

Building an Age-Friendly Tourism Environment: Reflections on China's Profound Population Aging

建设老龄友好型旅游环境：对中国深度人口老龄化的思考

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Abstract: China's rapid and profound population aging is driving strong growth in elderly tourism demand, yet the current tourism environment remains far from age-friendly. Barriers include inadequate infrastructure, misaligned services, limited information access, and weak socio-cultural inclusiveness. This study explores the urgency, core connotations, and key elements of building an age-friendly tourism environment, analyzing practical and institutional obstacles. From a social policy perspective, it proposes multi-level recommendations: strengthen top-level planning and standards, retrofit infrastructure, diversify and professionalize market supply, build inclusive information systems, foster a supportive cultural atmosphere, and improve regulation and incentives. These measures aim to help China address aging challenges, integrate aging initiatives with tourism, and enhance elderly well-being, while offering lessons for other countries undergoing similar demographic transitions.

摘要: 中国快速而深刻的人口老龄化正在推动老年旅游需求的增长, 但现有旅游环境的适老友好度仍严重不足, 表现为基础设施不完善、服务错位、信息获取受限以及社会文化包容性不足。本研究探讨建设老龄友好型旅游环境的紧迫性、核心内涵与关键要素, 并分析实践与制度层面的障碍。从社会政策视角提出多层次建议: 加强顶层规划与标准, 推进基础设施适老化改造, 推动市场供给多样化与专业化, 建设包容的信息系统, 营造积极的文化氛围, 完善监管与激励机制。这些举措旨在帮助中国应对老龄化挑战, 促进养老事业与旅游业的融合, 提升老年群体福祉, 同时为其他处于类似人口转型的国家提供借鉴。

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Problem Statement

Population aging, as one of the most significant global demographic structural shifts of the 21st

century, has become a central issue affecting the sustainable socio-economic development of nations worldwide. China, distinguished by possessing the world's largest elderly population base and one of the most rapid aging rates, confronts challenges that are particularly severe and complex. By the end of 2022, the number of individuals

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aged 60 and above in China had reached 280 million, constituting 19.8% of the total population. Concurrently, the population aged 65 and above amounted to 209 million, representing 14.9%, signaling China's official transition into a moderately aging society and its accelerated progression towards a severely aging one. This demographic trajectory indicates that over the coming decades, population aging will continue to exert profound and extensive impacts on China's social security system, healthcare services, labor market, and even its overarching socio-cultural paradigms.

Within this macroeconomic context, the quality of life and the spiritual and cultural needs of the elderly demographic are receiving increasing attention. Tourism, as a multifaceted activity integrating leisure, health and wellness, social interaction, and knowledge acquisition, plays an indispensable and positive role in enhancing the happiness of older adults in their later years, promoting their physiological and psychological health, delaying the aging process, and expanding their social participation networks (Hu et al., 2023; Nimrod & Shri-
ra, 2016; Patterson & Balderas-Cejudo, 2023). Concurrent with China's sustained economic development, rising disposable incomes among residents, and the progressive enhancement of the social security system, an increasing number of older adults now possess the economic foundation and temporal conditions necessary to engage in tourism activities. Consequently, the scale of the "silver-haired tourist" cohort continues to expand, establishing itself as a remarkably vibrant and high-growth-potential force within China's tourism market.

However, an undeniable reality persists, in stark contrast to the burgeoning tourism demand from the elderly population, the current state of age-appropriate development within China's tourism environment is profoundly inadequate to meet their specific requirements. Elderly tourists, when planning and participating in tourism activities, frequently encounter a multitude of difficulties, including physical environmental barriers, deficiencies in service provision, impediments to information access, and an insufficient socio-cultural atmosphere (Hu et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023). These existing obstacles not only severely curtail the rights of older adults to enjoy the benefits of tourism development equitably, conveniently, and with dignity, but also significantly constrain the healthy, orderly, and sustainable development of the senior tourism market. Moreover, they are, to some extent, in-

congruent with the nation's macro-strategic objectives of actively responding to population aging and constructing a "Healthy China". The rapid economic advancement that has empowered this demographic to seek travel experiences has seemingly outpaced the evolution of socially inclusive infrastructure and services tailored to their needs.

Therefore, the systematic construction of a safe, convenient, comfortable, and inclusive age-friendly tourism environment is not merely a public welfare project that actively responds to the aspirations of the elderly for a better life. It is also a crucial strategic measure for promoting the transformation and upgrading of China's tourism industry, fostering coordinated economic and social development, and building a harmonious and inclusive society. This systemic undertaking necessitates a departure from traditional tourism development paradigms, adopting a perspective centered on the actual needs of older adults and involving a comprehensive, deep-seated review and reconfiguration of tourism-related physical spaces, service processes, information dissemination, socio-cultural norms, and even policy and regulatory frameworks. Addressing this gap is not solely a matter of social welfare; it is intrinsically linked to the sustainable economic development of China's tourism sector. Failure to cater to the "silver economy" represents a missed economic opportunity and risks social discontent, undermining broader national goals. Although domestic and international academic circles have accumulated a relatively rich body of research on aspects of senior tourism such as market characteristics, consumer behavior, and motivational barriers (Alén et al., 2014; Chen & Shoemaker, 2014; Huber et al., 2018; Patterson & Balderas, 2020), there remains a discernible paucity of research that, from a macro social policy perspective, systematically explores how to construct a genuinely age-friendly tourism environment within China's unique national conditions and its context of advanced population aging. Consequently, the development of a complete and feasible policy framework in this domain represents a significant area for theoretical expansion and practical exploration.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Population Aging and Tourism Development

The intersection of population aging and tourism industry development has emerged as a focal point of academic inquiry in recent years. Globally, profound demographic shifts, particularly the sustained increase in the proportion of the elderly population, are fundamentally reshaping the tourism market landscape from the demand side. The elderly cohort, characterized by its unique attributes of available leisure time and financial resources, coupled with escalating demands for enhanced quality of life and spiritual-cultural fulfillment, has become a formidable consumer force with immense potential within the tourism market. Many developed nations, having transitioned into aging societies at an earlier stage, have accrued relatively extensive experience in areas such as senior tourism market development, product design, and service provisioning, leading to the formation of comparatively mature industry models (Horneman et al., 2002; Klimova, 2018; Ohe, 2016; Zsarnoczky, 2017).

