

Knowledge Map Analysis of Travel-Based Elderly Care Research Using CiteSpace: Evolutionary Trajectories, Hot Topics, and Emerging Trends

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on travel-based elderly care in China's ethnic minority regions, this paper systematically reveals the research hotspots and evolving trends over the past decade by performing a bibliometric analysis and using CiteSpace to visualize 239 valid articles from the CNKI database. The volume of publications exhibits a three-stage pattern initial emergence and dormancy, rapid expansion, and qualitative improvement and is significantly driven by the rural revitalization strategy, the needs of an aging population, and policies promoting the integration of culture and tourism. The core research hotspots center on "travel-based elderly care," forming eight thematic clusters and five dimensions. The timezone map reveals that the research has gradually evolved from an early stage of "model exploration and age-friendly spatial design" to a multidimensional framework characterized by "policy-driven + model innovation + technology-enabled" approaches. Although current research has progressed in policy coordination and industrial integration, challenges remain, including product homogenization, one-way cultural interaction, and suboptimal community participation mechanisms. Future research should further explore the spiritual and cultural values of ethnic groups, promote the localized application of IoT and big data technologies, and facilitate the transformation of travel-based elderly care in ethnic regions toward a model characterized by "localization, smart solutions, and collaboration." This will provide theoretical and practical support for rural revitalization and the high-quality development of elderly care services.

KEYWORDS

Travel-Based Elderly Care; CiteSpace; Knowledge Map.

1. INTRODUCTION

With China's population aging rapidly and regional economic disparities persisting, travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority areas has gradually emerged as a key issue of common concern for both academia and practice. By 2025, the proportion of China's population aged 60 and older had exceeded 20%, and the elderly's demand for care services was becoming increasingly diverse and quality-oriented. Against this backdrop, ethnic regions that combine natural ecological advantages with distinctive cultural characteristics have become popular destinations for "migratory" travel-based elderly care, owing to their favorable climate, low cost of living, and abundant cultural and tourism resources[1]. However, ethnic minority regions still face challenges in practicing travel-based elderly care, including uneven distribution of medical resources, insufficient cultural adaptation, and lagging policy coordination mechanisms. Systematic research is urgently needed to drive breakthroughs in both theory and practice.

In recent years, academic research on travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions has focused on three areas: innovative models and regional collaboration[2], cultural interaction and ethnic identity[3], and policy safeguards and sustainable development[4]. Travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions involves not only a physical relocation but also cross-cultural adaptation and the restructuring of ethnic relations. Based on this, this study employs bibliometric analysis. Using search terms such as “ethnic regions,” “travel-based elderly care,” “cultural interaction,” and “ethnic identity,” 239 valid articles were retrieved from the CNKI database. Using CiteSpace software, keyword co-occurrence networks, clustering maps, and timezone maps were generated. Combined with manual close reading, the study analyzes research hotspots and evolutionary logic, aiming to clarify the research trajectory across the “resources–culture–society–technology” dimensions. This provides a scientific basis for theoretical innovation and practical optimization of travel-based elderly care in ethnic regions.

2. RESEARCH MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Materials

Travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions refers to a model of long-term or temporary residential services for the elderly, leveraging the natural ecology, cultural traditions, and social structures of ethnic minority communities. By integrating locally distinctive health and wellness resources, cultural symbols, and community participation mechanisms, this model provides services that combine health maintenance, cultural experiences, and social integration. The model is fundamentally anchored in the unique natural landscapes, ethnic cultural elements, and ethnic social networks of ethnic minority regions. It integrates multiple functions health and healing, cultural immersion, ecological leisure, and community interaction with the aim of meeting the elderly’s dual needs for physical and mental wellness and cross-cultural experiences [5].

As the trends of an aging society and cultural tourism integration continue to deepen, the research scope of travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions has expanded from an early single development model of “natural landscapes + elderly care facilities” to areas including the revitalization of ethnic cultural resources, ethnic identity and sojourner cultural adaptation mechanisms, and community-based service provision. Current implementation models mainly include ethnic-themed wellness villages, culturally themed wellness towns, eco-friendly travel and residence camps, and multi-ethnic integrated senior living complexes. By preserving traditional living and working spaces while integrating multiple functions and reconfiguring spatial layouts, these models form a three-in-one service system that combines “senior care, culture, and ecology” [6]. Drawing on theories of cultural interaction and ethnic identity, this paper categorizes these models into three types: culturally symbiotic residential spaces, identity-reconstructing service networks, and cross-regional collaborative senior living communities.

