

# *Campsite Evolution in China and the US: A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Influences and Industry Maturity*

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**Keywords:** Campsites; camping tourism; cultural studies; comparative studies

**Abstract:** This study utilizes a comparative research framework to examine the fundamental differences in the development models of campsites within China and the United States, exploring these distinctions through the dual perspectives of cultural lineage and industry status. It finds that camping culture in the United States is deeply embedded within its tradition of nomadism, resulting in a market that is both mature and diversified after centuries of development. In contrast, the camping industry in China, while a more recent phenomenon, has experienced rapid growth in recent years. The emergence of high-end camping experiences, in particular, reflects significant shifts in consumer culture and demonstrates the adaptability of Western camping traditions within diverse cultural contexts. This investigation provides a nuanced understanding of how cultural heritage and industry dynamics uniquely influence the evolution of camping practices in different geographical regions, thereby contributing to a broader comprehension of the sector's global development trends.

## **1. Introduction**

The core elements of camping tourism include mobility, outdoor activities and recreation. Campsite is the location for camping and leisure activities, also known as campsite (Campsite, Campground or Camping area), which is not only for people to use self-provided camping facilities such as tents, caravans or campsite rented cabins, mobile villas, caravans, etc. to go out for a short time or a long period of time to live and live, but also with the sports and recreation facilities and equipment, and public service facilities, and with a beautiful natural environment. The nature of the camp is a small community with a beautiful natural environment [1].

As a basic way of life of the pioneers on the American continent, camping appeared mainly in the early stage of exploration and scientific research; in the 1920s and 1930s, camping began to form organised activities, and in the 1960s, the popularity of the caravan (RV) in the United States injected a new impetus into the commercial campsites, marking the evolution of camping from simple outdoor activities into a branch of the tourism industry with market-oriented characteristics. Today, the U.S. has the world's largest source market for camping tourism, and has many successful experiences in policy development, campsite management and channel operation. The research on camping by American scholars has continued from the 1960s to the present, with fruitful research results. Early research focused on factors that affect the camping experience, such as user

experience, price and profitability, market segmentation, and operation and development strategies [2], and also viewed camping as a window to examine a wide range of issues, such as people's identities, family concepts, social interactions, and even the gender division of labour [3].

The development of campsites in China started at the end of the 20th century, with exquisite camping bursting into flames during the New Crown epidemic in 2020, and since then achieving a high rate of growth in the camping economy. Chinese scholars' research on campsites and the industry's development trend are basically in sync, and the number of studies in the field has continued to rise since 1997, when Wu Chengzhao first mentioned camping tourism in China's Tourism Planning 30 Years of Retrospective and Prospective, in which a spurt of growth was realised in 2022. However, the development of campsites in China is still in the primary exploration stage, lacking relevant theories and practical experience, and has yet to meet the growing national demand for camping and leisure consumption. Current research in China focuses on the current state of the camping tourism industry, market segmentation and development paths, as well as the planning and construction of specific campsites, development modes, and business management, while relatively little research has been conducted on campers, the core body of camping tourism[4], and most of the research has relied on reports from online tourism platforms and consulting organisations, lacking systematic and practical experience[5].

Therefore, based on the analysis of the cultural lineage, economic development and social environment and other conditions in China and the United States, this paper will compare the commonalities and differences between the two countries in the development of camping culture and the development of camping activities, and put forward the corresponding solution paths for the difficulties that may be encountered in the development of China's campsite industry. At the same time, the author hopes to enrich the theoretical results of international research on campsites and provide references for other subsequent studies.

## **2. The Cultural Origins of Campgrounds**

### **2.1 The Cultural Origins of Campsite Development in the United States**

Camping, as one of the oldest ways of survival of human beings, can be traced back to the early days of human society in the wilderness, when human ancestors were engaged in nomadic herding, hunting, migration and other activities that require the construction of temporary shelters. Therefore, the English word "camp" is taken from the Latin word "campus", which is synonymous with field, and originally referred to the flat land where the camp was set up, and later evolved into the meaning of "camping". The Cambridge Dictionary explains camping as "the act of staying and sleeping in an outdoor area for one or more days and nights, usually in a tent". Glamping, a synonym of Glamorous+Camping, was not officially included in the Oxford Dictionary as an emerging word until 2016. The original meaning is "camping in style, special camping", often translated as "exquisite camping". The concept originated from the safari experience of middle and upper class travellers in Europe and the United States in Africa: these groups, who had more time and money, were no longer satisfied with simple camps on outdoor trips, but began to pursue the process of outdoor life with high-class canvas tents, cooks, guides, porters and even housekeepers [3].