Academic research has also delved deeply into the tourism motivations of elderly tourists, revealing a diversified spectrum of drivers. These extend beyond traditional sightseeing and leisure or visiting relatives and friends, encompassing the pursuit of novel experiences, the promotion of physical and mental well-being, recuperation and rehabilitation, in-depth cultural exploration, the expansion of social networks, and the evocation of nostalgic sentiments (Bagus & Utama, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2020; Mrčela et al., 2015; Otoo & Kim, 2020; Utama, 2014). However, concurrently, elderly tourists frequently encounter a multitude of physiological, psychological, economic, social, and environmental barriers during their actual travel experiences. These include limitations imposed by health conditions and anxieties regarding medical security, concerns about travel safety, considerations of economic cost, inadequacies in the convenience and accessibility of public transportation and tourism facilities, difficulties in information acquisition and comprehension, and a dearth of tourism products and services in the market that genuinely cater to their needs (Bao & Wu, 2021; Fleischer & Pizam, 2002; Huber et al., 2018; Huang & Tsai, 2003; Lopes et al., 2020; Rosa et al., 2020).

In contrast to developed countries, China's senior tourism market, though initiated later, has ex-

hibited rapid developmental momentum and continuous expansion in market size. Research by domestic scholars on senior tourism in China has predominantly focused on market segmentation and characteristic analysis, consumer behavior patterns and decision-making processes of elderly tourists, travel intentions and their key influencing factors, and targeted tourism product development strategies and marketing innovations (Chen et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2017; Xu, 2022). These studies offer valuable references for understanding the fundamental landscape and developmental dynamics of China's senior tourism market. Nevertheless, the existing literature remains somewhat insufficient. Most studies continue to emphasize market marketing and individual behavior, with a relative lack of depth and breadth in exploring how to systematically enhance the overall tourism experience for the elderly from the broader perspectives of the social environment and policy support, particularly concerning the construction of a comprehensive age-friendly tourism ecosystem. This global-local dynamic is significant; while motivations and barriers for elderly tourists share commonalities worldwide, China's situation is intensified by the sheer scale and velocity of its aging population, juxtaposed with a service ecosystem that is less mature than those in nations that experienced more gradual demographic shifts. Consequently, solutions from other countries require substantial adaptation rather than direct transference. Furthermore, the documented evolution in elderly tourist motivations—from passive sightseeing to a desire for active, experiential, and wellness-oriented travel—directly conflicts with the prevalence of simplistic, low-quality tour packages often found in the Chinese market, indicating a market failure to adapt to these changing consumer demands.

2.2. The Concept of Age-Friendly Environments and its Application in Tourism

The concept of Age-Friendly Environments was initially systematically articulated by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2007 through its "Age-Friendly Cities and Communities" initiative. The core objective of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities is to promote the health, active participation, and social security of older people, thereby ultimately enhancing their quality of life, by optimizing the physical environment, social environment, policy systems, and service provisions within cities. This comprehensive framework in-

cludes employment, information and communication, and community support and health services, etc (McDonald et al., 2023; Steels, 2015; Wang et al., 2017; WHO, 2007; WHO, 2023). This forward-looking and guiding philosophy rapidly gained traction globally and progressively extended its application from the realm of urban planning to broader social life scenarios, with the tourism sector being one of its significant fields of application.

Building upon this foundation, the concept of an "Age-Friendly Tourism Environment" emerged. This can be conceptualized as a concretized, specialized, and localized extension of the age-friendly city philosophy within specific tourism contexts (Bournemouth University, 2024; Chang, 2025; den Hoed, 2020; Ersözlü, 2023). It underscores the necessity that the design, construction, and operation of tourism destinations, associated facilities, ancillary services, and even the overarching socio-cultural ambiance must meticulously consider the physiological characteristics, psychological needs, and social expectations of the elderly demographic. The ultimate aim is to ensure that older individuals can participate in diverse tourism activities safely, without undue concern, comfortably, conveniently, with dignity, and with enjoyment, thereby deriving positive physical and mental experiences and opportunities for personal growth. Relevant research has begun to concentrate on identifying the key elements that constitute an age-friendly tourism environment. These include, for instance, barrier-free design standards and the adoption of universal design principles for tourism facilities, the multi-channel dissemination and guaranteed accessibility of tourism information, the facilitation and connectivity of public transportation and internal scenic area transport, the enhancement of service awareness and professional skills among tourism practitioners, and the cultivation of social inclusiveness and community support networks (Alén et al., 2012; Cooper, 2022; Olim & Carvalho, 2022; Patterson, 2007; Pühretmair & Miesenberger, 2006).

The adoption of the WHO's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities framework offers a robust, internationally recognized theoretical underpinning. However, the critical undertaking, which forms the central focus of this study, is the translation of this general framework into tangible, actionable, and contextually appropriate strategies specifically for the tourism sector within China. The challenge, therefore, lies not in understanding the concept, but in its effective integration into a comprehen-

sive, coordinated, and sustainable policy framework and social action plan, particularly within a nation as vast, regionally diverse, and rapidly aging as China. Successfully navigating this challenge and developing an effective age-friendly tourism environment in China could, in turn, provide a valuable model for other developing countries undergoing similar rapid aging processes. These nations may encounter comparable issues of scale and resource constraints, distinguishing their situations from those of developed countries that aged more gradually.

2.3. Current Status of China's Elderly Tourism Development and Policies

The Chinese government has accorded unprecedented high-level attention to the development of services and support for its aging population. In recent years, a series of policy documents have been successively introduced, aimed at enhancing the well-being of the elderly and promoting the comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development of aging-related initiatives. However, when juxtaposed with the immense scale of the elderly population and their continuously growing and diversifying tourism demands, the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment in China still confronts numerous severe challenges in practical implementation.