2.2. Research Methods

This study employs bibliometric analysis using CiteSpace 6.3.R1 visualization software, combined with manual review and thematic categorization, to systematically analyze the research literature on travel-based elderly care in China’s ethnic minority regions[7]. By mapping keyword co-occurrence networks and conducting cluster analysis, this study identifies research hotspots, traces thematic evolution, and examines the relationship between cultural interaction and ethnic identity. It also provides a qualitative interpretation of the quantitative findings through close reading of the texts.

2.3. Data Source

Chinese-language literature was primarily sourced from the CNKI Academic Journal Database and the CNKI Master's and Doctoral Thesis Database as core databases. Using search terms including “ethnic regions,” “travel-based elderly care,” “ethnic minorities,” “wellness tourism,” “cultural interaction,” and “ethnic identity,” the literature was screened with compound search queries such as “Subject = Ethnic Regions AND (Travel-Based Elderly Care OR Wellness Tourism)” and “Title/Keyword/Abstract = Cultural Interaction OR Ethnic Identity.” To ensure comprehensive coverage of the research topic, we imposed no time restrictions and included master's and doctoral theses in the search scope. Through manual review, we excluded duplicate records, news reports, policy documents, and articles with low content relevance, resulting in a final set of 239 valid documents. These consisted of journal articles (129, 54%), master's theses (63, 26%), conference papers (11, 5%), and other document types (36, 15%).

The relevant literature was exported in RefWorks format to CiteSpace software for data cleaning and format conversion. Keyword co-occurrence maps, cluster label maps, and timeline maps were subsequently generated. The analysis focused on extracting core thematic nodes such as “travel-based elderly care,” “ethnic minority regions,” and “rural revitalization.” Additionally, the centrality of high-frequency keywords (frequency ≥ 10) was calculated and visualized.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Annual Publication Volume Analysis

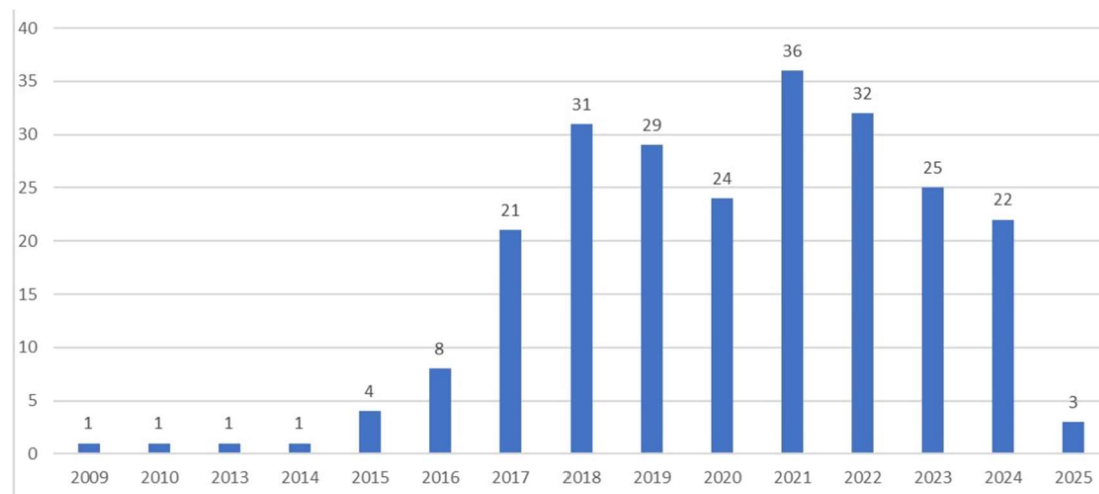


Figure 1. Number of Publications on Tourism-based Elderly Care in China's Ethnic Areas

