiarity:</i> design/management by Korean; Korean large enterprises
11	Service	Service; big smiles; cute; want to recommend; disappointed
12	Environment	Beautiful scenery; ecological conditions
13	City image	Safety; a big city; clean; a rich/wealthy village
14	Entertainment	Night entertainment; KTV; massage
15	Congestion control	Play leisurely, "President golf"; "Emperor golf"

### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

A database of 328 blogs was compiled with text contents and 1491 photographs. The data were collected from the blogs written by Korean golf tourists within the previous two years. Content analysis was done through the qualitative analysis software, NVivo 10, and the information analysis of text and photographs used the social network visualization tool, NetDraw. The semantic analysis extracted 136 headwords to identify the narrative meaning and relationships of the 15 attributes.

The data were gathered from the Korean search engine Naver ([www.naver.com](http://www.naver.com)) within the period from 1 July 2011 to 30 June 2013. Naver.com directly searched for the blogs with two keywords: “China” and “golf”. All the data were from personal blogs written by tourists in several Korean social weblog services, including [blog.naver.com](http://blog.naver.com), [blog.daum.net](http://blog.daum.net), [mygolfstory.co.kr](http://mygolfstory.co.kr), [blog.me](http://blog.me), and [cyword.com](http://cyword.com). The authors identified 328 valid blogs out of 8551 raw-data posts. Some blogs were deleted due to insufficient content or an advertising bias. Commercial advertising blogs were not accepted, and two typical advertising expressions of tour agency blogs (“product” and “quotation”) were excluded in the advanced retrieval function of Naver.

The Chinese golf destinations were divided into seven regions (Figure 1) according to their characteristics: Bohai Coast; Hainan Province; Pearl River Delta; Western Coast Economic Zone on the Taiwan Strait; Yangtze River Delta; Yunnan Province; and other [8,73]. The selected destinations attract Korean golf tourists in different ways based on their resources, including geographical, cultural, and other factors. The Chinese literature and in-depth interviews with Korean golf travel agencies support the geographic classification for this research, but this grouping also needs to be verified by tourists’ descriptions of the regions. Supply-side sources provide information on the quality and quantity of golf courses, geographical proximity, and climatic advantages, but tourists’ narratives may reveal important social and cultural criteria for destination classification.



Figure 1. Map of generating and destination regions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Overall Findings

Reflecting China’s unbalanced regional development and high dependency on overseas markets, the geographical distribution data showed that Korean golf tourists converged on the developed southeast coastal regions of China (Figure 1). Table 2 shows the frequency of visits by region and demographic profile of the Korean golf tourists to China. The closest Chinese cities to Korea, including Weihai, Qingdao, and Yantai, tended to have the most visits. Weihai, with 64 visits, had the highest frequency. It is only 93 nautical miles away from Korea, and there are frequent flights and ferry

services between the two countries. Weihai also has strong social and cultural ties with Korea due to many ethnic Koreans living there for business reasons; this also brings greater language convenience. The nearby Shandong Province cities of Qingdao and Yantai also benefit for similar reasons. Second, major capital cities including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou also ranked highly. Third, Taiwan and other cities on the mainland side of the Taiwan Strait were quite popular. Fourth, were vacation destinations such as Hainan Province and Huangshan (Yellow Mountain, on the UNESCO World Heritage List). About two-thirds of the Korean golfers were male and the length of their trips in China tended to be of 3–4 days.

The importance ranking for the 15 attributes based upon total frequencies in the text were *environment* (500), *course* (478), *facilities* (428), *climate* (303), *accessibility* (257), *playing partners* (235), *human resources* (219), *reputation* (173), *catering* (169), *city image* (125), *congestion control* (120), *price* (118), *attractions* (105), *entertainment* (94), and *service* (87). In contrast to previous studies, price and evening entertainment were not of such a high priority in Chinese golf tourism. Well-designed environments, courses and facilities are required to attract and satisfy these golf tourists in China. For the Korean golfers, climatic conditions, high accessibility, and human resource quality were attractive pull factors of China as a golf destination.