At the policy level, while macro-level guiding opinions exist at the national level, their specific execution often suffers from a lack of detailed, operable, and legally binding industry standards, as well as the absence of effective cross-departmental and cross-regional coordination mechanisms. This deficiency leads to an insufficient realization of policy effects. At the market level, a prominent imbalance characterizes the supply structure of elderly tourism products. The market is inundated with a large volume of homogenized, low-quality "夕阳红" (literally "sunset red," referring to tours specifically marketed to seniors) sightseeing packages, which struggle to meet the higher-level, personalized demands of contemporary older adults for health and wellness experiences, cultural immersion, leisure and relaxation, and social interaction. Concurrently, the quality of tourism services is inconsistent, and the professionalism of practitioners, along with their capacity to understand and respond to the special needs of the elderly, requires substantial improvement. At the environmental level, whether considering urban public transportation systems or tourism facilities such as

scenic spots, hotels, and other reception venues, the coverage, standardization, and systematic nature of barrier-free and age-appropriate renovations are markedly insufficient. Furthermore, with the rapid advancement of information technology, intelligent services, while offering convenience to some segments of the population, have inadvertently erected new "digital divides" for many elderly individuals who are unfamiliar with or find it difficult to adapt to digital device operations. This creates difficulties for them in areas such as information access, online booking, and convenient payment (Gao, 2018; Gao, 2023; He, 2023; Hong et al., 2019; Sun, 2020; Xu et al., 2023; Zhu, 2025). The "digital divide" is not merely a technological hurdle but is rapidly evolving into a significant socio-economic barrier, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in tourism access for the elderly and adding a new layer of complexity to the creation of age-friendly environments. These interconnected and multifaceted problems collectively constitute the core bottlenecks currently impeding the healthy development of China's age-friendly tourism environment. They necessitate systematic policy intervention and concerted multi-faceted social efforts to achieve resolution.

3. Current Status and Challenges in Building China's Age-Friendly Tourism Environment

3.1. Construction Status and Positive Progress Achieved

In recent years, concomitant with the deepening societal understanding of the strategic importance of population aging and the thorough implementation of national strategies such as "Healthy China," the nation has demonstrated a proactive stance and achieved a series of commendable preliminary outcomes in exploring and advancing the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment.

Firstly, the degree of policy attention has markedly increased, with strategic orientations becoming progressively clearer. Successive planning documents and policy guidelines pertaining to the development of aging-related services, the construction of elderly care systems, and the promotion of cultural tourism industries, issued by governments at both central and local levels, have, to varying extents, incorporated content related to developing senior tourism, improving travel condi-

tions for the elderly, and enhancing the quality of senior tourism services. For instance, the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Elderly Care and Elderly Care Service System" explicitly designates the development of elderly education and cultural and sports tourism services as significant tasks. Similarly, the "14th Five-Year Plan for Tourism Development" also underscores the need to improve the convenience and service quality of tourism for special groups, including the elderly and disabled. The issuance of these policy signals has undoubtedly provided macro-level directional guidance and developmental impetus for the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment.

Secondly, certain economically developed regions and forward-thinking tourism enterprises have taken the initiative to engage in active exploration and practical implementation. In regions characterized by relative economic development, higher degrees of aging, and well-established tourism foundations, such as the Yangtze River Delta, the Pearl River Delta, and the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, some local governments and tourism management departments have begun to consciously promote pilot projects for the age-appropriate renovation of tourism facilities and have attempted to introduce specialized tourism routes and preferential policies targeting the elderly. Concurrently, a segment of large tourism conglomerates, chain hotel brands, and online travel platforms has gradually recognized the immense potential of the "silver-haired market," consequently investing resources in the development of senior tourism products and the optimization of their service processes to accommodate the needs of older adults. For example, some renowned scenic spots have augmented their facilities with barrier-free pathways, dedicated rest areas for the elderly, and emergency call points; certain star-rated hotels have commenced promoting elder-friendly rooms or care rooms, featuring layouts and facility configurations more attuned to the habits of older users; and some travel agencies have also endeavored to launch senior tour groups characterized by more relaxed paces, more meticulous services, and more distinct themes.

Thirdly, there has been an elevation in societal awareness and attention regarding concepts such as "age-friendly" and "age-appropriate." With the ongoing discourse surrounding the issue of population aging and the deepening penetration of media publicity, terms like "age-friendly society," "age-

appropriate renovation," and "silver economy" have progressively transitioned from specialized professional domains into the public consciousness. The public's understanding and respect for the rights and needs of the elderly to participate in social life and enjoy leisure tourism are gradually improving. This, to some extent, cultivates a more positive and favorable public opinion atmosphere conducive to the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment.

Finally, the application of information technology in senior tourism services has also witnessed some initial, beneficial endeavors. In response to the digitalization wave, certain smart tourism projects and online service platforms have begun to address the special needs of elderly users. For instance, attempts are being made to develop elderly-friendly applications or mini-programs featuring simpler interfaces, larger fonts, and streamlined operational processes, or to integrate auxiliary functions such as voice broadcasting and one-click assistance into smart navigation systems. Although these initiatives currently exhibit insufficient coverage and depth, they signify a positive trajectory towards leveraging technological means to enhance the convenience of senior tourism.

However, despite these positive developments, it is crucial to acknowledge with clarity that, when compared to the severe realities of China's advanced population aging and the increasingly diverse tourism demands of the elderly, the overall construction level of China's age-friendly tourism environment remains in its nascent stages. It confronts numerous deep-seated, structural contradictions and challenges. The observed progress, largely concentrated in more affluent regions or driven by larger corporations, hints at a potential for widening regional disparities in access to age-friendly tourism if comprehensive national standards and broader investment are not implemented. If these challenges are not effectively addressed, they will severely constrain the healthy development of the senior tourism market and the continuous improvement of the well-being of older adults.

3.2. Core Challenges and Obstacles Currently Faced

The construction of an age-friendly tourism environment in China, while having achieved some progress driven by policy initiatives and spontaneous market exploration, remains deficient in its

depth, breadth, and systematicity, confronting a series of interconnected and complex challenges.