The evolution of domestic research on travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions exhibits a three-stage pattern: “emergence and dormancy – rapid expansion – qualitative upgrading.” From 2009 to 2014, the average annual publication volume was only one article, indicating an initial stage of development. During this period, population aging was just beginning to emerge, but the concept of “travel-based elderly care” was not yet widespread. Cultural tourism development in ethnic minority regions focused primarily on traditional sightseeing, academic research was limited to scattered conceptual models, and interdisciplinary effects had not yet materialized [8]. The field entered a period of rapid growth after 2015, with the number of publications surging from 21 in 2017 to a peak of 36 in 2021. This growth was driven by three key factors: the Rural Revitalization Strategy, which has made the dual characteristics of ethnic regions being both “culturally rich areas” and “ecologically fragile zones” increasingly prominent; rising aging rates, which have spurred demand for high-quality

elderly care,” this research employs a keyword co-occurrence network to reveal its deep associations with factors such as “rural revitalization” and “population aging”[10]: At the policy level, a collaborative model has emerged that integrates rural spatial carriers—such as “characteristic towns” and “traditional villages” with the elderly care industry. Practices in the Sichuan-Chongqing and southern Jiangsu regions have verified the revitalization pathways of ethnic rural resources[11] (cultural, ecological, and industrial); At the demand level, the study focuses on the needs of specific groups such as urban seniors and childless individuals for “companion-based travel” and “emotional support in aging,” while promoting model innovations such as “senior-friendly products” and “smart services” [12]; At the spatial level, the study proposes an optimization strategy that combines “residential-tourism spatial planning with local cultural integration.” Case studies in the Chengdu-Chongqing region further demonstrate a pathway for integrating cultural scene creation with age-friendly renovations [13]. Cluster analysis further validated the scientific validity of the research framework ($Q = 0.7495$, $S = 0.9353$) and identified six major thematic clusters: industrial integration models driven by rural revitalization; technology support systems for smart elderly care; practices reflecting ethnic and regional characteristics; service innovations promoting intergenerational integration; pathways for policy–industry–service synergy; and resource integration and spatial optimization strategies. Research trends point to three main directions: first, deepening localized practices grounded in the principle of “one region, one specialty,” such as incorporating ethnic elements like Tibetan wellness and Miao village cultural tourism[14]; second, building a collaborative ecosystem involving government, businesses, communities, and research institutions [15]; and third, advancing precision service matching and smart spatial planning empowered by the Internet of Things and big data[16]. This study provides a four-dimensional theoretical framework “policy, stakeholders, spatial planning, and technology” to support the high-quality development of elderly care services in ethnic minority regions. Its shift toward localization, smart solutions, and collaboration will facilitate the in-depth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy within the elderly care sector.

3.3. Keyword Cluster Analysis

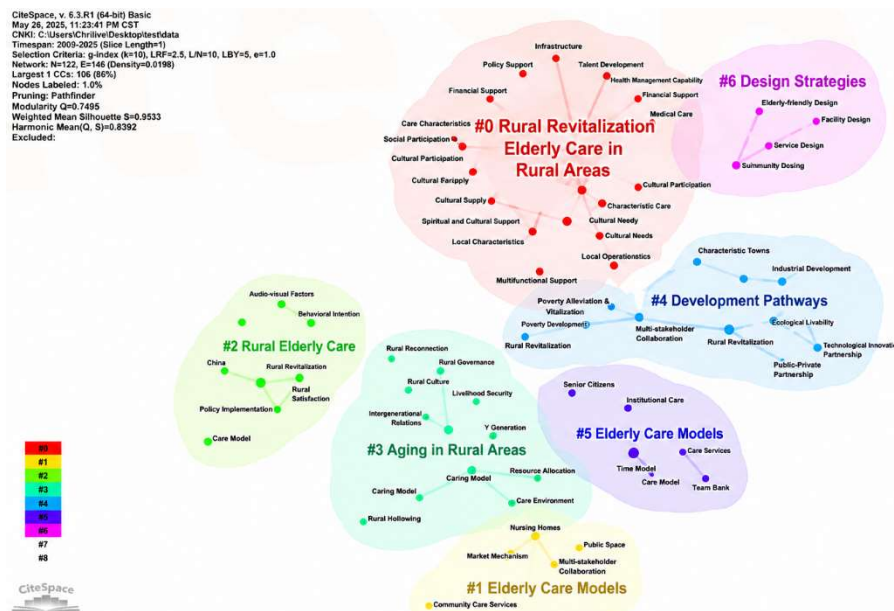


Figure 3. Keyword Clustering Analysis of Domestic Research on Tourism-based Elderly Care

A keyword cluster analysis was performed on domestic research on travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions (Figure 3). The clustering metrics show a modularity Q-value of 0.7495 (exceeding 0.3) and a mean silhouette S-value of 0.9353 (exceeding 0.5), indicating that the clustering results are

statistically significant and highly reliable, effectively capturing the structure and relationships of the research content.