The famous ecologist Wilson put forward the "pro-life hypothesis" that people have a need to be close to nature, and have a strong desire to get close to nature and keep in touch with nature [6]. In the late 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, with the industrial revolution and urbanisation advancing, Americans began to seek to escape from the hustle and bustle of the city, reconnecting with nature. Camping provided people with the opportunity to deeply experience and appreciate nature, giving people a sense of return to nature and peace of mind, a kind of nostalgia in

the sense of "escape". The most popular campgrounds in the United States during this period were mainly national parks [7], and Barry Garst and other scholars, when examining the historical changes in the experience and meaning of camping in the U.S., believe that human "restoration" is a central theme throughout the history of camping [3].

Subsequently, a large body of work that emerged in the mid-20th century suggests that family camping became widely popular in the United States during this period, and that it became an important part of recreation for many families. For example, LH Weir in 1924 discusses the rapid growth of the organised camping phenomenon, particularly the rise of private campsites and family camping for teenagers [8]. In 1958, GW Donaldson and LE Donaldson referred to "family camping clinics" offered by some universities and recreational agencies [9], and the following year RE Carlson directly described the phenomenon of significant growth in family camping, especially in state parks [10]. Functionally, camping culture is deeply rooted in the idea of the family, as the division of labour contained in the campsite environment enhances the interactions of family members and the quality of their relationships, and Germann Molz views camping as an ontological practice, combining his own childhood experiences of camping, such as the mimicking of domestic chores and the creation of functional zones within the tent analogous to those of domestic space, to point to an implicit dimension of camping: "the family camping clinic". implied dimension: "If camping is a metaphor for a collective wandering, it is also a metaphor for a 'homing desire'", illustrating that even in the midst of an unqualified life of wandering, people still seek a sense of homelike sense of belonging and stability [11].

Experiencing and appreciating nature will bring campers the feeling of beauty and other positive psychological feelings, and arouse people's strong desire to respect and protect the natural environment. In the 21st century, environmental protection has become a growing concern, and more and more campers have begun to adopt Leave No Trace camping (LNT camping) in order to minimise the impact on the environment, reflecting an ecologically sustainable camping culture [12].

## 2.2 The cultural lineage of camping development in China

In China, the concept of "camping" in the Chinese context originates from the military camping, as mentioned in the Book of Jin, Volume 68 - Biography of Gu Rong, which states that "the public would like to camp out in the field and drive around from time to time". Camping activities in China have also existed since ancient times, as early as in Zuo Zhuan, which records the invention of the horse-drawn carriage by Xi Zhong during the Xia Yu period for the purpose of lodging. During the Tang and Song dynasties, with the further development of the commercial economy, camping was featured in the travelogues, poems and paintings of many literati and writers [13].

Although the early camping activities in China were either for some military and practical purposes or as some cultural and aesthetic pursuits, in fact, there is a remarkable opposition between the concept of settling the land and relocating the land, which is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, and the nomadic spirit represented by the camping culture. The notion of settling the land reflects a deep emotional attachment to home and land, a concept that is the result of thousands of years of agrarian civilisation, emphasising the enduring cultivation and careful maintenance of a particular piece of land, as well as a self-sustaining way of life built around the family. In contrast, camping culture has its origins in the nomadic way of life, and is characterised at its core by an emphasis on mobility and environmental adaptability. This culture favours flexible use of space and relies on cyclical use of natural resources, contrasting with the traditional Chinese values of stability and sedentary living.

Historically, although China has experienced the rule of nomadic peoples such as the Liao

Dynasty, the dominant Han culture has remained a predominantly agrarian civilisation with reservations about the nomadic lifestyle. In modern times, the introduction and popularity of camping culture is largely the result of Western cultural influences and globalisation trends. As P Ny fi points out in 'Scenic spots: Chinese tourism, the state, and cultural authority' (2011), the fact that young Chinese people choose to travel during traditional festivals reflects the impact of the Western concept of nomadic leisure on the traditional Chinese family culture.

