

Research on Silver Tourism in China: Themes, Theoretical Frameworks, and Methodological Approaches

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Abstract: The silver economy, driven by the rapid aging of China's population, has emerged as a significant frontier for both academic research and market development. With over a thousand scholarly works dedicated to elderly tourism, this review consolidates the core knowledge base of “silver tourism,” integrating studies from the fields of senior and elderly travel. It systematically examines three primary dimensions: the preferences and behavioural characteristics of senior tourists; the development and differentiation of tourism products tailored to this demographic; and the segmentation of regional and subgroup markets. Moreover, it outlines the dominant theoretical frameworks and interdisciplinary methodologies adopted by scholars, drawing upon over three decades of literature (1993–2025). In light of recent policy initiatives and technological transformations, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive and critical foundation for future academic exploration and practical innovation.

Keywords: Silver Tourism; Elderly Consumers; Travel Insurance; Literature Review; Aging Economy

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1.Introduction

China is experiencing an unprecedented demographic transition, with the proportion of elderly citizens rising rapidly. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, by the end of 2023, the number of people aged 60 and above reached 290 million, accounting for 21.1% of the national population. By early 2025, this figure had grown to 310 million, or 22.0%. As population ageing accelerates, the elderly demographic has become not only a core target for social policy but also a burgeoning market force—giving rise to the concept of the “silver economy. “Among its sectors, silver tourism—defined as travel activities designed to meet the physical, emotional, and social needs of senior citizens—has garnered growing attention. Optimistic projections suggest that this market will become a new engine of domestic tourism growth, supported by national policies such as the “two new” initiative and reforms in senior mobility infrastructure (e.g., the adaptation of trains and public services).

In parallel with policy development, academic research on silver tourism has grown significantly. However, despite the expanding volume of literature, theoretical integration, empirical consistency, and interdisciplinary dialogue remain limited. Against this backdrop, this review aims to comprehensively assess the current landscape of silver tourism research in China, identify dominant themes and methods, and provide a forward-looking perspective on its academic and practical evolution.

2.Research Content

2.1 Preferences and Behavioural Characteristics of Elderly Tourists

The segmentation of the silver tourism market is typically structured around multiple dimensions, including age cohorts, disposable income, educational background, health conditions, travel motivations, and modes of participation. Compared to other demographic groups, elderly tourists display unique behavioural patterns that are closely tied to their life stage, psychological needs, and physical capabilities.

A predominant feature of elderly tourists is their preference for relaxed, low-density, and off-peak travel schedules. With abundant leisure time and greater schedule flexibility, many opt for destinations that offer tranquillity, health benefits, and opportunities for social interaction. Rather than pursuing novelty or high-adrenaline activities, senior tourists are more likely to seek wellness-oriented experiences—such as hot spring retreats, cultural immersion, nostalgic landscapes, or faith-based tours. Cao Furong (2008) characterised these global preferences as reflective of a “therapeutic and reflective mode” of travel consumption.

Empirical studies in China reinforce these observations. ¹Chen Ying et al. (2018), in a survey conducted in Chengdu, found that among the six major travel dimensions—food, accommodation, transportation, sightseeing, entertainment, and shopping—the top concerns for elderly tourists were dining hygiene and suitability, accommodation comfort, and convenient transportation. Entertainment and shopping accounted for only 13.1% and 6.5% of their priorities, respectively. These figures suggest that elderly travellers are not only health-conscious but also pragmatic and functionally driven in their consumption.

Despite having substantial cumulative wealth and pension-backed consumption power, elderly tourists tend to adopt rational and value-sensitive consumption strategies. Many exhibit nostalgic consumption behaviours, influenced by past experiences and a desire to “make up for” missed opportunities earlier in life. This “compensatory consumption” is often expressed through curated, memory-driven travel itineraries. Moreover, due to risk aversion and declining adaptability to digital tools, older adults exhibit lower receptivity to aggressive online marketing or unfamiliar technology-based booking systems. They typically prefer recommendations through trusted interpersonal channels or familiar institutions.

