

The Call of Wilderness: A Historical Analysis of Western Hiking Development and Its Implications for China's Outdoor Recreation Transition

Junxuan Li

*International Department, Zhixin High School, Guangzhou, China
3373307962@qq.com*

Abstract. In recent years, as the rapid development of the Internet, outdoor activities have become a popular trend among Chinese people. However, this sudden spread of outdoor activities is accompanied by gear-centered consumption and huge environmental cost. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the underlying mechanisms behind these two issues, exploring possible resolutions in different angles. In doing so, this study analyzed second-hand materials to compare the developmental history in both the West and China, determining to gain insights from Western experiences. Eventually, this study discovered that the gear-centered consumption originated from people's demand, fashioned by the Internet, for social identity and misleading online contents. It also found that the environmental cost is the result of a lack of education and regulation. Therefore, to solve these problems, multiple approaches should be implemented simultaneously. It is essential to build an authoritative platform of outdoor information, to promote affordability and sustainability in the market of outdoor equipment, to improve environmental education, and to strengthen regulation on people who attend outdoor activities.

Keywords: gear-centered consumption, environmental cost, outdoor activity, Leave No Trace, China

1. Introduction

Currently, in China, the Internet has sparked a hiking craze among the Chinese, especially young and middle age citizens. Hiking was fashioned as a new, adventurous approach for urban residents, who in general lead a preoccupied, stressful lifestyle, to relax or to recreate by popular apps such as the Little Red Book and Tiktok. Hence, hiking has attracted a wealth of beginners who have little outdoor experience to participate in hiking. Nevertheless, as hiking lowered the participation threshold and expanded the outdoor population in China, it gradually exceeds the range of sport and become a social identity, featuring in high consumption: many outdoor lovers have established an image of being well -equipped, leading to a trend of purchasing outdoor equipment. In addition, environmental issues have also arisen as an increasing portion of people begin to go into the wild.

Therefore, this paper will conduct an exploratory historical-comparative study based on secondary sources, aiming to investigate the mechanisms behind the gear-centered consumption—

concentrating attention and money on equipment instead of outdoor activity itself—and environmental problems resulted from the sudden development in Chinese outdoor activities. Meanwhile, this study also discusses potential solutions to the two issues mentioned above. This study will first present history of the development of outdoor activity in the West and then analyze the current issues—gear-centered consumption and environmental pollution—of outdoor activity in China, advancing potential solutions ultimately.

2. History of western outdoor development

2.1. Elite exploration stage (1850s—1900s): lack of equipment and respect for nature

From the 1850s to 1900s, as the industrial revolution developed and matured in the west, travelers were able to visit distant locations with the assistance of fast ships and trains powered by steam engine, as well as the expansion of railroads. Meanwhile, Romanticism fueled exploration in the 1850s by sparking a love for nature, wild places, and personal adventure in art and poems from the late 1700s to early 1800s. Thinkers like Wordsworth praised imagination and the outdoors, inspiring explorers to pursue beauty and mystery in far lands [1]. This spirit continued to influence the exploration in the 1900s, pushing people to travel for wonder and thrill, not just for money and science [1]. Therefore, mountain climbing and exploration had gradually evolved from a subsidiary activity of scientific research into an independent sport for recreation [1]. During this period, mountain climbers used basic gear like ropes, lamps for mountain climbing. And significantly, those early designs of outdoor equipment were devised based on functions instead of fashion, emphasizing practicality [2].

In addition, early mountaineering organizations such as the Swiss Alpine Club appeared among the elite class. Due to the small number of participants, environmental impact remained relatively minor.

2.2. Transition to popularization stage (1900s—1960s): industrialization of equipment and the emergence of environmental awareness

During this period, cars became widespread after the Second World War and new technologies were applied in outdoor equipment, allowing hiking to expand its scope of participants toward the working class. Specifically, new materials like nylon and synthetic fibers were adopted into the production of outdoor equipment, reducing the cost and making outdoor equipment more affordable for normal people [2]. Another example was the development of mountain snow shoes [3]. They appeared with small, maneuverable wooden frames in the 1940s and the 1950s. Later, in the 1960s, strong, lightweight aluminum-framed mountain snowshoes emerged [3].

Meanwhile, the right to roam emerged and began its initial institutionalization in Europe. In Britain, the Kinder Scout strived for public access to moors and mountains owned by private landowners through the Kinder Scout Mass Trespass and protesting. This protest helped push for the right to roam and inspired the National Parks Act of 1949, which created national parks to protect scenic landscapes and improved public paths and access to the countryside. And the Kinder Scout Mass Trespass later became an important symbolic event in campaigns for public access to the countryside.