Firstly, the age-appropriateness of infrastructure is generally low, and systematic renovation presents a formidable, long-term task, compounded by an incomplete and inadequately enforced standards system. This constitutes a persistent and fundamental problem demanding urgent resolution. A vast number of existing tourism scenic spots, historical and cultural districts, public transportation terminals, hotels, and catering and shopping facilities were, during their initial planning, design, and construction phases, largely devoid of adequate consideration for the physiological characteristics and behavioral needs of the elderly. This oversight has resulted in severely inadequate coverage of barrier-free facilities, or where such facilities exist, they often suffer from non-standard design, insufficient maintenance, or a failure to achieve genuine accessibility. The systematic age-appropriate retrofitting of this enormous stock of existing infrastructure not only faces immense financial investment pressures but is also frequently constrained by factors such as original building structures, spatial layouts, and complex property rights, rendering renovation exceedingly difficult and progress relatively slow. More critically, in the design approval stages for new tourism projects, although national-level general standards like the "Codes for Accessibility Design" exist, more detailed, tourism-industry-specific, and mandatorily binding standards and evaluation systems for age-friendly facility construction have yet to be fully established or effectively implemented. This deficiency means that some new projects may perpetuate design flaws unfriendly to the elderly, thereby missing the opportunity to enhance friendliness from the outset. Many so-called age-appropriate renovations are often confined to sporadic, superficial improvements—such as merely installing a ramp at a scenic area's entrance—while neglecting the systematic, continuous barrier-free experience throughout the entire travel chain, from the tourist's disembarkation point to various key nodes within the scenic area, and onward to dining and accommodation. Consequently, "last mile" or even "last hundred meters" barriers persist.

Secondly, the supply structure of senior tourism products and services is severely imbalanced, failing to meet the diversified, personalized, and quality-oriented demands of the elderly demographic. While the market may appear to offer a considerable number of tourism products targeted at older

adults, their quality and innovativeness are generally low. Product offerings are predominantly traditional, fast-paced, itinerary-packed, and relatively low-priced sightseeing tours, with a high degree of content homogenization. These often overlook the higher-level, more individualized needs of the elderly for in-depth cultural experiences, health and wellness regimens, leisure and relaxation, social and emotional engagement, and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. This one-size-fits-all product supply model is profoundly mismatched with the increasingly assertive self-awareness and continuously improving consumption capacity of contemporary older adults. At the service level, a low degree of professionalization is another prominent shortcoming. The vast majority of frontline tourism practitioners lack systematic knowledge of gerontology, elderly care skills, elderly psychological communication techniques, and emergency response capabilities for sudden health conditions, rendering them incapable of providing genuinely precise, considerate, and humanized professional services. Inadequate attention to service details is also pervasive; for example, catering arrangements may not fully accommodate the digestive characteristics and taste preferences of the elderly, and accommodation facilities may lack necessary safety protections and convenient assistive features. Furthermore, the senior tourism market commonly exhibits a tension between price sensitivity and the pursuit of quality. Some elderly tourists, due to traditional consumption habits or actual economic constraints, are more sensitive to the price of tourism products. This vulnerability allows unscrupulous operators to attract customers by offering unreasonably low-priced tours, subsequently profiting through forced shopping or the addition of self-funded items, thereby severely infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of elderly tourists and greatly damaging their tourism experience and trust in the market. How to balance cost and quality to provide fairly priced, safe, and reliable high-quality senior tourism products and services remains a major test for the entire industry.

Thirdly, significant barriers exist in accessing and utilizing information, with the "digital divide" being particularly pronounced among the elderly population. With the rapid development of information technology and the widespread promotion of smart tourism, various online booking platforms, mobile payment tools, smart navigation systems, and self-service terminals have become indis-

pensable components of tourism activities. However, this digital and intelligent transformation, while bringing immense convenience to some, has inadvertently erected new barriers for many older adults who are unfamiliar with or struggle to adapt to digital technology operations. Traditional information access channels that the elderly are more familiar with and reliant upon—such as printed tourism promotional materials, staffed inquiry service counters, and telephone booking services—are diminishing or even disappearing in many locations. Conversely, emerging digital tourism applications often feature complex interfaces, excessively small fonts, and convoluted processes, lacking adequate consideration for the cognitive characteristics and usage habits of elderly users. This frequently leaves them feeling confused, anxious, or even helpless during use, leading to numerous difficulties in information access, itinerary planning, ticket booking, convenient payment, and obtaining real-time assistance, thereby forming an almost insurmountable "digital divide." Even when some older adults attempt to use smart devices, they may be more susceptible to misleading information, such as online rumors, false tourism advertisements, and telecommunication fraud, due to insufficient information discernment capabilities and cybersecurity knowledge, consequently facing risks of property loss and personal safety.

Fourthly, lagging socio-cultural perceptions and a weak social support system have failed to cultivate an atmosphere that fully supports the active participation of the elderly in tourism. Despite increased societal attention towards older adults, deeply ingrained stereotypes persist in some quarters, viewing the elderly as frail, dependent, and in need of constant care, even perceiving their travel as troublesome and unsafe. This predominantly negative view of aging can not only affect the elderly's own willingness to travel and their self-confidence but may also result in them not receiving the due respect, understanding, and necessary assistance during their journeys. Family support, an important pillar for elderly travel, has also seen its role somewhat diminished. With the shift in China's family structure towards smaller, nuclear families, and the rising proportion of empty-nest and solitary elderly individuals, many older adults may face the predicament of lacking children's companionship or care during their travels, thereby placing higher demands on external social support systems. However, current social organizations, community mutual aid networks, and professional

volunteer service forces specifically dedicated to senior tourism are relatively underdeveloped, making it difficult to form a comprehensive, effective, and sustainable social support system to compensate for the functional gaps left by families. Furthermore, positive media portrayal and role modeling of active, healthy, and vibrant tourism lifestyles for the elderly are still insufficient, failing to adequately foster a socio-cultural atmosphere that encourages older adults to venture out and enjoy life.