Research on travel-based elderly care has established a comprehensive framework centered on the rural revitalization strategy and the context of an aging society. This framework comprises four stages: “strategy-driven, demand-responsive, model-innovative, and implementation-oriented.” At the strategic planning level, this study is guided by the national rural revitalization strategy and seeks to deeply integrate travel-based elderly care with rural development. Through practical approaches such as the construction of specialty towns and the revitalization of traditional villages, it explores a synergistic development model based on “industrial integration and spatial optimization,” thereby establishing an innovative mechanism for policy alignment and resource conversion[17] . At the theoretical level, the focus is on the spatial infrastructure of travel-based elderly care services and age-friendly design, aiming to establish diverse models that integrate intergenerational and cultural-tourism elements[18]. For ethnic regions such as Sichuan and Chongqing, strategies are being developed to incorporate local culture and renovate spaces, thereby achieving an organic integration of travel-based elderly care services with local characteristics[19] . At the practical application level, this study addresses the real-world needs arising from an aging society. By analyzing user behavior and focusing on service quality improvement, it proposes systematic solutions that integrate industrial collaboration, traditional village preservation, and age-friendly renovations[20]. This yields a closed-loop research framework centered on “strategic implementation, model innovation, and spatial optimization,” offering a Chinese approach that combines theoretical depth with practical value to address the challenges of population aging.

3.4. Keyword Timezone Map Analysis

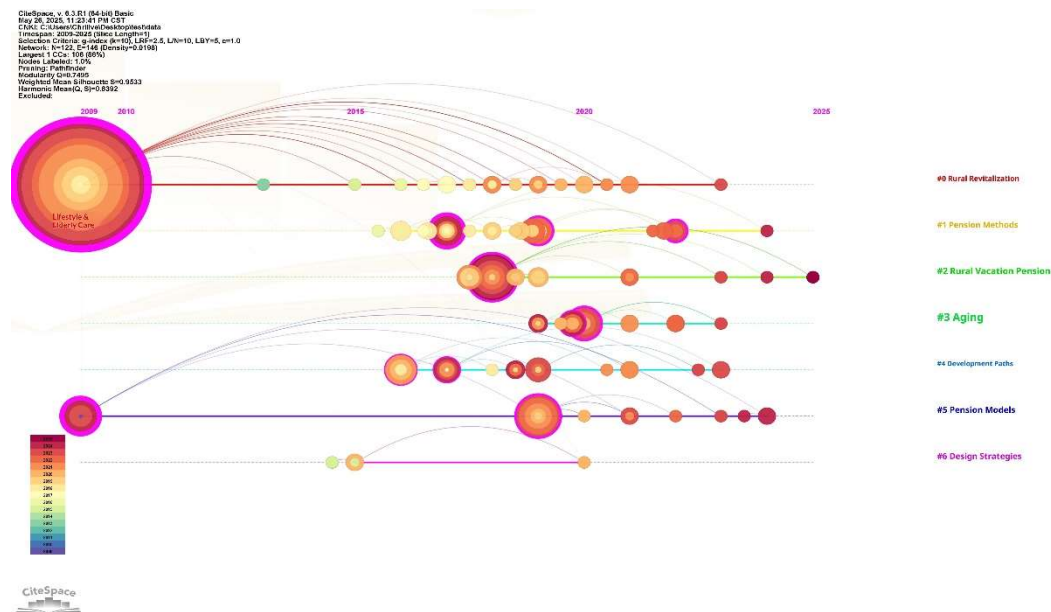


Figure 4. Keyword Time Zone Mapping of Domestic Research on Tourism-based Elderly Care

Figure 4 systematically illustrates the evolution of this field from its conceptual inception to multidimensional refinement through the temporal distribution of keywords related to research on travel-based elderly care in China’s ethnic minority regions from 2009 to 2025. The study originated in 2009 with the core concept of “travel-based elderly care.” Initially focusing on elderly care models and age-friendly spatial design, it established a foundational research framework encompassing “elderly care services,” “age-friendly renovations,” and “public space optimization”[21], thereby laying the theoretical groundwork for subsequent developments. In 2016, the issue of “population