In addition, retail co-operatives like REI were established, aiming to provide people with affordable outdoor clothing and equipment.

2.3. Maturing period of popularization (1960s—1990s): the spread of equipment and the formation of environmental ethics

During this period, the market of outdoor equipment moved into a stage of standardized and industrialized production, function segmentation, and price segmentation. At the same time, the environmental movement was on the rise during the 1960s, people demanding for the protection of nature. And America began to promote minimizing harm to the environment during outdoor activities, namely, "Leave No Trace (LNT)" [4]; the LNT courses were also established to help people do outdoor sports in a green way [4]. After the emergence of LNT, designers of outdoor equipment began to consider environmental protection, such as using green materials and reducing packaging in their products.

Meanwhile, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 changed natural resource management by requiring federal agencies to assess environmental impacts. Additionally, agencies began using Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) to balance recreational opportunities with environmental protection. These policies reflected growing recognition that outdoor recreation needed environmental management.

2.4. Internet popularization stage (1990s—2010s): information democratization and adaptive adjustments of

As the Internet developed during this period, mountaineering knowledge was no longer limited in mountaineering clubs, in fact, people could gather information of different trails through digital platforms. This rendered hiking more accessible to the general public. And the backpacking culture was furtherly institutionalized and globalized through online communities. At the same time, globalization promoted the spread of outdoor sport across regions.

Digital tools like GPS began to be applied in outdoor sports, enabling people to organized outdoor events without clubs. Nevertheless, it caused new issues: as people began to organize mountain climbing spontaneously without clubs, there was often a lack of clear rules, division of work, and management among members. Meanwhile, many participants were overly reliant on digital techniques while overlooking basic mountaineering skills, resulting in inability to solve unexpected situations [5-7].

In order to deal with these rising issues, many governments worked with NGOs to promote safety education, trail management, and community partnerships to support outdoor sports. In addition, facing diverse online information, they would also collaborate to establish authoritative platform for mountaineering information. For instance, in New Zealand, Mountain Safety Council and Herenga ā Nuku Aotearoa had collaborated on a website named Plan my Walk [8]. In this collaboration, Herenga ā Nuku offered financial support for Mountain Safety Council to furtherly develop Plan My Walk, a website that helps people prepare before doing outdoor activities. Meanwhile, Plan My Walk incorporated data from Herenga ā Nuku's platform Find My Adventure about public walking tracks [8].

3. Current situation of outdoor activities in China: gear-centered consumption and environmental costs in the digital era

3.1. Developmental characteristics of outdoor activities in China: compressed outbreak

In China, as the Internet developed and spread quickly throughout the public from the 2000s to the 2020s, outdoor sports have suddenly become a hot online topic, attracting an increasing number of beginners both from the middle class and Gen-Zs simultaneously. However, compared with the history of outdoor activity in the West, this much faster, more abrupt development of outdoor sports in China clearly lacks the accumulation of a healthy and harmless outdoor culture. In fact, many mountaineers begin gear-centered consumption. At the same time, the online promotion of the LNT is insufficient, resulting in enormous environmental problems.

3.2. How the Internet reshapes logic of consumption of outdoor equipment

First, the Internet bonds outdoor equipment with professionalism. Many social-media influencers who specializes in outdoor content establish their social-media image as experienced and well-equipped, and most of them would film videos to share their experience purchasing different kinds of equipment to the public. Admittedly, equipment can serve as a practically assisting role in outdoor sport. However, it can often mislead people, especially beginners, to overemphasize the importance of equipment, believing that possessing with better equipment equals to having better ability in outdoor sport. Hence—to fashion a "highly professional and skilled" image online, and to fit in with other outdoor lovers—many young people began to practice gear-centered consumption, purchasing expensive outdoor equipment from famous brands [9-12]. Besides, some influencers solely introduce an outdoor brand's product to the public due to that brand's sponsorship, also resulting in misleading information. Consequently, forming a worship for equipment, more and more people begin to purchase outdoor-related products. This has contributed to the expansion of the market for outdoor equipment. The market size of China's professional outdoor industry will reach predicted 209.5 billion yuan in 2024, an increase of 9.80% from 2023 to 2024, and will reach estimated 251.4 billion yuan in 2025 [13]. Nevertheless, following this trend, the price of outdoor equipment is overlifted during these years. And 30.61% of the consumers perceives that excessively high price is the primary issue that is required to be fixed among outdoor-related products [14].