**Table 2.** General profile of golf tourists and regional variables.

Region-City Variables	% of Blogs	Freq.	Tourist-Related Variables	%
<b>Bohai Coast (190)</b> Weihai (64), Qingdao (44), Yantai (22), Beijing (35), Dalian (10), Tianjin (5), Dandong (4), Shenyang (5), Jinan (1)	57.9%	2056	<b>Gender</b> Male Female Unknown	62% 29% 9%
<b>Yangtze River Delta (34)</b> Shanghai (27), Wuxi (2), Hangzhou (2), Suzhou (1), Yancheng (1), Suyang (1)	10.4%	321	<b>Golfing partners</b> Unknown Family & Friends Club members Business partners Alone (for training)	75.9% 13.6% 5.2% 4.7% 0.5%
<b>Western Coast Economic Zone on Taiwan Strait (33)</b> Taiwan (20), Xiamen (12), Fuzhou (1)	10.1%	391	<b>Length of stay</b> 2 days or less 3–4 days 5–6 days 7–8 days More than 9 days	2% 74% 14% 6% 4%
<b>Pearl River Delta (30)</b> Guangzhou (6), Shenzhen (7), Zhuhai (4), Dongguan (2), Shantou (7), Zhongshan (2), Macau (1), Yangjiang (1)	9.1%	239		
<b>Hainan Province (22)</b> Hainan, Haikou & Sanya (22)	6.7%	216		
<b>Yunnan Province (8)</b> Kunming (7), Lijiang (1)	2.4%	82		
<b>Other (11)</b> Huangshan (6), Chongqing (2), Guilin (1), Xi'an (1), Nanning (1)	3.4%	106		
<b>Total 328 blogs</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>3411</b>		

NVivo provided the frequencies for each attribute in the seven regions, but the regions had differing numbers of blogs and therefore, varying amounts of content. Since the number of blogs was uneven, the content coverage percentage was used to compare attributes among the regions. Table 2 shows that the *Bohai Coast* had 57.9% of the blogs and 2056 of the total of 3411 references. The content coverage percentage produced by NVivo represented the proportion of each attribute to the total number of references in the full text of the blogs for that region (Table 3). *Course*, *environment*, *facilities*, *climate*, *reputation*, and *city image* had the highest rankings among the 15 criteria in six regions, excluding *others*. *Price*, *service*, *attractions*, and *entertainment* had the lowest rankings.

Applying Spearman's rank correlation analysis for the content coverage percentages, 12 of the 21 pairs of destination regions had significant correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ) with five of these pairs significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level (Table 4). *Hainan Province* and *Western Coast Economic Zone on Taiwan Strait* had significant correlations with most of other regions, except for the *Yangtze River Delta*. The *Yangtze River Delta* had only one correlation and that was with *Yunnan Province*, and the rest of the correlation coefficients were relatively low. In contrast to the other regions, the golfers in the *Yangtze River Delta* were more concerned about certain attributes including *congestion control* and *play partners*.