aging” came to the forefront, prompting a shift in research toward the needs of the elderly. In particular, urban seniors’ willingness to spend time in rural areas became a focal point[22]. Following the implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy in 2017, the “rural travel-based elderly care” cluster began to take shape rapidly in 2018, forming a deep synergy with the revitalization of characteristic towns and innovations in travel-based elderly care models[23] . This established a three-dimensional research paradigm centered on “policy-driven initiatives, spatial transformation, and model innovation.” In 2019, research on travel-based elderly care models expanded into niche areas such as “intergenerational integration” and “ecological wellness” [24]. The introduction of development pathways such as “industrial integration” and “regional coordination” in 2021 further facilitated the cross-sectoral integration of travel-based elderly care with rural cultural tourism, modern agriculture, and the health industry[25] , thereby forming a closed loop of industrial practice under the rural revitalization strategy. By 2022, research had begun to focus on the unique characteristics of ethnic minority regions, proposing spatial optimization strategies-such as the “integration of ethnic culture” and “age-friendly retrofitting of senior housing”-in typical areas such as Sichuan-Chongqing and Yunnan-Guizhou, thereby achieving an organic integration of regional characteristics with modern elderly care needs. It is worth noting that, although “smart elderly care” has not yet formed an explicit label since 2023, big data-driven spatial layout optimization and the development of smart age-friendly facilities have already begun to implicitly emerge in the iteration of development pathways and design strategies[26]. This indicates that technology-enabled solutions will become a key driver for the intelligent upgrading of travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions. This evolutionary process clearly traces the academic trajectory from “concept introduction” through “policy response” and “model innovation” to “industrial implementation” and “smart upgrading,” demonstrating how research themes dynamically adapt to social change and technological progress.

3.5. Keyword Burst Analysis

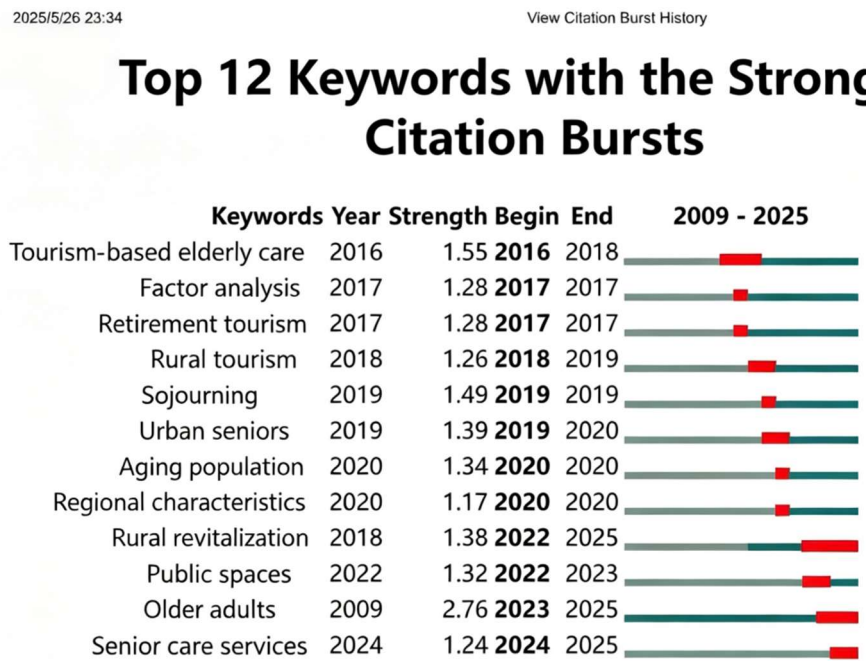


Figure 5. Keyword Burst Analysis of Domestic Research on Tourism-based Elderly Care

Through keyword burst analysis, domestic research on travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions has evolved along a trajectory of “model exploration – stakeholder deepening – policy

implementation – technology empowerment,” with core hotspots focusing on policy coordination, stakeholder needs, spatial services, and technological innovation [27]. In the future, it will be necessary to further strengthen the close integration of policy and practice, deepen the distinctive design of services and spaces, and integrate the innovative application of smart technologies. This will provide theoretical support and practical pathways for the localized, distinctive, and smart development of travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions, thereby facilitating the high-quality implementation of the rural revitalization strategy in the elderly care sector [28].

