



## Encouraging Green Open Space

# Parks in Shanghai

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Images as credited

Shanghai is one of China's "National Garden Cities," with 2,590 square kilometres of green space taking up 38.15 percent of the city's area. Spurred on by the World Expo in 2010, the city has made significant efforts to improve both the amount and quality of its green space in the past decade, though much of the city's green space remains hidden in plain sight.

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OPPOSITE Senlin Park (Photo: City Weekend Shanghai).

ABOVE Expo Park (Photo: National Parks Board, Singapore).

### Past and Present

According to all government data, the state of Shanghai's park system has improved dramatically over the last few decades. There was only 0.16 square metres of green space per person in Shanghai 60 years ago, but by 1993, there was 1.15 square metres per person.<sup>1</sup> That number jumped to 5.6 square metres by the end of 2001<sup>2</sup>, when the city first applied for its "Garden City" designation; it hit 9 square metres per person in 2004<sup>3</sup>, when it was finally awarded the title. There is now 13 square metres of public green space per person in Shanghai<sup>4</sup>, covering 38.15 percent of the city (2,590 square kilometres).

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has garnered a great deal of recognition nationally for driving the development of the country's efforts to become greener (both literally and figuratively) and to use newly developed green spaces to fight the impact of pollution. This mandate manifested itself in Shanghai most clearly in its sustainability-themed 2010 World Expo. The city revamped a good deal of the city's infrastructure for the mega-event, adding 200,000 square metres of green space in 2008 alone, and the emphasis on building parks since 2002 (when Shanghai was awarded the Expo) is undeniably tied to the event's ubiquitous tagline, "Better city, better life."

### Park Life

However, one would never know how much of this government-described "green space" Shanghai has just from walking around the city. Shanghai's downtown core is filled with skyscrapers, and most of the parks are hidden away, often in plain sight. As Chris Choa, partner

and managing director of HLW, a New York-based architectural firm in town, told local magazine *That's Shanghai*, "Embedded in a lot of the local Shanghai codes is a very strong emphasis on green space and green area, which is basically a very good thing. But when Westerners think of green space, we think of a park — a real park — often with grass that you can sit and tramp on. In China, it's any area that is specifically designated as green space. There are certain things that qualify. Lawns and bushes count. A row of trees or even one tree with a kind of affected area next to it counts as green space. A turf block that you can park on counts as green space. In some cases, even hard landscape that has no green or whatsoever counts as green space."

So there's still room for improvement, according to Choa: "While I applaud in general the increase in the open space and the green area, numbers are not enough. It's very hard to quantify the quality of an urban space. You can say you have 35 percent green area, but actually, some things that make a city attractive to be in are not necessarily related to green area. For example, Fifth Avenue in New York is a wonderful place, but it has very little green space. In fact, it has no green space. And there are areas in Pudong that have tons and tons of green area but are some of the most inhuman spaces in the world."

Regardless, Shanghai has just about every type of park, from botanical gardens to zoos. The most common are small neighbourhood parks that make up 80 percent of the city's population of green spaces;<sup>5</sup> these are usually free of charge and often full throughout the day.

The early risers, a group composed mainly of the elderly, are there from dawn. Some, almost stereotypically, congregate in groups to do tai chi at sunrise, while others perform their daily callisthenics on the simple exercise machines native to such parks. Joggers are common, but so are those who walk slowly backwards around the park—doing so is said to improve one's blood circulation. It's also common to see park goers rubbing trees, in the belief that they will be able to absorb some of the fauna's life force by osmosis.

As the day wears on, a wider variety of people pass through to enjoy their slice of park life. Basketball players pop into their caged-off domains to compete in pickup games and kite fliers come by to stretch their wings, Chinese yo-yo players drop in to hone their spinning skills. Some parks are hotspots for card players, Chinese chess or Go; others become meeting points for community groups of ballroom dancers. Many just go to enjoy the spaces or the sculptures that dot the bigger venues. Small pagodas and rockeries are also common.