**Table 3.** Content coverage percentages and rankings of golf tourism destination attributes by region.

Regions' Attributes	Bohai Coast		Hainan Province		Others		Pearl River Delta		Western Coast Economic Zone on Taiwan Strait		Yangtze River Delta		Yunnan Province	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
Accessibility	2.8	5	1.5	9	3.3	6	1.4	10	2.9	6	1.5	7	3.1	5
Attractions	1.2	15	2.3	5	3.8	3	0.6	14	0.9	11	1.7	6	3.9	4
Catering	1.6	10	0.5	13	1.5	10	1.8	9	2.2	9	1.2	11	1.2	11
City image	1.5	12	1.8	7	2.3	7	3.3	4	3.8	2	0.7	14	2.5	8
Climate	2.0	6	2.8	4	3.8	2	2.6	8	3.7	3	1.5	8	2.9	6
Congestion control	1.3	13	0.8	12	2.0	8	1.3	11	0.8	12	1.9	4	0.0	15
Course	4.6	1	4.6	2	5.0	1	6.5	1	3.6	4	4.5	2	7.1	3
Entertainment	1.8	9	1.1	11	1.5	9	0.6	13	0.2	15	0.3	15	0.0	15
Environment	3.5	2	2.0	6	3.3	5	3.0	5	6.7	1	2.7	3	15.6	1
Facilities	3.3	3	5.2	1	3.8	3	3.8	3	3.1	5	5.2	1	2.6	7
Human resources	3.1	4	2.8	3	1.4	11	2.7	7	2.2	8	1.0	12	1.5	10
Play partners	2.0	7	1.3	10	0.6	13	2.7	6	0.6	13	1.9	5	1.9	9
Price	1.3	14	0.4	14	0.7	12	0.3	15	1.7	10	0.8	13	0.3	13
Reputation	1.9	8	1.7	8	0.4	15	5.2	2	2.7	7	1.4	9	10.5	2
Service	1.5	11	0.3	15	0.6	14	0.7	12	0.4	14	1.3	10	0.6	12

**Table 4.** Correlations of attribute rank scores among regions.

		Bohai Coast	Hainan Province	Others	Pearl River Delta	Western Coast Economic Zone on Taiwan Strait	Yangtze River Delta	Yunnan Province
Bohai Coast	r Sig.	1.000						
Hainan Province	r Sig.	0.632 * 0.011	1.000					
Others	r Sig.	0.343 0.211	0.671 ** 0.006	1.000				
Pearl River Delta	r Sig.	0.693 ** 0.004	0.621 * 0.013	0.186 0.508	1.000			
Western Coast Economic Zone on Taiwan Strait	r Sig.	0.543 * 0.037	0.643 ** 0.010	0.561 * 0.030	0.657 ** 0.008	1.000		
Yangtze River Delta	r Sig.	0.486 0.066	0.471 0.076	0.500 0.058	0.425 0.114	0.293 0.289	1.000	
Yunnan Province	r Sig.	0.511 0.052	0.636* 0.011	0.443 0.098	0.607 * 0.016	0.704 ** 0.003	0.532 * 0.041	1.000

\* Correlation significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level (2-tailed) \*\* Correlation significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level (2-tailed).

#### 4.2. Image Formation of Destination Regions: Place-centered Attributes

The ranked order correlation analysis revealed different attribute importance for the regions. However, a common concern for the golf course was shown in every region. The tourists' assessments of destinations were primarily based on experiences with the physical environments of golf courses, which are associated with other regional characteristics. The example of the *Bohai Coast* region illustrates this phenomenon. The most frequently mentioned attributes of the *Bohai Coast* were well-designed and managed golf courses (4.6%) and *environment* (3.5%), followed by the *facilities* (3.3%) and *accessibility* (2.8%). The Korean golfers especially expressed satisfaction and novelty with the seaside courses, because Korean golf courses are mostly designed as mountain courses due to the topography of the country:

[Course]

*Short length courses are amusingly designed, and the grass is managed perfectly. It's like an art! During the last 4 days... grass was efficiently maintained and well-managed.* (Blog 10, Weihai, Female).

*The most attractive thing is all the courses are designed along the sea. Three sides facing the sea, we can watch the sea and waves while playing all 18 holes.* (Blog 36, Weihai, Unknown). *It was fantastic to see all the holes along the seaside, but the highlight of the course was the drive shot at hole 12 and 16, they were crossing over the cliff and sea.* (Blog 282, Weihai, Male).

[Environment]

*Along the seaside, I hit the golf ball toward the sea, just like I spread my dreams toward the future. Although the balls are affected by sea breeze, I feel so good. The wonderful surrounding scenery and nature environment made this golf resort as a masterpiece.* (Blog 32, Weihai, Unknown).