4. RESEARCH HOTSPOTS

4.1. Exploring Models of Travel-Based Elderly Care in Ethnic Minority Regions

Exploring models of travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions hinges on identifying and leveraging the area’s unique natural and cultural resources to build a diversified elderly care system that meets the needs of older adults. The relevant research primarily examines how policy guidance, social participation, and market mechanisms can be leveraged to transform the ecological advantages and cultural distinctiveness of ethnic minority regions into attractions for travel-based elderly care. Research on ethnic minority regions in Guizhou indicates that their “migratory bird”-style travel-based elderly care model is characterized by seasonal migration. Leveraging the area’s superior ecological environment and ethnic culture, such as the Dong Grand Song of Southeast Guizhou and Miao silver craftsmanship, this model attracts older adults to reside there for short or long periods. This model not only integrates services such as healthcare, tourism, and cultural experiences, but also uses government planning to mobilize private capital and community resources, thereby creating an industry chain that encompasses dining, accommodation, and wellness services. The study further notes that travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions must strike a balance between resource development and cultural preservation. For example, when traditional Dong villages in Guangxi use iconic structures such as wind-and-rain bridges and drum towers to create a “cultural experience + elderly care” model, policy support is needed to restore traditional wooden dwellings while introducing age-friendly facilities, thereby preserving cultural identity while enhancing living comfort [29]. These studies indicate that travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions should be grounded in local resource endowments and, with policy support and community participation, pursue a sustainable development path [30].

4.2. Development Pathways for the Travel-Based Elderly Care Industry

This study on the development path of the travel-based elderly care industry focuses on driving the industry’s transformation from a “single-service” model to an “ecosystem” through model innovation, technological empowerment, and policy coordination. The relevant research paper analyzes the market demand, potential, and challenges of the travel-based elderly care industry and proposes strategies such as industrial convergence, technological innovation, and service upgrades. A SWOT analysis of Guangxi reveals that the industry’s strengths lie in its abundant ethnic cultural tourism resources and policy support exemplified by the Zhuang “March 3rd” festival while challenges include weak infrastructure and a shortage of skilled professionals. To this end, the study proposes an “Internet Plus” strategy for travel-based elderly care, which involves using AI-enabled devices for remote health monitoring or leveraging big data analysis to identify the needs of older adults and precisely match those needs with appropriate service resources [31]. Meanwhile, the case of Xijiang Miao Village in Qiandongnan Prefecture, Guizhou, demonstrates the implementation of the “Miao Silver Workshop + Senior Care” model. This initiative leverages the intangible cultural heritage of Miao silver craftsmanship and integrates experiential activities such as the long-table banquet and Miao herbal baths to create cultural wellness products. The main obstacles to its growth are service homogenization and limited marketing strategies. In response, scholars suggest adopting a

membership model to boost user retention, allowing members to redeem points for Miao embroidery classes and participate in Miao New Year festivities. Such studies indicate that the travel-based elderly care industry must transcend traditional service boundaries and enhance its competitiveness through technological innovation and cross-industry integration.

4.3. Integration of Rural Revitalization and Travel-Based Elderly Care

Research on the integration of rural revitalization and travel-based elderly care aims to explore how the mobility of the elderly population can revitalize the rural economy while improving rural infrastructure and public services. Related research examines the role of travel-based elderly care in boosting the rural economy, creating job opportunities, promoting industrial upgrading, as well as preserving rural culture and protecting the ecological environment. Lulang Town in Nyingchi City, Tibet, has developed a senior care program centered on “Tibetan herbal baths and forest therapy,” drawing on Tibetan medicine culture. By incorporating Monpa lute performances and yak wool craft workshops, the initiative attracts urban seniors and drives the growth of businesses such as Tibetan herbal cultivation cooperatives and family-run guesthouses. This model has also prompted rural areas to improve supporting infrastructure, such as transportation and healthcare. For example, the government has invested 120 million yuan to upgrade high-altitude emergency medical stations and equip them with mobile hyperbaric oxygen chambers. In contrast, Dong ethnic villages place greater emphasis on cultural empowerment. In the Eight Villages of Chengyang, Sanjiang, Dong brocade weaving and farming experiences have been integrated into elderly care services. Seniors can participate in the creation of intangible cultural heritage crafts or work in the rice paddies, achieving “wellness through labor.” This approach not only preserves cultural heritage but also creates job opportunities. The case demonstrates that, in the context of rural revitalization, travel-based elderly care must use culture as a unifying force to harmonize economic and social values.