Another underexplored segment is inbound elderly tourism. Research by Luo Dong (2015) identified that elderly international visitors to China tend to have higher per capita expenditures, longer average stay durations, and stronger brand loyalty. Their decision-making is more closely linked to the perceived quality of tourism services, destination image, and the availability of senior-specific facilities.

In addition, ⁴Liu Bin (2023) argued that elderly travel behaviour is deeply intertwined with broader lifestyle dimensions such as physical comfort, social bonding, and spatial accessibility. He posited that tourism consumption among the elderly should be viewed not only as an economic activity but as a process of identity reconstruction and emotional compensation in later life. These findings suggest that elderly tourism behaviour is multi-layered, combining physiological needs, emotional aspirations, and sociocultural memory. Therefore, tourism design for this demographic must go beyond basic accessibility and safety, embedding empathy, cultural relevance, and psychological resonance into every stage of the experience.

2.2 Tourism Product Design and Market Development

Despite the rapid growth in demand, the current landscape of silver tourism products in China remains underdeveloped, fragmented, and marked by severe homogenization. Most tourism offerings fail to respond effectively to the specific needs of elderly travellers, particularly in terms of physical comfort, health assurance, cultural engagement, and emotional value. The lack of targeted innovation has led to mismatches between product supply and consumer expectations, ultimately constraining the expansion of the elderly travel market.

Lin Zixiao (2024) points out that the silver tourism product ecosystem in many regions is plagued by a narrow focus on sightseeing packages, often with little differentiation from general group tours. He advocates for the expansion of product categories to include nostalgic journeys, cultural immersion, slow-paced rural retreats, and integrated wellness tourism. These approaches not only meet physiological needs such as rest and rehabilitation but also address the psychological desire for self-expression, emotional resonance, and intergenerational bonding.

Infrastructure adaptation is another major bottleneck. Elderly travellers require enhanced accessibility across both physical and digital environments. Tourist destinations often lack barrier-free facilities, such as ramps, elevators, stair-lift systems,

or wheelchair-accessible routes. In the digital domain, mobile apps and online booking platforms tend to neglect interface simplicity, readability, and voice assistance functions tailored for older adults. The Ministry of Commerce and China Railway Group have responded to these challenges by promoting senior-friendly transportation infrastructure, including customized “silver tourism trains,” which aim to improve comfort, safety, and convenience¹⁵ (Zhang Huaishui, 2025).

At the level of service provision, a critical shortage of elderly-aware professionals further restricts quality improvement. Many front-line tourism practitioners lack training in elderly care, age-specific communication, or emergency response. Lu Hengqin (2024)⁶ emphasizes the importance of building professional capacity and establishing an elderly complaint feedback mechanism. She also highlights the emerging value of “silver study tours,” which combine leisure and education to stimulate cognitive engagement. Such programs often include cultural classes, red tourism, calligraphy, music, or health-related themes, and have been positively received in pilot cities.

Moreover, the integration of safety measures into tourism product design has become a key focus. Elderly travellers generally prefer to travel in the company of spouses, relatives, or close acquaintances, and often expect familiarity and psychological security during group tours. Tang Yinghui’s (2021)¹⁰ doctoral dissertation interprets this behavioural pattern using adult attachment theory and group travel motivation, arguing for the emotional as well as logistical structuring of senior-oriented group tours.

One area with significant development potential is tourism insurance. While safety is a paramount concern for elderly travellers, there is a notable scarcity of customised insurance products. Most available offerings lack flexible coverage, are poorly marketed, or are bundled in ways that do not align with elderly consumption logic. Since the 2024 State Council policy explicitly included “elderly tourism insurance” in national planning, scholars such as Wang Dongni (2024)¹² and Sun Rong (2024)⁹ have called for the creation of modular insurance packages, including accident protection, short-term medical coverage, and loss-of-luggage guarantees (Shi, 2018). These measures are not only essential for risk mitigation but also for enhancing elderly tourists’ willingness to participate in longer and more diverse travel experiences.

In sum, the sustainable development of silver tourism requires a shift from standardized tourism models to deeply personalized, accessible, and emotionally enriching product strategies. Policy support, professional training, and market-driven insurance innovation must be integrated to build a truly elderly-centric tourism ecosystem.