Fifthly, the systematicity, synergy, and enforcement of relevant policies and regulations require strengthening, with a discernible disconnect between top-level design and grassroots implementation. Although some macro-level guiding documents have been issued at the national level, there is, overall, a lack of a systematic strategic plan specifically addressing the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment, as well as a dearth of highly authoritative and legally binding laws and regulations. Existing policies are often dispersed among documents from different departments, lacking integration and foresight, which makes it difficult to establish clear policy direction and achieve strong policy synergy. In terms of standard system construction, while documents such as the "Codes for Accessibility Design" provide some foundational guidance, more detailed, operable, and internationally aligned age-friendly construction standards, service norms, and evaluation and certification systems for various facilities and services within the tourism industry are still severely lacking or lagging. This leaves local governments without a clear basis when promoting relevant work, enterprises uncertain when undertaking age-appropriate renovations and product development, and market regulatory bodies without clear judgment criteria when conducting quality supervision. More importantly, the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment is a complex systemic project involving the responsibilities of multiple government departments, including tourism, civil affairs, health, transportation, housing and urban-rural development, industry and information technology, market supervision, and culture and sports. However, there is currently a general absence of a normalized, institutionalized, and efficient cross-departmental collaborative working mechanism and information-sharing platform among these departments. This can easily lead to fragmented policy formulation, duplicated resource investment, and siloed or even conflicting approaches in work promotion, severely impacting

the overall effectiveness of policies and the achievement of objectives. Finally, at the market supervision level, although efforts to regulate the tourism market have intensified in recent years, the intensity of supervision and the effectiveness of enforcement concerning specific problems within the senior tourism market still require further improvement. Elderly tourists whose legitimate rights and interests have been infringed continue to face inconvenient and costly avenues for redress, which, to some extent, also dampens their enthusiasm for travel.

The emergence of these challenges is attributable to complex and diverse deep-seated causes, reflecting objective characteristics of China's socio-economic development stage, long-standing institutional and mechanistic barriers, and cognitive biases deeply rooted in socio-cultural concepts. Therefore, effectively addressing these challenges necessitates adherence to a problem-oriented and goal-oriented approach, conducting top-level design from a strategic height, and implementing fine-grained management at the operational level. This requires mobilizing the concerted efforts of multiple stakeholders—including government, the market, society, families, and the elderly themselves—to engage in systematic and sustained policy innovation, institutional reform, and conceptual reshaping.

4. Social Policy Recommendations for Building China's Age-Friendly Tourism Environment

4.1. Policy Level

Firstly, the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment should be elevated to a national key strategic task, explicitly integrated into national economic and social development medium- and long-term planning frameworks, the national strategy for actively responding to population aging, national plans for the development of aging-related services, as well as national and provincial tourism development plans. Building on this, it is recommended that the national level spearhead the organization of relevant ministries and commissions—such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the National Health Commission—to jointly formulate an authoritative and forward-looking strategic plan or outline. This overarching plan should clearly de-

lineate the overall objectives, fundamental principles, phased tasks, key engineering projects, regional distribution, division of responsibilities, funding guarantees, and mechanisms for assessment and evaluation pertaining to the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment for a defined future period, thereby ensuring that all related work is rule-based and proceeds in an orderly fashion.

Secondly, it is imperative to expedite the strengthening and refinement of the legal, regulatory, and industry standard systems pertinent to the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment. This will provide a solid legal foundation and robust technical support for various practical initiatives. It is recommended that during the revision of core laws such as the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly," the "Tourism Law of the People's Republic of China," and the "China Accessibility Construction Law," the concept of age-friendliness be fully assimilated and reflected. Specific chapters or clauses should be added to explicitly affirm the right of older adults to safe, convenient, and comfortable tourism experiences; to detail the legal obligations of tourism operators in providing age-appropriate facilities and services; to define the responsibilities of governments at all levels and relevant departments in planning, construction, supervision, and service provision; and to stipulate corresponding legal liabilities. Concurrently, efforts should be mobilized swiftly to research and promulgate a series of industry norms and technical guidelines that cover the entire senior tourism chain and possess national mandatory or recommended status. Examples include the formulation of "Evaluation Standards for Age-Friendly Tourist Attractions," "Design and Service Norms for Age-Friendly Hotels," and "Service Quality Standards for Elderly Tour Groups." These standards must not only align with advanced international benchmarks but also meticulously consider the actual needs and cultural characteristics of Chinese older adults, ensuring their scientific rigor, practicality, and operability.

Thirdly, the crux lies in establishing an authoritative, efficient, clearly demarcated, and normalized cross-departmental collaborative governance mechanism to overcome the prevailing issue of policy fragmentation. It is advisable to establish, at the State Council level, a national leading group or an inter-ministerial joint conference system for the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment. This body should be headed by a designat-

ed senior leader and comprise principal officials from the aforementioned relevant ministries and commissions. Such an agency should be endowed with comprehensive authority for overall coordination, policy deliberation, resource integration, supervision and inspection, and performance evaluation. It would be responsible for periodically addressing and resolving major issues in the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment, coordinating cross-departmental and cross-regional cooperation projects, and promoting the effective implementation of various policy measures. Simultaneously, proactive exploration is needed to establish a consultative governance platform involving the participation of multiple stakeholders—including government, the market, social organizations, research institutions, the media, and representatives of the elderly—to broadly solicit opinions from all parties, build social consensus, and forge a potent synergy for advancing this work.

4.2. Facility Level

The friendliness of the physical environment constitutes the fundamental assurance that enables older adults to venture out, travel with ease, and engage in recreational activities safely. To this end, a strategy that addresses both immediate symptoms and underlying causes, integrating long-term and short-term measures, must be adopted. On one hand, addressing the vast stock of existing tourism infrastructure necessitates the formulation and implementation of a national, phased, and priority-driven systematic plan for age-appropriate renovation and upgrading. Central and local government finances should establish dedicated subsidy funds or guidance funds to preferentially support comprehensive barrier-free and age-appropriate assessments and renovations of national and provincial key tourist attractions, major transportation hubs, urban parks and leisure green spaces proximate to elderly residential areas, and star-rated hotels and distinctive guesthouses with significant reception capacity. Renovation content should strictly adhere to newly developed national standards, encompassing not only the installation and enhancement of hardware facilities such as ramps, handrails, elevators, and accessible restrooms, but also meticulous attention to details like the clarity of signage systems, anti-slip surface treatments, and improved lighting conditions. Throughout the renovation process, the concept of universal design should be vigorously promoted, aiming to ensure that the retrofitted fa-

cilities provide maximum benefit to all individuals, including older adults. For market entities actively participating in age-appropriate renovations, in addition to financial subsidies, consideration could be given to incentive policies such as tax reductions, preferential financing, and land use support.