3.3. Environmental problems resulted from the sudden popularization of outdoor activity in China

As the Internet motivates a significant number of people to go into the wild without enough promotion about environmental protection, many cases of environmental contamination have occurred within a few years. While many people are throwing litter away easily in the nature, it takes great effort to diminish the damage done on the environment. One example is the Paradise Lake, located on the Wusun Ancient Road in Xinjiang. As a popular scenic and camping spot for hikers along a famous hiking route--the Wusun Ancient Road, it has been polluted by camping litter like camping gas canisters that are thrown away by tourists since 2022 [15]. As a consequence, the government has to send helicopters to bring the large amount of trash out of the Paradise Lake [15]. Hence, it is clear that the overall awareness of environmental protection still necessitates much LNT promotion to be improved.

3.4. Comparing development of outdoor activity in the West and in China

First, in China, following the outburst of a hiking trend and of a gear-centered consumption, people in the outdoor community began to treat outdoor equipment as part of their social identity [9, 10], resulting in inflated prices of outdoor-related products [11]. Whereas in the West, developing slowly in the industrial revolutions while outdoor sports gradually spread from the elite class to a larger public, outdoor equipment was devised primarily for practicality instead of some fashionable or social factors [2]. A side-by-side comparison is summarized in Table 1.

Second, although many efforts and policies are made to reduce pollution resulted from a large scale of outdoor activities and to raise the overall public's awareness of environmental issues, in China, the public still lack the education about environmental protection. Meanwhile, in the west, the LNT serves as a moral guideline in nature, establishing systematic courses for people to learn to protect the environment [2]. There are clear laws protecting outdoor parks and trails. And the public possesses with a higher awareness of environmental protection.

Table 1. Comparing development of outdoor activity in the West and in China

West		China
Speed of development	slow	fast
Equipment culture	Focusing on functions	Focusing on social representation; gear-centered consumption
Environmental ethics	Possessing with the LNT policy and clear laws protecting parks and trails	Lacking environmental education

4. Discussion and implication on how China can alleviate gear-centered consumption and environmental cost of outdoor activity

4.1. Building authoritative information platforms

First, in account of misleading, incomplete outdoor information, it is important for the government to collaborate with experts to establish and promote an authoritative platform like the NGO. Such platform should offer comprehensive, accurate outdoor information, including condition of hiking trails, appropriate advice on outdoor equipment, safety notes, and other specific aspects. In this way, people are able to plan their walk and choose equipment based on reliable suggestions. And they may not be misled by other unreliable sources that "the most expensive one is the best" [11, 16]. Moreover, the government can also collaborate with different digital platforms to spread the idea of LNT and to advocate for focusing on outdoor activity itself rather than equipment through making special videos, organizing online activities, and drawing more views to environmental contents.

4.2. Steering the market toward affordability and sustainability

Second, the Chinese government should direct the outdoor market toward a more customer-friendly and environmentally friendly prospect. Many domestic outdoor brands should be encouraged to design products while focusing more on function and quality instead of fashion sense, reducing the over-inflated price of outdoor equipment due to its fashionable and social symbol. In addition, it is also essential for outdoor brands to count the carbon footprint of their products, applying greener

and more biodegradable materials in its product design, especially small and non-clothing products that can be easily discarded in the wild [17].

4.3. Cultivating outdoor and environmental education

Third, the cultivation of a healthy outdoor ambience always necessitates outdoor education among the overall population. Outdoor courses can be added into students' curriculums to improve their outdoor knowledge and to promote the practice of LNT among the young generations, engendering the LNT everyone's basic moral principles [18]. Moreover, the outdoor scouts and leaders should be required to take the LNT training, so that they can serve as promoters and supervisors of the LNT in various outdoor activities.

4.4. Incorporating environmental responsibility into management

Ultimately, it is significant for the government to incorporate environmental responsibility into the outdoor management system. For each hiking trails, especially those popular ones, the number of entries should be strictly restricted, since overcrowding often results in damage of vegetation and soil erosion. And everyone who enters should be required to make a commitment of protecting the environment. In the West, people follows the LNT commitment. Hence, China can also require visitors to sign up a paper and to guarantee to protect the environment, noting that for those who commit harmful actions like discarding rubbish in the wild, fines should be collected.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the currently big issues—gear-centered consumption and large-scale environmental damage-- of the rapid-developing outdoor activities in current China by comparing to the relatively slow and steady development of outdoor sports in the West. And it finds the underlying problems of misleading information on social medias, insufficient regulation in trails or parks, and a lack of environmental education of the public behind the two serious issues above. Therefore, inspired by Western Experience and in order to overcome the problems following the rapid rise of outdoor activities in China, it is essential for us to build authoritative information platform, to steer the market toward affordability and sustainability, to cultivate outdoor and environmental education, and to incorporate environmental responsibility into management. Admittedly, this study was based on second-hand materials and limited case, lacking questionnaires, surveys, and on-site data. Thus, the results of this study are exploratory rather than statistically generalizable. Nevertheless, this study does offer insight into the current issues of Chinese outdoor environment and the potential solutions to them. In the future, the availability of each solution can be tested with experiments and real-world data, and more advancement can be established.