Parks also often provide activities for residents and especially children, who have precious little space to run around in the densely packed metropolis. As mentioned, simple exercise machines are common, while bigger parks often come complete with carp-filled ponds and miniature amusement parks with merry-go-rounds, bumper cars and small roller coasters. However, people are not allowed on the grass in the majority of the parks—local guards make sure the rules are observed—and dogs are allowed in on even fewer locations.

## Prominent Parks

### People's Park

People's Park is located on top of the city's largest Metro station, making it the most central green space in Shanghai. It's the site of the city's oldest horse racing track, founded in 1863 and frequented for years by the city's international elite and the wealthiest Chinese businessmen. It became what it is today in 1951 after horse racing (i.e., gambling) was outlawed by the Communist government and was renovated extensively in 1994. The 120,000-square-metre park is now bordered by the municipal hall and the Shanghai Concert Hall to the north; every parade in town marches through the large avenue that splits it in two. People's Park is also home to the Museum of Contemporary Arts, three upscale restaurants and a weekly "marriage market," where parents and grandparents post personal ads for their unmarried sons, daughters or grandchildren.

### Fuxing Park

Originally named Gujiazhai Park after the local family that owned the land, it was re-named French Park in 1909 and re-designed in the Parisian style that it still holds. It later became Daxing Park when the Japanese took control of the former French Concession, before finally becoming Fuxing Park in 1949. It's one of the most centrally located and popular parks in town, with a small amusement park, ornate fountains, wide boulevards, a rose garden, 120 different species of trees and a statue of Marx and Engel. It also houses three popular nightclubs, plus a karaoke club, making it the city's most trafficked park after dark.

### Century Park

Century Park, located in Pudong, is currently the city's largest park at 140 hectares and was designed by a British design firm. It features a man-made cobblestone beach, tandem bikes for rent, examples of British, Japanese and Chinese gardening styles and a central man-made lake frequented by paddle-boaters and amateur fishermen. The park is a favourite of runners and also holds one of the city's best soccer pitches, though access to it is limited to only parties (often intramural soccer leagues) who can afford to rent it at the standard RMB2,000 per hour rate. Admission to the park costs RMB10, and for the last few years, it has also been home to the JZ Festival, the city's biggest annual music festival that is held through three days across three stages in the fall.

### Xuhui Park

Formerly the site of the Ta Chung Hua rubber factory, this park became what it is today at the turn of the century. The reclamation project has been a great success, and the new, centrally-located park is popular with the locals. The factory's chimney still stands as a monument to the site's past, though new features are added constantly. It is currently home to a pedestrian skybridge, a variety of gardens, a small lake and two restaurants, including Restaurant Martin, a Spanish fine dining spot run by Michelin-starred chef Martin Berasategui. Xuhui Park is also host to one of Shanghai's biggest impromptu community dance shows, put on every night by various groups of ballroom dancers.

### Golf Courses

Golf is one of the fastest growing sports in China, and accordingly, Shanghai is now home to several new golf courses, most of which have been built in the last ten years. "China is one of the only countries in the world where golf course construction is a growth industry," says Shanghai-based

golf journalist Dan Washburn. "Unofficially, there are probably five or six hundred courses in China and there are many, many big projects on the way. Some people say it's growing 50 percent every year, some say 30 percent. It's a really hard thing to quantify."

There are now over 30 full courses and many more driving ranges in town; the Tomson Shanghai Pudong Golf Club was the first of the city's world-class venues and over \$100 million had been invested in the 7,337-yard course. It became home to China's first world-class golf event, the BMW China Open, in 2004, though the city's marquee golf event (and China's only World Golf Championship event) is now the HSBC Champions Tournament, held in a nearby suburb at the 7,140-yard Sheshan International Golf Club.

However, getting the chance to play on any of these courses is no small feat. In fact, it's more expensive to play golf in China than anywhere else in the world: membership fees average RMB240,000, annual fees clock in anywhere between RMB 10,240 to RMB27,300 and green fees are between RMB340 to RMB1,365 per round.



### Expo Parks

80 hectares of green space were developed along six kilometres of river-side property on the Expo grounds, all part of the site's "green space system." The system is made of a green core, a green axis, green belts and green wedges split up into five categories: waterfront green space, green space for activities, ornamental green space, green space along streets and green space on plazas. The three key parks on site are the 13.9-hectare Houtan Park, the 12-hectare Bailianjing Park and the 23-hectare Expo Garden.