Therefore, camping, as a modern social phenomenon imported from the West, not only challenges the traditional idea of settling down in China in terms of its cultural roots, but also embodies the spirit of rebellion on three levels. Firstly, in the sense of "self-exile", camping is a rebellion against the modern urban life of "fixed abode". According to anthropologist Victor Turner's theory, human society is divided into two states, one is the daily social and relational state, and the other is the ritual state. Behind the experience of being close to nature and enjoying freedom that campers enjoy, it is essentially a ritual resistance to the monotonous and rule-filled urban life [14]. Secondly, at the level of leisure modalities, camping is a rebellion against the highly industrialised traditional tourism industry, and it contributes to the development of a post-Ford-style leisure economy by providing a more personalised and autonomous form of leisure. Finally, as a narrative of "distinction", "escape" and "healing" in daily life, camping provides a haven for urban youth to escape from stress in the fast-paced modern society. As Edward Brooker puts it, through this kind of "recluse" behaviour, people are able to improve their physical, mental and emotional conditions [15].

### **3. Industry Development of Campgrounds**

#### **3.1 The development of the campground industry in the United States**

The development of the U.S. campground industry began in the early 20th century and has since experienced several landmark events. 1910, the American Campground Managers Association was founded, which was the beginning of camping as an industry. After World War II, many recreational clubs in the U.S. joined together to form large camping associations and consortia, such as the National Camping and Walking Association (NCHA), etc. Between the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service made great efforts to develop a major infrastructure, and the number of available campsites nationwide rapidly increased from 41,000 to 125,000. At the same time, RVs of all types entered mass production. In 1968, the revised National Trails System Act called for the creation of trails in both urban and rural environments, enhancing the accessibility of campgrounds in areas such as nature preserves, parks, forests, and wilderness. Camping in the United States diverged in the mid- to late-20th century into various forms and segments, such as RV camping, backpacker camping, wilderness camping, and luxury camping, reflecting the motivations, preferences, and lifestyles of a diverse group of campers. In 2009, the total number of camping participants in the United States was 46 million, or about 15 percent of the population, and the average number of camping days per participant was 13.2 days. In 2015, there were 8.5 million people using RVs, and about more than half of the families in the North American market travelled in RVs during the holiday season.

Today, the U.S. campground industry is a major player in tourism and outdoor recreation. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, camping generates \$18.7 billion in annual consumer spending and supports 171,000 jobs. Early camping trips were taken by a small number of affluent travellers, but now camping has become one of the most popular outdoor activities for the general public in the US [16]. According to Dyrts latest data, in 2021, 66 million people will be camping in the U.S., and the number of households will reach 938,000, a growth rate of 9%. Participation in camping reached 15.5 per cent, with nearly 8.3 million people camping for the first

time, or 40 per cent of the total number of campers. With 21% of these new campers doing so to spend time with family and friends, 19% to get in touch with nature, 16% wanting to get out and about after the outbreak is over, 11% to visit U.S. attractions, 8% for recreation and relaxation, 6% on a retirement trip, and another 6% new RV buyers, it is clear that America's new campers are driven by a wide variety of motivations to visit campgrounds and have an experience. And RVs remain the most popular type of camping accommodation, at 23%.

The North American camping industry encompasses a wide range of businesses, which can be divided into the following categories: the first category is camping equipment manufacturers, such as Yangzhou Jinquan and Coleman, which mainly provide camping supplies, such as tents, sleeping bags, and cookware. The second category is camping site operators, such as Kamp grounds of America, Inc (KOA), Hipcamp, etc., which mainly provide camping site reservation and management services. The third category is camping travel service providers, such as Outdoorsy, RVshare, etc., which mainly provide rental and insurance services for camping vehicles such as RVs and recreational vehicles. The fourth category is camping media platforms, such as The Dyr, Campendium, etc., which mainly provide camping-related information, tips, reviews and other content.

Due to extensive social support, the camping industry in the United States has flourished. Government departments such as municipal recreation and park authorities, education and youth organisations, and welfare organisations not only organise camping events, but are also responsible for fundraising. In addition, a variety of non-governmental and non-profit organisations, such as the American Camping Association, the YMCA, and other social service organisations, attract millions of people to their organised camping trips each year. At the same time, private organisations also organise commercial camping activities by providing specialised educational and psychological guidance [5].