[Accessibility]

*This summer vacation is the golf tour to Weihai... Although it is an abroad travel, it only took 50 min from Incheon. How come it seems to be closer than Jeju island? There are 428 km from here to Seoul, it's closer than the distance between Seoul and Busan!* (Blog 2, Female, 2011-08-26) *The golf resort is located 20 min of Weihai airport and 40 min to downtown city areas.* (Blog 120, Male).

Apart from the golf resort environment and accessibility, the Korean golfers also mentioned facilities and attractions in the surrounding destination. For example, *Hainan Province*, one of the more mature holiday destinations in China and known as the "*Oriental Hawaii*", has integrated golf resorts offering a wide range of *facilities/amenities* (5.21%) with many surrounding tourism *attractions* (2.34%). Korean golfers tend to prefer to fly to Hainan in the winter, so the pleasant *climate* (2.8%) is an important advantage for the island. The *Pearl River Delta* is the pioneer region of golf development in China and has a mature golf management system. Korean golf tourists value the *course* (6.45%), *reputation* (5.2%), *facilities/amenities* (3.79%), *city images* (3.25%), and *environment* (2.95%) of this region. It is worthy of note that the golf courses in the *Pearl River Delta* have successfully launched a branding strategy, including its nominations as *Chinese Top Ten Golf Clubs*, *Best Green Maintenance Golf Courses*, and *Top 100 Golf Courses of the World*. These statements about course reputations affect Korean golfers' perceptions and satisfy their self-esteem and aesthetic needs:

[Pearl River Delta, Reputation]

*I travel to Shenzhen for 5 days and visited Taojing CC, which is the one of Top 100 golf courses of the world* (Blog 258, Male). *I found mowed grass like as diamond lattice in fairway, it contributes to visual beauty but the workload could be doubled. I have studied it in the green keeper managing courses. It shows the philosophy of working and management principles of Taojing CC.* (Blog 278, Male).

### 4.3. Interactions with Perceptual Attributes

Beyond the resorts and associated environmental features, the golfers broadened their experiences within the surrounding urban and rural communities. This introduced more social and cultural attributes into regional image formation. A sense of distinct identity was created through interactions with local communities. Some liked touring cities and their attractions after playing golf. *City image* was an important theme in golf tourists' blogs for the *Western Coast Economic Zone* and *Yunnan Province*. The *Western Coast* cities were well received due to their pleasantness, cleanliness, orderliness, and good infrastructure along with high levels of economic development. For example, Xiamen and its Gulangyu Island were beyond expectations and enhanced golfers' overall satisfaction:

[Western Coast Economic Zone, *City image*]

*Before returning to Korea, I have had Xiamen city tour. Xiamen was quite different with other Chinese cities. It could be like this because it has adopted opening-up policy earlier, also have been affected by Taiwan which is located near to the Eastern coast of China. The city is cleaner and organized than I imagined... (Blog 25, Male).*

*Xiamen is a beautiful city filled with trees and flowers. It is the land of Taiwanese's ancestors, a traditional international trading area and one of the exclusive industrial zones of China... The highlight of Xiamen city tour is the Gulangyu Island, we can feel an exotic atmosphere with the heritage of European powers and historical buildings of foreign concession around the city... As a clean city, there are no cars around and only allowed electric vehicle and walking tour around the island. There are no cigarette butts or garbage ... consulate, Catholic church, souvenir shops and modernized high buildings... (as well as) every corner of the street is neat and very well organized, it is appreciably attractive and environment friendly, deserves to be called as an eco-city by Chinese government . (Blog 191, Female).*

*Yunnan Province* is located on an inland plateau and has no ocean scenery. Hence, the golf resorts in *Yunnan* combine the province's heritage resources and minority ethnic cultures with spectacular high-elevation scenery in destinations such as Kunming, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, and Lijiang:

*Lijiang is in north Yunnan and was listed by World Heritage in 1977, the ancient city has almost a thousand years of history. It is famous for the Nakhi (Naxi) people and firstly invented hieroglyphs. The thawed snow of Lijiang Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, which is at 6600 meters' altitude, drains into the lake of Lijiang Lakefront Golf Club... I can watch the snow mountain and the heritage house of Nakhi during my stay. (Blog 46, Lijiang, Male).*