On the other hand, for all new, renovated, and expanded tourism projects, mandatory age-appropriate and barrier-free design standards must be strictly enforced from the initial planning and design stages, ensuring that new constructions are inherently age-friendly. At every stage—including project approval, planning and design scheme review, construction supervision, and completion acceptance—compliance with age-friendly and barrier-free requirements should be a non-negotiable prerequisite and a core review criterion. Relevant competent authorities should intensify the dissemination, training, supervision, and inspection related to these standards to guarantee their uncompromised implementation.

Furthermore, particular attention must be devoted to the barrier-free connectivity of the "first mile" and "last mile" of elderly travel. The construction of an age-friendly tourism environment cannot be confined merely to the interiors of scenic spots or hotels; it must extend to seamless connections from the community at an older person's doorstep to the nearest public transportation station, from transportation hubs to the entrances of tourism destinations, and among various functional areas within the destination itself. This may necessitate promoting the age-appropriate retrofitting of urban public transportation systems, encouraging the development of accessible taxi and ride-hailing services, establishing convenient shuttle services for the elderly between communities and major transportation stations, and providing reasonably priced and user-friendly mobility aids within large scenic areas.

4.3. Market Supply Level

Whether the immense potential of the senior tourism market can be fully realized hinges critically on the provision of high-quality products and services that genuinely align with the needs of older adults and surpass their expectations. At the policy level, efforts should concentrate on guiding and supporting market entities in undertaking supply-side structural reforms. Firstly, tourism enterprises should be actively encouraged and guided to innovate and develop diversified, personalized, and themed senior tourism products tailored to

different segments of the elderly market. In product design, thorough consideration must be given to the physical condition, cognitive characteristics, and safety requirements of older adults. This includes arranging itinerary paces reasonably, controlling daily activity intensity, ensuring sufficient rest time, and integrating more elements that offer interactivity, experiential value, and emotional resonance. The government can stimulate the innovative vitality of market entities by establishing innovation and development funds for senior tourism products, organizing design competitions for senior tourism products, and providing publicity, promotional, and market access support for outstanding innovative products.

Secondly, it is imperative to comprehensively enhance the professional expertise and service skills of tourism practitioners, thereby cultivating a high-caliber talent pool that truly understands and is adept at serving older adults. It is recommended that foundational knowledge of gerontology, specialized skills in elderly services, norms for senior tourism services, and professional ethics be systematically incorporated into the professional curricula of tourism educational institutions, pre-employment training for tourism industry personnel, in-service continuing education programs, and professional skill level certification standards. Drawing on international experience, consideration could be given to promoting the establishment of specialized professional qualifications or skill certifications, such as "Senior Tourism Planner," "Elderly Health Travel Advisor," and "Elderly Activity Instructor," to enhance the professional identity and social standing of practitioners. Individuals and teams demonstrating outstanding performance in senior tourism services should receive commendations and rewards to establish industry benchmarks.

Thirdly, new models for the deep integration of multiple sectors—such as "medical services, elderly care, rehabilitation, sports, culture, and tourism"—should be actively explored and promoted. This aims to provide integrated and professional comprehensive services for older adults with special health needs or those pursuing high-quality health and wellness experiences. Support should be given to qualified regions and institutions to collaborate in constructing a number of comprehensive elderly health tourism complexes or demonstration bases for health and wellness-oriented travel and living. These facilities would integrate multiple functions, including medical

care, rehabilitation nursing, health management, elderly residential services, sports and fitness, cultural entertainment, and leisure tourism. The government can offer key support in areas such as land supply, planning approval, fiscal and tax policies, and talent attraction, encouraging these entities to innovate in service standards, operational models, and industrial chain integration, thereby creating internationally competitive high-end senior health and wellness tourism brands.

4.4. Information Level

Ensuring that older adults can access, understand, and utilize tourism information without barriers is a crucial metric for gauging the friendliness of a tourism environment. To this end, policy should initially concentrate on preserving and continuously optimizing the effectiveness and convenience of traditional information channels. This implies that, notwithstanding the pervasive wave of digitalization across all industries, traditional information media and service modalities—those with which older adults have long been familiar and upon which they rely—should not only be protected from arbitrary discontinuation but should also receive investment for improvement and enhancement. For instance, at key nodes such as tourism information centers at all administrative levels, major transportation hubs, and visitor service centers in large scenic areas, an adequate number of staffed service counters must be guaranteed. These should be manned by experienced, patient personnel skilled in communicating with older adults, capable of providing face-to-face consultation, booking, ticketing, and problem-resolution services. Concurrently, the printing and free distribution of detailed, user-friendly paper-based tourism promotional materials—such as tourist guides, scenic spot maps, transportation timetables, and emergency contact information—should continue. These materials ought to feature large fonts, high-contrast colors, and concise graphic layouts that are easy for older adults to read, and the language used should be straightforward and easily understandable, avoiding overly professional or colloquial terminology. Telephone inquiry hotlines should also remain accessible, and where feasible, offer options such as slow-speed voice, dialect services, or direct transfer to a human operator for older users, ensuring barrier-free information transmission.

Simultaneously, in confronting the rapid advancements in information technology, another

critical policy focus is to actively promote the comprehensive age-appropriate renovation and innovative design of existing and future information technology applications, thereby striving to bridge the "digital divide" that afflicts many older adults. This necessitates the government issuing guiding and incentive-based policy measures to urge and direct various online travel platforms, official websites and applications of airlines and railway companies, hotel booking systems, official websites and mini-programs of scenic spots, and diverse smart navigation and self-service equipment to fully integrate age-friendly and universal design principles into their product design, development, and iteration processes. Specifically, these digital products should be mandated or encouraged to launch dedicated elderly versions, "care modes," or "senior modes." Core features of such modes should include: highly concise and intuitive interface layouts, eliminating redundant information and complex functionalities; maximally simplified interaction workflows, reducing operational steps and cognitive load; significantly enlarged fonts and font sizes, with color contrasts meeting the visual requirements of older adults; clear, prominent, and easily clickable key operation buttons; provision of clear voice narration, voice input, voice assistant, and other auxiliary functions; and built-in safety assurance features such as one-click help, emergency contacts, and location sharing. For online payment procedures commonly used by older adults, more secure and convenient verification methods, such as fingerprint or facial recognition, or large-font password input, should also be explored.