There are many camping organisations and associations in the United States dedicated to the promotion and maintenance of the camping industry, representative of which include national camping associations such as the National Campers and Hikers Association and the North American Family Campers Association, and regional camping clubs such as the Adirondack Mountain Club and the Sierra Club. In addition, well-established campground chains, such as Kampgrounds of America (KOA), the largest campground chain in North America, have been established in the U.S. to provide their members with uniform brand standards and operating models to ensure consistent customer experience and brand value. The organisation also provides members with management and marketing support such as booking platforms, mobile apps and marketing materials. There are many other similar campground organisations, such as the National Park Service (NPS), which is primarily responsible for the management of America's national parks, national monuments and other publicly protected areas, and the National Forest Service (NFS), which is responsible for the management and protection of America's state-owned forests and grasslands, which offer a variety of camping and outdoor activities. Finally, there are a number of camping-related organisations in the US, such as the American Camp Association (ACA), one of the largest summer camping organisations in the US, which provides its members with a variety of resources and services, such as training, certification, and sharing of resources, as well as providing standards and guidelines for summer camps. There is also the American Hiking Society (AHS), an outdoor non-profit organisation that promotes ecological sustainability, and the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics.

### 3.2 Industry development of campsites in China

The history of China's campsite development can be divided into four phases: the initial

exploration period (2000-2005), the growth period (2005-2015), the transformation period (2015-2020) and the steady development period. This categorisation framework facilitates an in-depth understanding of the development trajectory and characteristics of China's campsite industry. The initial exploration period marks the budding of China's campsite industry. Campsites in this period were mainly established in scenic natural areas, providing basic tent or caravan camping services, and the initial campsites were mostly located around tourist attractions, such as Qinghai Lake and Zhangjiajie. The growth period witnessed the rapid development of the camping industry. Along with the prosperity of the domestic tourism industry, the public's interest in camping activities increased day by day, and the requirements for the environment and facilities of campsites were also raised, and professional campsites gradually appeared, equipped with more entertainment and leisure facilities. During the transition period, China's campsite industry underwent transformation and upgrading, responding to the national call for ecological civilisation and emphasising the concept of environmental protection and sustainable development. During this period, innovative campsites emerged, adopting new materials and technologies and aiming to provide a more comfortable and intelligent camping experience. For example, the application of biodegradable materials for tents and intelligent management systems enhance efficiency. The period of steady development has witnessed the maturity and innovation of the campsite industry, with campsites becoming a popular choice as demand for high-quality travel experiences increases. It is expected that China's campsite industry will continue to maintain steady growth in the future.

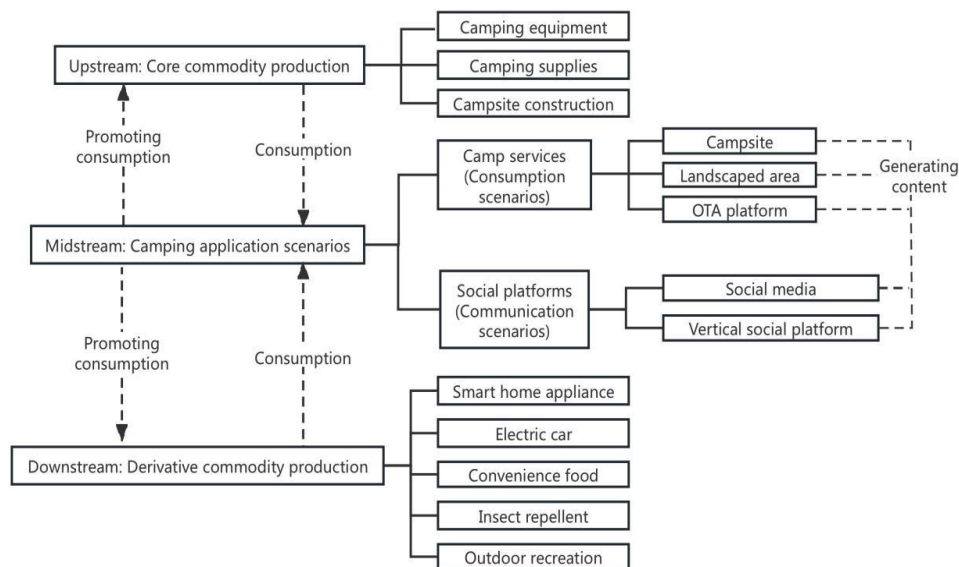


Figure 1: Camping Industry Chain in China

As is illustrated in figure 1, China's campsite industry chain can be divided into upstream, midstream and downstream parts according to the type of consumption and scenarios. The upstream is mainly the production of core commodities, involving manufacturers of camping equipment (including tents, canopies, folding tables and chairs, camp trailers, camping lights, etc.), camping apparel (including punching jackets, hiking bags, hiking hats, mackintoshes, gloves, etc.), and campsite construction (including infrastructure required for the provision of campsite services, such as water, electricity, rubbish collection, safety facilities, etc.). The midstream is mainly camping application scenarios, divided into consumption scenarios based on campsite services and communication scenarios based on social platforms, with the former's main positions in campsites, scenic areas and OTA platforms, and the latter mainly in social media and vertical social platforms.