In contrast, some experiences outside golf resorts in the *Bohai Coast* region demonstrated negative experiences with the local community:

*As requested by my junior, I reluctantly agreed to have another drink at a lamb skewers house near resort. The local men took off their shirt and bared their belly, the tables were dirty, and the streets were noisy with the sound of cars and loud voices of drunken peoples. The hard liquor Erguotou (Chinese vodka) and strong cigarette Zhonghua made this night faded from my memory. (Blog 185, Male).*

However, the blog data suggested that golfers' interactions with local people were limited. Cognitive and affective perceptions of local communities were formed mainly through service providers. *Human resources* were important in image formation, but there were very different perceptions of human resource management by region, especially caddies. In the *Bohai Coast*, caddies and their service levels were relatively lowly rated; in contrast, the professionalism of caddies enhanced Korean golfers' satisfaction and positively affected *Hainan's* destination image:

[Hainan Province, Human resources]

*My caddie's golf knowledge and skills was better than LPGA players. She gave me a lot of information and suggestions (and,) she can speak Korean very well, I am perfectly satisfied. (Blog 174, Male). [Bohai Coast, Human resources]*

*The problem of caddies' education level on golf has deteriorated my impression to the resort image, ... I need to find my ball by myself because the caddies don't care and they couldn't provide any suggestions or advice of the shots ... I just looked; they look like 16 years old. They're just little boys who work for money. (Blog 158, Male).*

*There were no formal caddies, they are students from colleges of sports science ... they only earned 50 RMB (about 8 USD) for four hours' hard work. I was worried about one of the boys was under dressing in such a cold weather. The boys were about the same age as my son ... I could not help but having compassion for them. They struggled to find the ball ... , I tapped him on the shoulder and ask to stop searching for lost ball, he gave me a sweet smile. (Blog 1, Male).*

However, the human resources in the Bohai Coast, especially with respect to Korean language services, were highly praised by some golfers. The Chaoxian Korean nationality (one of China's ethnic minorities) is mainly found in the Northern Bohai Coast in Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning Provinces, as well as in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. The influential role of cultural familiarity on tourist flows can be better understood by using gravity models. In tourism research, gravity models have been applied using a limited set of variables, including distance, cost, and physical attributes. In contrast, political economy researchers emphasize cultural familiarity, common language, and trade blocs as key factors when examining international trade scales with gravity models [74,75]. The close relationship between China and Korea, especially in the Bohai Coast, offers a good case for understanding how cultural and historical backgrounds between generating and destination areas (including "migrant effects" and "border effects") play critical roles in international tourism flows. The golf resorts in the Bohai Coast make great efforts to educate employees in the Korean language and culture, particularly front-of-house staff and caddies:

*There is no language barrier in this resort due to the Korean language education for the staff and caddies. Especially one of the caddies' response in Korean when I tip to her after the play touched my heart and exceeded the satisfaction of the course, "Ma um ulo, Gam sa hi bat get suni da." (I sincerely received it with my gratitude for your kindness). (Blog 110, Male)*

For the Yangtze River Delta region, congestion control (1.93%) and playing partners (1.91%) are worthy of further discussion. Congestion control was represented by unique Korean headwords in the expressions of *president golf* and *emperor golf*, reflecting the inadequacy of Korean golf facility supply. This is a form of sarcasm suggesting that only a "president" or "emperor" can enjoy golf in Korea without being hurried by marshals or people playing behind them. This is an important motivation that pushes Koreans to travel to overseas destinations to play golf. Congestion control systems that allow adequate playing and stroke-taking time can be an effective approach to increase Korean golfers' satisfaction with Chinese golf courses.

*I love this quiet golf course. Sometimes I can enjoy playing the president golf alone without worrying to keep pace with the teams. It is possible on quiet weekdays. (Blog 180, Shanghai, Female).*

*This is what we called the "emperor golf", there is no one in front and behind of my team, we don't have to worry about the others but playing golf leisurely. (Blog 168, Suzhou, Female).*

#### 4.4. Social Network Analysis of Photographs

This research conducted a synthesis analysis combining blog text and photographs to more fully articulate what the Korean golfers were saying about, and looking at, in the Chinese golf destinations.