Finally, it is essential to strengthen information warning education and consumer rights protection publicity targeting elderly tourism consumers to enhance their risk prevention awareness and self-protection capabilities. Given that the elderly demographic is relatively more vulnerable in terms of information discernment and risk perception, they are more susceptible to becoming targets for illicit activities such as false tourism advertisements, consumer traps, and telecommunication fraud. Therefore, market supervision departments, consumer rights protection organizations, public security organs, and news media outlets should collaborate to regularly disseminate elderly tourism consumption advisories, analyses of typical fraudulent cases, and rights protection guidance through diverse channels, including television, radio, newspapers, community bulletin boards, official web-

sites, and social media. This initiative aims to expose common tourism fraud tactics and consumer pitfalls, alerting older adults to be wary of unrealistically low-priced tours, free tourism-related lectures (often sales pitches in disguise), tourism product investments, and other scams. It should also educate them on how to select legitimate travel agencies and tourism products, how to sign standardized travel contracts, how to preserve relevant evidence, and how to file complaints and protect their rights through legal channels when their rights are infringed. Through sustained publicity and education, the goal is to help older adults cultivate scientific and rational consumption habits and improve their resilience in complex information environments.

4.5. Social and Cultural Level

The construction of an age-friendly tourism environment transcends the mere renovation of physical facilities and the enhancement of services; at a more profound level, it involves the transformation of socio-cultural perceptions and the establishment of a comprehensive societal support system. Firstly, it is imperative to vigorously advocate and promote the core values of active aging and healthy aging throughout society, continuously shaping and disseminating positive and diversified images of older adults to counteract and dismantle long-standing stereotypes and potential discrimination against them. This entails actively showcasing the contemporary elderly's vibrant, upward-looking spirit, their eagerness to learn, and their active participation in social life through various publicity and educational channels, including mainstream news media, emerging online platforms, public service advertisements, and literary and artistic works. It is crucial to narrate vivid stories of older individuals gaining happiness, improving health, broadening horizons, and realizing self-worth through tourism, thereby guiding the public to correctly understand the positive aspects of an aging society and to appreciate the elderly's aspirations for and right to a better life. Negative labels and discriminatory rhetoric that portray older people as frail, incompetent, social burdens, or stubbornly old-fashioned must be resolutely opposed and resisted, striving to cultivate a positive public opinion and social ethos that genuinely respects the individual value of older people, appreciates their life wisdom, and encourages their social participation.

Secondly, efforts should be concentrated on building and refining a comprehensive, multi-layered, and professional social support system for elderly tourism. This system should effectively compensate for the relative weakening of family care functions and provide robust support for safe and convenient travel for older adults. This requires the government to increase its cultivation of and support for relevant social organizations and public welfare projects. For instance, local elderly associations, community service centers, universities for the elderly, social work service agencies, and specialized tourism volunteer organizations can be encouraged and supported to actively expand their service offerings for older adults, including tourism information consultation, itinerary planning assistance, travel companionship and care, tourism-related legal aid, and psychological counseling. Innovative models such as elderly tourism mutual aid platforms or time banks can be explored to encourage healthy younger elderly individuals to provide tourism-related volunteer services for older, frail, or specially-abled elderly persons, fostering a supportive and friendly atmosphere. Concurrently, commercial insurance institutions should be actively guided and regulated to develop more tourism insurance products that specifically address the unique risks faced by older adults, along with simplified claims procedures, to provide more comprehensive risk protection for their travels.

Thirdly, intergenerational understanding, communication, and interaction should be actively promoted, encouraging and supporting family members to participate in tourism activities together, thereby making tourism an important vehicle for enhancing family harmony and transmitting valuable cultural heritage. At the policy level, consideration could be given to introducing incentive measures that encourage family tourism. For example, during specific holidays or tourism promotion seasons, families traveling with elderly parents or grandparents might be offered discounts on scenic spot tickets, accommodation and dining, or transportation subsidies. Employers should diligently implement paid annual leave systems for their employees and encourage them to use their holidays to accompany elderly family members on trips. Various media and cultural institutions should also endeavor to create and disseminate more cultural products that reflect intergenerational harmony, filial piety, respect for elders, and shared family enjoyment, guiding the younger generation to pay

greater attention to the spiritual needs and emotional worlds of older adults and to understand the significance of companionship. Furthermore, tourism destinations and enterprises can be encouraged to develop more tourism projects and activities suitable for multi-generational family participation, catering to the needs of members across different age groups. Examples include parent-child educational tours, customized family tours, folk culture experiences, and outdoor recreational activities, allowing older adults to enjoy familial bliss in shared leisure with their descendants, and enabling the younger generation to learn traditional virtues and experience the continuity of life through interaction with their elders.

Finally, enhancing society's overall awareness of the special needs of the elderly and improving service consciousness are crucial links in fostering a friendly atmosphere. This encompasses not only professional training for personnel in the tourism industry but should also extend to all societal levels related to tourism activities. For instance, at urban public service counters, within public transportation systems, and in commercial service establishments, employee training and education should be strengthened to ensure they understand the common difficulties and needs of older adults. Staff should be encouraged to exhibit greater patience, meticulousness, and respect in their service, and to proactively offer necessary assistance. Through subtle influence and continuous social advocacy, a cultural self-awareness should gradually be cultivated throughout society, one that views older adults as valuable assets and treats them with familial care. This will empower older adults to feel warmth and friendliness in every corner of society, thereby instilling in them greater confidence and willingness to leave their homes and enjoy the pleasures that tourism offers.