2.3 Regional and Subgroup Studies

As silver tourism gains national strategic importance, the regionalization and stratification of its development have become increasingly pronounced. Given China’s vast territory, significant disparities exist in terms of resource endowment, infrastructure readiness, population aging levels, and local policy support. Consequently, the spatial distribution of silver tourism research and practice reflects highly localized patterns, often tailored to specific demographic compositions and regional socio-economic conditions.

From a macro-regional perspective, developed eastern provinces such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Guangdong tend to focus on health-and-leisure integrated products, leveraging their advanced healthcare systems, scenic urban infrastructure, and strong consumer bases. In contrast, central and western regions—such as Sichuan, Anhui, and Yunnan—often emphasize cultural nostalgia, red tourism, and wellness retreats, taking advantage of natural landscapes and lower travel costs. For example, Zhai Daqing (2014) examined wellness tourism in Tai’an, Shandong, and proposed integrating pre-tour health check-ups and customized physical regimens into elderly-oriented travel packages to address individual health needs more precisely.

At the city level, case studies are frequently based on provincial capitals or tourism-rich prefectures. Studies in Kunming, Chengdu, and Xiangtan have shown that municipal governments play a vital role in shaping local silver tourism ecosystems through targeted policy subsidies, infrastructure renewal, and support for elderly-specific products. Moreover, demographic segmentation research has deepened our understanding of tourist heterogeneity within the elderly population. Factors such as educational attainment, former occupation, travel experience, and health literacy significantly influence tourism preferences, risk perception, and participation modes.

A notable example is Zheng Wenting’s (2014)¹⁶ research on retired university faculty in Fujian. Her findings suggest that this subgroup displays strong travel motivation, a high degree of planning awareness, and a marked preference for knowledge-

intensive and cost-effective travel products. These individuals are more likely to engage in off-season travel and prioritize safety, cultural depth, and social engagement over material comfort. Such subgroup-specific insights are essential for designing differentiated marketing strategies and thematic products.

In addition to urban elderly travellers, rural elderly tourism has begun to attract scholarly attention. Yu Tian (2014) coined the term “light elderly rural tourism,” focusing on rural-dwelling seniors’ nostalgic and memory-driven motivations for travel, often tied to family visits, ancestral culture, or traditional festivals. Meanwhile, Liu Fang (2017) introduced the concept of “migratory tourism,” whereby elderly individuals temporarily relocate to destinations with favourable climates and medical facilities during certain seasons. This form of long-stay tourism raises new questions about tourism-healthcare integration, long-term rental infrastructure, and community inclusion mechanisms.

Despite the growing number of localised studies, cross-regional comparative analysis remains scarce. With the national push toward constructing a unified large tourism market and the expansion of inbound visa-free policies, greater attention must be given to interregional tourism mobility, service standard harmonisation, and shared resource utilisation. Future research should also explore the role of interprovincial coordination mechanisms, tourism alliance models, and demographic migration trends in shaping the long-term sustainability of silver tourism across diverse regional contexts.

3.Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

As silver tourism matures as a research domain, its analytical depth has expanded beyond descriptive case studies into more structured theoretical explorations and empirical testing. Scholars have progressively drawn on interdisciplinary theories and methodological frameworks from fields such as tourism studies, marketing, consumer psychology, gerontology, and public policy. This section reviews the most frequently applied theoretical models and methodological approaches in Chinese silver tourism research, highlighting both academic patterns and opportunities for further refinement.

3.1 Dominant Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical foundation of silver tourism research is primarily built on classical consumption and behavioural models, with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory occupying a central position. It provides a psychological interpretation of elderly tourists’ motivations, linking physical safety, social belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation with different layers of tourism demand—from basic travel security to spiritual enrichment.

Consumer behaviour and satisfaction theories have also been widely applied. For instance, Yu Hui (2021)¹⁴ employed the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) combined with Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) to construct a multi-dimensional satisfaction index system for evaluating elderly travelers’ perceptions of tourism products in Tianjin. This model considered factors such as itinerary design, guide professionalism, and insurance arrangements. Meanwhile, Zhou Aiping (2019)¹⁷ used customer satisfaction theory to optimise tourism product portfolios from the supplier’s perspective.