To indicate the semantic structure of each attribute, a co-word analysis was completed through the 136 headwords extracted from source text data. Headwords that frequently appeared for each attribute were sorted and their relationships were plotted by using the social network visualization tool NetDraw to identify the semantic network analysis.

It was not possible to map the attributes of *price* and *service* since these were too generic. The semantic webs of the remaining 13 attributes are shown in Figure 1. These covered the full text of the contents and 1491 valid photographs which were posted in the 328 blogs. Each photograph was assigned to several attributes based on its visual contents. The synthesis data of photographs and text were coded in NVivo, and the social network analysis was completed through NetDraw. In Figure 2, the different sized circles of each attribute represent the scales of frequencies, and the thickness of connecting lines indicates the intensity of relationships between the attribute and the corresponding headword.

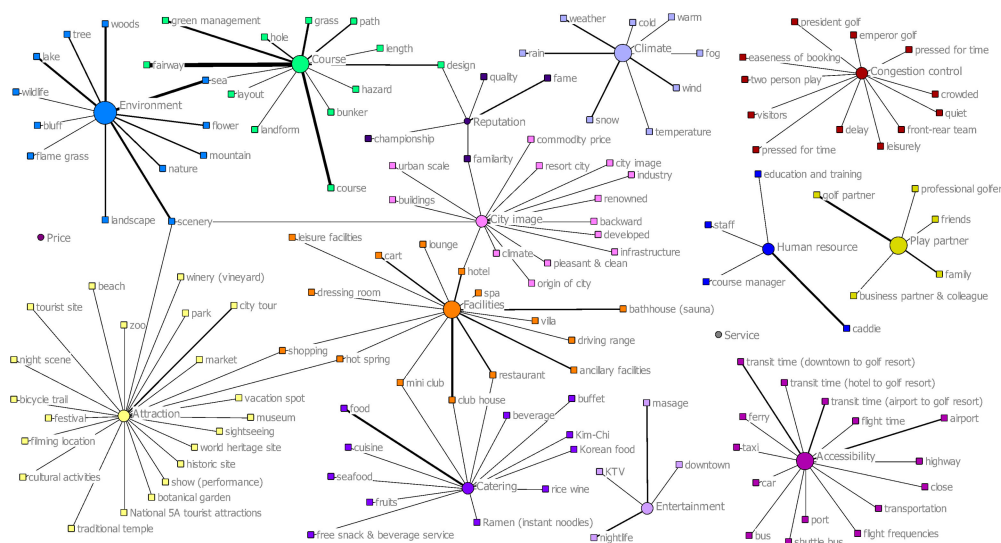
Each of the 13 attributes were associated with specific headwords. *Course*, for example, was described by 13 headwords, but core factors could be identified, including *fairways* (589, 142 text + 447 photos), *course* (371, 215 + 156), *green management* (182, 154 + 28), and *grass* (221, 84 + 137). This further illuminates the specific objects as mediators of what tourists see and what kind of factors the golf tourist uses to portray the images of courses. The maintenance conditions and quality of fairways, greens and grass have important roles in shaping tourists' images of golf courses. *Accessibility* had 15 headwords describing time, facilities, and transportation. Here the Korean golf tourists primarily considered accessibility in terms of *transit time from downtown to golf resort* (94), and *airport* (99).

Cross-domain characteristics were analyzed through 10 overlapping headwords, including *sea* (overlapping in *course* and *environment*); *design* (*course* and *reputation*); *scenery* (*environment*, *city image*, and *attractions*); *shopping* and *hot springs* (*attractions* and *facilities*); *mini club*, *club house*, and *restaurant* (*facilities* and *catering*); *hotel* (*city image* and *facilities*); and *familiarity* (*reputation* and *city image*). *Sea* was present in the *course* and *environment* attributes with frequencies of 23 and 340, respectively, and may indicate Korean golfers' desire for variety and novelty. For Korean golfers who are used to inland mountain golf courses, seaside courses may enhance satisfaction due to their novelty. Petrick [53] found that golf tourists, especially younger golfers, pursued novelty for a "change from routine, surprise, thrill, and boredom-alleviation."