4.6. Market Regulation Level

A healthy, orderly, and vibrant senior tourism market serves as the institutional bedrock for the sustainable development of an age-friendly tourism environment. Firstly, it is imperative to further refine and strengthen the legal and regulatory framework and the normalized supervision and enforcement mechanisms specifically targeting the senior tourism market. This involves rigorously cracking down on all forms of illegal and irregular activities that infringe upon the legitimate rights and interests of elderly tourists, thereby effectively purifying the market environment. This means ad-

ressing persistent and prominent issues within the senior tourism market—such as unreasonably low-priced tours and their associated problems of forced shopping, induced consumption, contract fraud, false advertising, substandard service quality, and ambiguity in liability for accidents involving elderly tourists. To this end, detailed clauses within relevant laws and regulations, along with judicial interpretations, must be improved to clearly define illegal behaviors and stipulate appropriate penalties. Departments responsible for market supervision and administration, culture and tourism, public security, and cyberspace administration should establish and enhance normalized joint law enforcement operations and specialized rectification campaigns. They must intensify inspections, patrols, and unannounced visits to key regions, enterprises, and tour routes. A zero-tolerance stance must be adopted towards illegal and irregular acts, ensuring that every discovered case is severely punished and publicly exposed to create a strong deterrent effect. Particular attention should be paid to, and severe crackdowns launched against, tourism-related scams that defraud elderly individuals into purchasing high-priced tourism products or participating in illegal fundraising activities under the guise of health product lectures, sales-oriented tourism conferences, or financial investment schemes. Concurrently, channels for elderly tourists to file complaints and report malpractices must be made more accessible, complaint handling procedures simplified, and the costs of rights protection reduced, thereby encouraging and supporting older adults in using legal means to safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. The introduction of whistleblower systems and class action mechanisms could be considered to augment supervisory pressure on unscrupulous businesses.

Secondly, a market entity credit evaluation and management system, combining positive incentives with negative constraints, should be actively constructed. This system aims to guide and encourage tourism enterprises to consciously fulfill their social responsibilities, operate with integrity, and enhance service quality. Leveraging national credit information sharing platforms and national enterprise credit information publicity systems, a robust credit file system for tourism enterprises can be established. This system would incorporate their performance in areas such as compliance with laws and regulations, fulfillment of contractual agreements, protection of tourist rights and interests, handling of complaints, and participation in

public welfare activities into a comprehensive credit evaluation index. For enterprises with good credit records, high tourist satisfaction ratings, and outstanding contributions to age-friendly services, the government could provide preferential support and favorable consideration in areas like government procurement, project bidding, brand promotion, and access to policy benefits. This would help establish industry benchmarks and exert a demonstrative, leading influence. Conversely, enterprises exhibiting serious dishonest behavior, repeatedly infringing upon the rights of elderly tourists, or causing adverse social impacts should be legally included in a joint disciplinary blacklist for dishonesty. They should face strict restrictions in market access, financing and credit, qualification assessments, and eligibility for awards and honors, and their transgressions should be publicly disclosed through media channels, ensuring that a single instance of dishonesty results in widespread limitations.

Finally, the bridging, coordinating, and governance roles of tourism industry associations and other social organizations in areas such as industry self-regulation, standard promotion, experience exchange, dispute mediation, and rights protection should be fully leveraged. The government should support and guide tourism industry associations in formulating and improving industry norms, such as self-regulatory conventions for senior tourism services, service commitments, and quality assessment criteria. These associations should organize member units to engage in initiatives aimed at creating age-friendly services and promote advanced experiences and best practices. Industry associations can establish mechanisms for mediating consumer disputes in senior tourism, providing elderly tourists and tourism enterprises with a convenient, efficient, and low-cost channel for resolving conflicts. Concurrently, industry associations should actively represent the interests of the sector, convey enterprise demands to relevant government departments, participate in the formulation and revision of pertinent policies, laws, and industry standards, and organize market research and data analysis to provide valuable references for government decision-making. By strengthening the self-management and self-service functions of industry organizations, the shortcomings of government supervision can be effectively supplemented, fostering a multi-governance pattern that combines government regulation, industry self-discipline, enterprise conscientiousness, and social

supervision. This collaborative approach will jointly promote the long-term healthy development of the senior tourism market.

5. Conclusion

In the overarching contemporary context of China's accelerating population aging and the elevation of actively responding to this demographic shift to a national strategic priority, the systematic construction of a safe, convenient, comfortable, inclusive, and appealing age-friendly tourism environment is no longer a discretionary option. Instead, it has become a critical undertaking directly pertinent to the well-being of hundreds of millions of older adults in their later years, profoundly influencing social harmony, stability, and sustainable development, and possessing the capacity to effectively unlock the immense potential of the "silver economy". This endeavor not only represents respect for and a guarantee of the fundamental rights of older people to participate equitably in social life and share in the fruits of reform and development but also constitutes an inherent requirement for propelling the transformation and upgrading of China's tourism industry from high-speed growth to high-quality development, thereby achieving coordinated economic and social progress.

This study, grounded in China's national conditions, has deeply elucidated the scientific connotations of an age-friendly tourism environment and its multi-dimensional constituent elements. It has systematically assessed the progress achieved and the severe challenges currently faced by China in this domain. Building upon this analysis, a comprehensive and systematic policy recommendation framework, encompassing multiple aspects from a social policy perspective, has been proposed. The research underscores that the successful construction of an age-friendly tourism environment is fundamentally centered on the authentic needs of the elderly. It necessitates adherence to the basic principles of government leadership, market-driven initiatives, social collaboration, familial responsibility, and the active participation of older adults themselves. This is to be achieved through comprehensive and multi-level policy interventions and resource integration aimed at effectively eliminating the various tangible and intangible barriers that impede older people's participation in tourism activities.

It must be clearly recognized that in China—a nation characterized by an enormous population base, significant regional disparities, and a rapid aging process—the construction of an age-friendly tourism environment is by no means an endeavor that can be accomplished overnight. Rather, it is a systemic project of long-term, complex, and arduous nature. Its realization demands not only sustained strategic investment and policy innovation at the national level but also proactive engagement and refined management by local governments. It requires not only a profound transformation and proactive assumption of responsibility from the tourism industry but also a fundamental shift in societal concepts and widespread cooperation in practical actions across the entirety of society.

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