4.4. Service Design for Travel-Based Elderly Care

Research on service design for travel-based elderly care emphasizes optimizing the entire chain, from spatial layout and age-friendly facilities to cultural experiences[32]. A related study examines service design methods and tools, and proposes optimization strategies covering functional features, facility construction, landscaping, and cultural significance tailored to the needs of older adults[33]. Through service touchpoint analysis, Aze Ke Village in Yuanyang County, Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan, identified high-frequency usage scenarios for older adults, such as the Hani Terraced Fields viewing platform and the hearth culture experience area and subsequently installed accessible terraced field trails and emergency call devices to address their needs[34]. The design team used local stone and vegetation to create a “rural healing garden,” thereby reducing the elderly’s sense of alienation from the environment. In Gangcha County, Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai, travel-based elderly care apartments were renovated in the Tibetan architectural style, preserving elements such as rammed-earth walls and yak-wool tents while incorporating solar heating systems. To enrich the cultural experience, the epic of King Gesar was integrated into the decoration of public spaces, and thangka painting workshops were established. Research indicates that service design must be grounded in “locality,” using environmental renovations and cultural activities to rebuild social connections for older adults.

4.5. Market Demand and Influencing Factors of Travel-Based Elderly Care

Research on the market demand for travel-based elderly care has revealed the underlying motivations behind older adults’ decision-making. This research primarily examines market characteristics including care needs, consumption habits, and preferences, as well as various factors influencing their choice of travel-based elderly care, such as personal, family, and social factors [35]. A study conducted by the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences in the four prefectures of Southern Xinjiang

found that the preferences of older Uyghur adults are significantly influenced by religious beliefs, language proficiency, and intergenerational support. For example, highly educated older residents in Kashgar Prefecture are more likely to choose to reside elsewhere in their later years, as they have the ability to filter information and, with many of their children living apart, need such a lifestyle to alleviate feelings of loneliness.

A study in Qinghai indicates that urban seniors' concerns about rural travel-based elderly care center on medical facilities and service quality. Although Banyan Village in Wushi Town, Mutou County, Haidong City, has introduced a "Tu-style embroidery + elderly care" package, the lack of 24-hour medical staff on duty, the township health center conducts only one weekly clinic visit, has led to a decline in the number of seniors residing there. In response, scholars have proposed establishing a "tiered service" system, where basic services are provided by village health clinics, while specialized care is linked to remote consultations with top-tier tertiary hospitals in urban areas. This research provides empirical evidence for precisely meeting market needs and optimizing policy design, indicating that policy guidance and market mechanisms are necessary to address the concerns of older adults who choose travel-based elderly care.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

This paper employs bibliometric analysis to systematically review and evaluate research on travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions. The analysis yields the following conclusions:

The annual publication volume of domestic research on travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions exhibits a three-stage pattern: "emergence and dormancy - rapid expansion - qualitative upgrading." From 2009 to 2014, the field was in its initial stage, with a low average annual output. During the rapid expansion phase, driven by the Rural Revitalization Strategy, accelerating population aging, and policies promoting the integration of culture and tourism, the number of publications reached its peak. Thereafter, the field entered a phase of qualitative improvement characterized by rational reflection. "Travel-based elderly care" is closely intertwined with "rural revitalization" and "population aging," forming eight major thematic clusters-including industrial integration models driven by rural revitalization and technology support systems for smart elderly care. The study traces the concept's evolutionary trajectory from its inception through multidimensional development, as well as the progression from "model exploration" to "stakeholder engagement," "policy implementation," and "technology empowerment."

Future research on travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions should continue to deepen localized practices, fully harness the unique natural and cultural resources of each ethnic group, and create travel-based elderly care brands with strong ethnic characteristics. At the same time, a more closely integrated ecosystem should be built, policy-practice alignment should be strengthened, and the deep integration of travel-based elderly care with the rural revitalization strategy should be promoted. In terms of technological innovation, the application of advanced technologies such as the Internet of Things and big data in travel-based elderly care should be actively promoted to achieve precise service matching and smart spatial planning, thereby enhancing the quality of life and well-being of older adults. In addition, empirical research should be strengthened, including comparative analyses of different travel-based elderly care models and evaluations of policy effectiveness, thereby providing a scientific basis for policy formulation and implementation. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on the role of cultural interaction and ethnic identity in travel-based elderly care research, exploring their mechanisms in areas such as cultural adaptation, social integration, and service optimization. This will provide strong support for the sustainable development of travel-based elderly care in ethnic minority regions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset analyzed in this study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The source data are publicly available from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) website (<https://www.cnki.net/>), and the search strategies are described in detail in the Methods section.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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