Various service encounters in Chinese golf destinations were important to Korean golf tourists. These included interactions with caddies, course managers, hotel and resort staff, and tour guides. As a social sport activity, golf tourists encounter diverse social interactions with *human resources* (service providers) and *playing partners*. *Caddies* (261, 205 + 56) not only exchange information and emotions with tourists, but also play a crucial role in golfers' perceptions of service quality and overall satisfaction.

The results suggest that marketing strategy must consider the unique needs and preferences of different market segments. For example, Korean tourists expressed satisfaction with having Korean traditional foods and Korean brands, as well as the familiarity with their language and culture. Related headwords included *Korean food* (38), *Kim-Chi* (14), *rice wine* (12), *Ramen* (Korean instant noodles) (19) in *catering*; *familiarity* in domains of *reputation* and *city image*.

Headwords related to the natural environment had a positive effect on the destination images of golf tourists. In addition to features such as *scenery* (182), *lake* (200, 61 + 139) and *landscape* (159, 26 + 133), golf tourists noticed indigenous *trees* (157, 82 + 75), *flowers* (65, 43 + 22) and *wildlife* (36).



**Figure 2.** Distribution mapping of destination attributes and headwords.

The photographs which were taken and posted represent the tourists' 'gaze' in a visual objectified form. As exemplified in Figure 3, the gaze of the Korean golfers mainly involved three dimensions of headwords: the environment and facilities at the golf courses; tourism attractions; and human elements. The objects with the highest frequencies in the photographs were *club houses* (155), *hotels* (69), *carts* (95), *fairways* (447), *grass* (137), *courses* (156), *paths* (95), *sea* (179), *lakes* (139), *woods* (143), *trees* (75), *landscape* (133) and *food* (59); *city tours* (93); and *golf partners* (196) and *caddies* (56). The photographs were coded into only 51 of the 136 headwords. This was because no photos directly represented the other headwords, such as climate, transit time, and so forth. Therefore, the photographs concentrated on more specific and less diversified objects than the blog text in describing tourists' experiences.



**Figure 3.** Photographic examples of blog contents.

## 5. Conclusions

This research examined the regional attributes of golf tourism destinations, as well as exploring tourists' perceptions, destination images, and motivations in the context of Mainland China. It found that varied regional attributes and tourists' cultural backgrounds were related to their tour experiences. The images formed through interactions with various attributes appear to affect tourist satisfaction as well as behavioral intentions. From the findings of Spearman's correlations, the relationships among regional rankings of destination attributes were identified. For example, Hainan Province and the Western Coast Economic Zone on the Taiwan Strait had significant correlations with most of other regions. However, the Yangtze River Delta had quite unique destination attributes such as congestion control and play partners.

The varying regional attributes of China's golf destinations were identified based on the perceptions of Korean golfers, as expressed in their blogs. As Dann (1981) stated, the typology of factors in generating regions and destination can be explained by both functionalist and interactionist perspectives, and this research found two important relationships between the generating (South Korea) and destination regions (of China). First, factors in South Korea influence golf tourists' perceptions of Chinese destination regions, based upon what they lack and what they desire. For Korean golf tourists, these are the *seaside courses* and *congestion control* in China's golf tour destinations. Second, destination attributes convey different symbolic meanings through mediating factors, with golf tourists identifying symbols based on their personal and cultural backgrounds, and these forge relationships between people and places. This research uncovered two aspects of symbolic interactions in tourists' experiences: self-esteem through golf resort reputations and service quality, and the historical ties through language, shared history and ethnic culture.