The text, pictures and video content produced during camping are shared and spread through social platforms, further increasing the penetration rate of camping in the country and thus generating more camping consumption. The downstream mainly involves the production of derivative goods, including smart home appliances, outdoor recreational products, electric vehicles, convenient food and insect repellent products, which can increase the sense of camping ritual and sophistication for consumers and improve the degree of comfort and portability.

According to the data of AiMedia Consulting, both the core and driven market size of China's camping economy show a year-on-year upward trend. In 2021, the core market size of China's camping economy reaches 74.75 billion yuan, a year-on-year growth of 62.5%, and the driven market size is 381.23 billion yuan, a year-on-year growth of 58.5% [17]. The background of the development of China's campsite industry covers a variety of factors. Firstly, with the economic development, Chinese consumers' disposable income has been increasing, and the consumption structure has gradually tilted from basic food and clothing consumption to enjoyment and development, and consumers' pursuit of a higher-quality lifestyle has become an important factor in pulling the economic growth of the campsite industry. Secondly, in the first half of 2021-2022, in the context of repeated epidemics across China, travellers' preference shifted from long-distance travel to short-distance travel within the province, as well as peripheral travel within 141km from the central city; at the same time, camping, as a kind of group recreational activity based on acquaintance relationship networks or interesting relationships, enables participants to achieve the reinforcement of the social network of relationships during the process of spatial construction [14], satisfying the social needs of people isolated from each other during the epidemic, driving the growth in the number of campers during that period. Third, as China's urbanisation rate continues to rise and the number of urban population increases, more and more domestic residents have long lacked the opportunity to have close contact with nature, stimulating the outdoor leisure needs of domestic residents to get close to nature and experience nature, thus promoting the development of rural tourism and camping industry. Fourthly, the content of camping culture has been widely disseminated in the past two years. For example, the outdoor camping experience reality show "Let's Camp Together" was launched in April 2022, which immersively led the audience to "cloud camping", and the readership of related topics on Weibo exceeded 3 billion. The camping culture has implanted potential camping motives in the hearts of more and more Chinese consumers, prompting them to convert their consumption in the future. Lastly, the rising technological level of camping products on the market, such as the emergence of outdoor power supplies, outdoor heaters and outdoor shower systems, has enhanced the experience and convenience of camping activities, attracting potential consumers who value the comfort of camping to join the camping ranks.

Domestic campsite organisations and associations in China have been established relatively late and are few in number. For example, the Camping Branch of China Tourist Attractions Association (CTAA), under the China Tourist Attractions Association (CTAA), is the only industry association within China that focuses on camping, and its members include various types of campsites, camping equipment manufacturers, and camping clubs. The Camping Working Group of National Tourism Administration (NTA), created by NTA in 2016, aims to promote the development of the camping industry, improve relevant policies and regulations, and enhance the level of camping safety management, with responsibilities including organising the formulation of relevant policies and regulations, coordinating the development of the industry, and promoting the camping culture. The Camping Industry Professional Committee of China Sporting Goods Industry Federation (CSGIF), established in December 2022, is a subordinate organisation of CSGIF. The committee's subordinate organisations include campsite operators, event organisers and planners, campsite equipment and facilities manufacturers, camping media and campsite design and planning organisations.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis of Campsite Development Models in China and the United States

Firstly, the development of camping culture in China and the United States reveals fundamental differences in cultural, social and economic backgrounds. In the U.S., camping culture has a long history, which was nurtured by the nomadic culture's values of individualism and proximity to nature, and then gradually evolved from a survival necessity to a popular outdoor leisure activity. In the 1920s, with the expansion of the middle class and the increase in leisure time, camping became an important part of American leisure culture. In contrast, although there were records of military and practical activities in China in ancient times, camping culture in China is essentially a foreign cultural form rooted in farming culture. It is only in recent years, with the influence of socio-economic changes and the popularity of social media, that camping has moved from a niche group of enthusiasts to the general public, a process that maps the complex interplay between cultural heritage, social change, and the natural environment.