Kotler’s five-level product theory has emerged as another influential framework, particularly in discussions about how to design and upgrade tourism services for senior users. Wang Xujie (2020)¹³, for example, dissected tourism offerings in Kunming into core, expected, augmented, and potential product layers, providing actionable insights for aligning tourism attributes with elderly consumers’ latent needs.

Additionally, sustainable development theory and the tourism product life cycle theory have been used to emphasize long-term strategy and market viability. Hu Juan³(2017) integrated these models in her study of Xiangtan’s elderly tourism development, advocating for a balanced consideration of economic, social, and environmental returns. In recent years, theories from gerontology—such as active aging, life-course theory, and socio-emotional selectivity theory—have been gradually incorporated, expanding the interpretive depth of silver tourism beyond consumption logic toward emotional well-being, cognitive function, and intergenerational connection.

3.2 Common Research Methods

The most commonly adopted research methods in silver tourism studies include case study analysis, structured questionnaires, and statistical modeling using tools such as SPSS and AMOS. These methods support the identification of travel motivations, preference clusters, and satisfaction levels among senior tourists.

SWOT analysis, due to its simplicity and strategic applicability, remains popular in regional studies. For instance, Tian

Hongfang (2012)¹¹ applied it to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Hebei's elderly sports tourism industry, helping to clarify its developmental positioning.

Marketing science methodologies—such as the STP (Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning) model and 4Ps (Product, Price, Place, Promotion)—have been adopted to evaluate the fit between elderly consumer segments and tourism product structures. Liu Guangming (2023)⁵ combined survey results with these models to critique the inadequacies of Kunming's aviation marketing for the elderly, including lack of price flexibility and poor channel accessibility.

More sophisticated statistical techniques are being gradually introduced. Wang Bo (2015) used cluster analysis and descriptive statistics to analyze elderly tourists' destination choice criteria in Ningbo, generating a weighted ranking of influencing factors including safety, climate, natural scenery, and travel costs.

Additionally, grounded theory has been employed in qualitative studies aiming to develop conceptual frameworks from interview data, particularly in urban elderly tourism. Hou Pingping (2021)² constructed a multi-level factor system limiting urban senior tourism participation, encompassing dimensions such as emotional support, infrastructural barriers, and digital exclusion.

An emerging trend is the integration of interdisciplinary and physiological methods. Lv Ting et al. (2025)⁷ combined semi-structured interviews with galvanic skin response (GSR) sensors to explore real-time happiness levels among elderly volunteer guides in Taizhou. This mixed-method approach provides novel insights into emotional experience, social meaning, and behavioral sustainability in silver tourism.

4. Review and Future Directions

A comprehensive review of Chinese silver tourism research reveals a field that has rapidly expanded in scope and sophistication over the past three decades. While important theoretical advances and methodological diversification have been achieved, the literature also exposes structural gaps, regional imbalances, and evolving challenges amid demographic, technological, and policy transformations. This section synthesizes the key research trends and outlines future directions to guide subsequent inquiry and policy innovation.

4.1 Accelerated Growth in Response to Policy and Demographic Shifts

Since China formally entered an aging society in 1999, and particularly following the large-scale policy emphasis on the “silver economy” in the 2020s, academic interest in elderly tourism has grown substantially. The annual number of publications increased from single digits in the 1990s to nearly 100 in 2024 alone, reflecting strong alignment between national strategic agendas and scholarly response.

This alignment is particularly evident in the wake of policy documents such as the 2024 “Opinions on Developing the Silver Economy,” which explicitly identified elderly tourism as a supported industry. Researchers have responded by exploring new domains, including tourism insurance, mobility infrastructure, digital accessibility, and cross-generational consumption behavior. However, the rapid expansion of literature has sometimes resulted in fragmented findings and inconsistent terminology, suggesting a need for field-wide theoretical integration and conceptual clarification.

4.2 Expanding Depth, Yet Uneven Coverage

While the silver tourism literature has grown in quantity and disciplinary scope, its coverage remains uneven across regions, methods, and themes. Core academic output—defined as journal articles in key databases and graduate theses—accounts for only about 24% of total publications, and much of the empirical work is concentrated in economically developed regions or tourism hubs such as Chengdu, Kunming, and Hangzhou.