The results show the relationships between destination attributes, tourist experiences and images. For the image formation factors, 15 golf tourism destination attributes were derived, measured, and ranked for seven Chinese golf destination regions. There are many approaches to tourism market segmentation based upon trip purposes, special interest themes, and other factors. Each region must identify and communicate its unique dimensions that match tourists' required experiences. This study identified three dimensions of destination attributes: physical or regional elements, functional elements which are pertinent to the primary purposes and themes, and tourists' perceptual attributes which are formed based upon the generating region and interaction experiences.

Such empirical analysis on segments of golf tourism in China has been neglected in international tourism studies. *Course* and *environment* were most important to South Korean golf tourists in their evaluations of destinations and resorts. Additionally, *congestion control*, *accessibility*, and *reputation* had significant effects on golf tourists' decisions and satisfaction levels. The congested courses and booking difficulties experienced with Korean domestic golf facilities are push factors in motivating Korean golfers to consider overseas travel. The *accessibility* (flight convenience in time and cost) and *reputation* (familiarity and brand awareness) of specific golf courses and clubs are competitive pull factors for Chinese golf destinations.

From the analysis of text and photographs, it was found that golfers categorized people into "us" and "them" through the cognitive processes of their social identity [76], represented, for example, by the headwords of *playing partners* and *caddies*, respectively. Specifically, it is worthy noting that *human resources*, as the main intergroup object for tourists, played a significant role in the overseas golf tourism of Koreans. Service quality was of intrinsic importance and closely related to tourists' satisfaction, and in the tourists' narratives. The *Bohai Coast* has many ethnic Chaoxian Korean staff at golf resorts to provide multi-cultural services that fit the Korean cultural style and needs. The familiarity and historical connections are considered in tourists' narratives and bolsters individuals' affective satisfaction. From the functional perspective, international golf tourists tend to have high-expenditure trips and expect this to be matched by higher service quality [77]. In addition, golfers are generally accompanied by caddies during their entire playing times [78]. Caddies should manage and assist throughout the whole golf game, and deeply impact the quality of the golfing

experience. The results reflected the key role of caddies in Korean golfers' experiences as recounted in their blogs. The social interactions between golfers and caddies impacted the affective outcomes of these experiences, including satisfaction levels and intention to recommend. From a management perspective, this means that golf destinations must recognize the importance of caddies and their supervision and training. Well-fashioned service attitudes and professionalism among caddies not only satisfy golf tourists' needs, but also may help in overcoming inherent weaknesses in golf courses and their locations and facilities.

The evidence from this research suggests that China is not one unified golf destination for Koreans. The respondents attached differing importance levels to the golf destination attributes for the seven regions of China. Dann [79] and Leiper [38] suggested there are push and pull motivation factors that influence tourist behavior, and these impact the tourist flows between generating and destination regions. In this research, the outbound flow of golf tourists from Korea is in response to needs that cannot be satisfied domestically for various reasons. The seven regions of China appeal to the Korean golfers in different ways and satisfy the needs that golf courses and clubs in Korea cannot. Just as not all Korean golfers are the same, each Chinese region needs to adopt golf development and marketing approaches that to take advantage of its unique resources and assets.

## 6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research has produced a more complete understanding of the destination attributes that are of greatest importance to Korean golf tourists, including such factors as congestion control and seaside course designs. It provides a significant perceptual analysis of Korean golf tourists to China, but the results may not be reflective of all Korean golfers traveling abroad to play golf. Further studies need to be carried out using other research methodologies to gain a broader understanding of Korean outbound golfer characteristics and preferences with respect to other destinations.

In the process of analyzing the data from Korean golfers' travel blogs, this research treated these people as a single group. However, it is highly likely that there are differences among them based on motivations (purpose of trip), lengths of stay, socio-demographic characteristics, as well as golf-related variables such as golf handicaps and previous golf experiences. The results had a focus on the frequency analysis of attributes, and insufficient attention was paid to whether tourists' perceptions were positive or negative. Further research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of tourists' 'gaze' through qualitative and quantitative methods using the measurement scale system derived from this research.

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