For these reasons, the development paths of the camping tourism markets in China and the United States have differed. In the United States, where the camping culture has been nurtured, tent camping was once a relatively accessible and inexpensive leisure and accommodation option, with the early audience mainly consisting of low- and middle-income people, and then diversified forms of caravan camping and luxury camping were developed, the latter of which included cabins, tents, yurts, tree houses, tipis, etc. In contrast, after the grafting of cultural heritage into the camping tourism market in China and the United States, camping tourism in China and the United States has also developed differently. In contrast, in China, where camping culture has been grafted on, due to the profit-seeking nature of commercial capital, the earliest form of camping introduced was the exquisite camping that focuses on taste and quality, whose cultural logic contains the dual pursuit of the traditional idyllic leisure life as well as the exquisite life under the consumer culture, and the main target of the camping culture is the young middle class or white-collar youths living in big cities, which is a kind of "gateway" camping established on the basis of the participants' certain economic foundation. It is a kind of "threshold" leisure and recreation mode based on a certain economic foundation of the participants [14].

Once again, the development level of the campground industry and economy in the two countries is different. The U.S. camping industry from the establishment of the Association of Campground Managers continues to grow and mature. In the mid-to-late 20th century, the U.S. camping industry has formed diverse forms and market segments including RV camping, backpacker camping, wilderness camping and luxury camping. Today, the U.S. camping industry occupies an important position in the field of tourism and outdoor recreation, generating about \$18.7 billion in consumer spending annually, supporting about 171,000 jobs, and increasing the rate of camping trips by close to 10 per cent. By contrast, China's campground industry is still in the early stages of development. The popularity of camping activities has only begun in recent years, and despite the fact that the government has strengthened its support for the industry and introduced relevant policies and norms, China's camping industry is still faced with challenges such as a small number of sites, unregulated management, imperfect services, and product homogenisation.

Finally, the organisations and institutions of the camping industry in the US have been well established since the beginning of the 20th century, whereas China started later and on a smaller scale. In addition, the U.S. has established a representative campground association since the 1960s, while China's relevant association was established late and is relatively homogeneous. In terms of policy support, the U.S. government has been actively promoting the camping industry for a long time and has formulated a series of regulations and standards, while China's policies and regulations in this field are still to be improved. In terms of talent development, the U.S. has a mature training system and curriculum, while China needs to further develop training standards and systems.



## 5. Conclusion

As William Burch theorises, camping opens up a 'play world' that escapes, subverts, and transcends the stability of daily commitments, but it also implies that the boundaries between camping and the real world are not only constructed but also fragile, with its 'non-reality' [3]. At the same time, this also means that the boundary between camping and the real world, which is 'non-real', is not only constructed but also fragile. Based on this, this study is rooted in the cultural, social and economic backgrounds of China and the United States, and finds that camping is naturally nurtured by the American cultural soil, engraved with the nomadic culture of the American continent, which advocates freedom and indefinite residence, and therefore, when the capital "transplants" it to the Chinese agrarian cultural soil, which advocates stability and secure relocation, it will be difficult to "mitigate" the "incompatibility with the local environment". Therefore, when capital "transplanted" it into the soil of Chinese agrarian culture, in order to alleviate the problem of "not adapting to the local conditions", Chinese practitioners have taken exquisite camping as a "breakthrough" in introducing camping, so as enable campers to strike a balance between pursuing natural and wild adventures and retaining comfortable and safe shelters, and to achieve the multiple purposes of escaping from reality, experiencing nature, linking with others and rebuilding the self in the process. In the process, they can achieve the multiple purposes of escaping from reality, experiencing nature, linking with others and rebuilding themselves, as well as strengthening their self-identity, social identity and cultural identity.

The author found that most of the previous camping research from the perspective of tourism focuses on the planning, development and management of campsites, or on the consumer preference and decision-making process of campers at the psychological level, but seldom combines the two perspectives of the subject and the object; and from the perspective of culture, most of the research adopts the frameworks of communication science and sociology, and focuses on the theoretical level of the metaphysical level, and is less combined with the current situation of the industry. Therefore, the innovation of this study lies firstly in the interdisciplinary research perspective, i.e., the first part of the study starts from the humanistic perspective to sort out the cultural lineage of the development of campsites in the two countries, which is close to the essence, and the second part of the study starts from the industrial perspective to analyse the development history and current situation of the campsite industry in the two countries, which focuses on form, and both of them are mutually reinforcing from surface to interior; and secondly, the authors compare campsite development under the context of different countries at different periods of history through the framework of comparative analysis. Secondly, by adopting a comparative analysis framework, the authors compare the differences in the development models of the campsite industry in different historical periods and in different national contexts, which is also of certain theoretical innovation significance.

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