By contrast, rural regions and lower-tier cities—where aging is often more severe—are underrepresented. In addition, most studies rely on questionnaire surveys or single-case analysis, while experimental methods, cross-temporal data tracking, and longitudinal designs remain rare. Theoretical innovation also lags behind application, with limited development of indigenous concepts or frameworks tailored to the Chinese aging context. Interdisciplinary integration has emerged as a strength in recent years, with increasing incorporation of gerontology, behavioral economics, environmental psychology, and digital health. However, truly cross-sectoral collaboration between academia, industry, and government remains in its infancy. Future research must move beyond academic silos to address the systemic nature of aging-related tourism phenomena.

4.3 Future Research Directions

As silver tourism continues to evolve within the broader framework of China's aging society and digital transformation, future research must pursue both theoretical refinement and empirical expansion. One pressing need lies in conducting more cross-regional and international comparative studies. Current literature is heavily localized, with most case studies concentrated in eastern or southern provinces. As tourism market integration deepens—through measures like expanded visa-free entry policies, interprovincial tourism alliances, and infrastructure standardization—researchers should explore how silver tourism varies across cultural, economic, and policy contexts. Comparative perspectives can help uncover transferable models, identify barriers to regional collaboration, and contribute to theory-building beyond the national scale.

Equally important is the integration of aging and digitalization studies. The growing prevalence of AI-powered travel platforms, mobile health tools, and smart tourism environments necessitates a deeper investigation into how elderly travelers interact with technology. While some scholars have addressed digital exclusion, more work is needed to understand the psychological barriers, cognitive thresholds, and design features that shape elderly users' willingness and capacity to engage with digital tourism services. Research on digital literacy training, interface optimization, and the ethical deployment of data in elderly tourism contexts will be crucial in ensuring inclusivity in the next phase of tourism innovation. In addition, new methodologies—such as physiological tracking, real-time emotional analysis, and sensor-based behavioral data collection—can offer unprecedented insight into the elderly travel experience beyond what traditional surveys reveal.

Furthermore, future studies should move toward a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of elderly tourism behavior. Rather than treating older adults as a monolithic group, scholars should differentiate among the “young-old,” “middle-old,” and “oldest-old” cohorts, incorporating life-course theory and post-retirement consumption models. Each age segment presents distinct health conditions, cognitive profiles, and social expectations, which in turn shape their tourism demands and risk tolerances. Moreover, silver tourism should not be approached merely as a commercial domain—it should be studied in its broader societal context, including its potential to foster intergenerational engagement, promote active aging, and contribute to public health outcomes. Longitudinal designs and interdisciplinary frameworks that combine behavioral science, gerontology, and tourism management will be indispensable in advancing a more holistic and sustainable vision for silver tourism research in the decades to come.

5. Conclusion

This review has examined the evolution, characteristics, and research frontiers of silver tourism in China, a field increasingly shaped by demographic transformation, policy intervention, and socio-technological shifts. Drawing from more than three decades of academic inquiry and over 1,500 relevant publications, the paper identified three core thematic areas: the behavioural patterns and preferences of elderly tourists, the design and differentiation of silver-targeted tourism products, and the regional as well as demographic segmentation of the market. Complemented by an analysis of the prevailing theoretical frameworks and methodological tools, this study underscores the multidimensional complexity of aging-related tourism behaviour.

While Chinese scholars have made significant progress in capturing the nuances of elderly tourism through behavioural surveys, case studies, and satisfaction models, several structural limitations persist. These include uneven geographic coverage, theoretical fragmentation, and underutilization of interdisciplinary or experimental methods. Nonetheless, the field has shown strong responsiveness to national policy trends, and recent shifts in digital inclusion and cross-border mobility present new areas for exploration.

Looking forward, the future of silver tourism research depends on its ability to deepen theoretical innovation while embracing methodological diversification. More importantly, it must reposition elderly tourism not merely as a market opportunity but as a platform for social integration, public health promotion, and inclusive growth in the context of an aging society. In doing so, silver tourism scholarship can play a pivotal role in guiding sustainable tourism development that is equitable, adaptive, and future-ready.

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Conflict of Interests

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