References

- [1] Bainbridge, S. (2020). *Mountaineering and British romanticism: The literary cultures of climbing, 1770-1836*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198857891.001.0001>
- [2] Rose, M. B., Love, T., & Parsons, M. C. (2006). Cotton spinning to climbing gear: Practical aspects of design evolution in Lancashire and the North West of England. Lancaster University. <https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/48872/>
- [3] Lillquist, K. (2013). The post-World War II origin and evolution of mountain snowshoes and mountain snowshoeing in North America. *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, 75, 140-166. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/517002>

- [4] Marion, J. L., & Reid, S. (2001). Development of the United States Leave No Trace programme: A historical perspective. In M. B. Usher (Ed.), *Enjoyment and understanding of the natural heritage* (pp. 81-92). The Stationery Office. <https://pubs.usgs.gov/publication/5211189>
- [5] Neill, J. T., & Gray, T. L. (2012). Technology, risk and outdoor programming. In T. J. Dickson & T. L. Gray (Eds.), *Risk management in the outdoors: A whole-of-organisation approach for education, sport and recreation* (pp. 164-182). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139192682.010>
- [6] The Irish Times. (2009). Warning against reliance on GPS. *The Irish Times*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/warning-against-reliance-on-gps-1.759310>
- [7] Whitacre, J. A. (2018). *Exploring the relationship between technology and decision making by investigating perceptions of safety in outdoor adventure activities* [Doctoral dissertation]. Indiana University.
- [8] New Zealand Mountain Safety Council. (2023). Outdoor agencies join efforts to improve walkers' experience. *New Zealand Mountain Safety Council*. <https://www.mountainsafety.org.nz/read/media-release-outdoor-agencies-join-efforts-to-improve-walkers-experience>
- [9] He, A. R. (2020). Symbolic consumption: A way of identity construction in modern society. *Modern Business*, (10), 9-10. <http://xdsyzzs.ndhx.net/sell/itemid-132251.shtml>
- [10] Ouyang, Z., & Wang, B. W. (2024). An analysis of the deep causes of the "glamping fever" phenomenon from the perspective of consumerism. *Media Forum*, 7(1), 38-41. <http://dianda.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=00002HCJ514O7JP0MHD08JP16PR>
- [11] Sing Tao Globe. (2026). Shenzhen Consumer Council exposes outdoor jacket chaos: thousand-yuan products fail to keep outdoor enthusiasts dry on rainy days. *Sing Tao Globe*. <https://m.stnn.cc/c/2026-03-12/4042081.shtml>
- [12] Wang, Y. T. (2021). The logic of Generation Z subcultural consumption. *China Youth Study*, (11), 88-95. <https://www.rdfybk.com/qw/detail?id=783552>
- [13] China Commerce Industry Research Institute. (2025). 2025-2030 China outdoor products industry development status and prospect investment forecast analysis report. *Askci*. <https://m.askci.com/news/chanye/20251014/094945276040658425648226.shtml>
- [14] Iimedia Research. (2025). 2025 China sports outdoor market consumer behavior survey data. *IiMedia*. <https://www.iimedia.cn/c400/108323.html>
- [15] NetEase. (2022). Paradise Lake in Xinjiang littered with garbage, Duku Highway becomes 'garbage' road. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/HD26FE3Q0514EGPO.html>
- [16] Ni, S. J. (2025). A 25-yuan shoe becomes a "fashion item". *China Science Daily*. <https://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2025/9/550904.shtm>
- [17] Peftrust. (2026). Product Environmental Footprint (PEF): The backbone for eco-design, DPPs, and ESPR. <https://peftrust.com/2026/02/02/product-environmental-footprint-pef-eco-design-dpp-espr/>
- [18] Zhang, D. C. (2018). The promotion of "Leave No Trace" concept in outdoor education in China. *Sports World*, (7), 36-37. <https://doi.org/10.16730/j.cnki.61-1019/g8.2018.07.023>