According to the Expo website, "The Expo Park will become one indispensable green structure in harmony with the large green space in downtown." Turenscape, the firm responsible for designing much of the Expo's green space, adds that the new green areas are meant to serve as the "future green lung of the downtown of Shanghai."

Judging by critical acclaim, the most successful of the green spaces is Houtan Park. It won the American Society of Landscape Architects General Design Award of Excellence, with the jury calling the space

"powerful and exquisite." It now serves as a haven for wildlife and, with its rock-armoured shorelines, is part of an eco-friendly flood control system. It has helped oxygenate the water and raise the water quality of the Huangpu River on the shores of the park from grade 5 (the worst in the country) to grade 3. It had created 2,400 cubic metres of potable water that was used on the Expo site; to achieve the same results using conventional water treatment techniques would have cost US\$500,000. In an interview with local magazine *City Weekend*, Dr. Yu Kongjian, head of Turenscape, says, "Flocks of Chinese mandarin ducks and families of turtles now reside in the Huangpu River, and, as the activity from the Expo dies down, we expect more biodiversity because the habitat will get better and grow."

The Expo area has been largely abandoned in the months following the end of the event as the pavilions are taken down. This has likely helped the parks' environmental impact on the city, but the areas have been of little practical public use.

BELOW LEFT Xuhui Park (Photo: National Parks Board, Singapore).

BELOW RIGHT Expo Park (Photo: National Parks Board, Singapore).



### The Future

By 2020, the government plans on covering an eye-popping 50% of Shanghai's 6,787-square-kilometre area with "nature reserves, wetlands, forests and farmland."<sup>6</sup> The plan is to ramp up green space through the use of nine "eco-corridors" that will link the city's furthest suburbs to its downtown core, though further details about these corridors are scant at this time. When the project is completed, the city hopes to average 14 to 16 square metres of green space per resident, but this will come at a cost: 260 square kilometres of industrial and residential land will be razed and turned into parks or farmland in the process.


One Expo-inspired initiative that flopped badly was Dongtan, an island suburb that was to be built as the world's first large-scale eco-city. The town, developed as collaboration between the Shanghai Industrial Investment Corporation (SIIC) and British engineering consultancy firm Arup, would have featured extensive green spaces, with rooftop gardens being used extensively to reduce energy consumption by providing insulation and filtering rainwater. The first condominiums and apartments (providing for an initial population base of 10,000) were meant to open in time for the Expo, with plans to house 500,000 residents by 2050. The project, however, has never gotten started and has since been shelved for the foreseeable future.

The green roofs that were to be applied to Dongtan are now being pushed by the government as the next wave of its urban greening projects and were featured prominently as part of the Expo, host of the Green Roof Congress, and at several of the pavilions at the event. According to state-run newspaper Shanghai Daily, "More than 80 percent of the 240 structures used large-scale greenery in rooftop gardens, green-walled exteriors, green interior walls and various kinds of interior gardens." The Shanghai Landscaping and City Appearance Bureau's senior horticulturalist Li Li calls it an effort aimed at "expanding greenery in three dimensions."

Green roofs can help reduce dust in the area by 4 to 28 percent, and a one square metre lawn can remove 0.2 kilograms of suspended particulates annually. In the summer, they can also help lower indoor temperature by three to five degrees Celsius, and thereby cut cooling costs by 20 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The most recent government estimates assert that these initiatives have transformed 900,000 square metres of roof space since they kicked off in 2003,<sup>8</sup> including a somewhat unbelievable 400,000 square metres (64 Fuxing Parks worth of green space and four times its annual 100,000 square metres goal<sup>9</sup>) between August 2008<sup>10</sup> and the end of 2009<sup>11</sup>.

According to a 2008 survey by the Shanghai Landscaping Bureau, it is estimated that 20 million square metres of roof space can be greened.<sup>12</sup> Depending on the type of park that is set up, green space can be added in this fashion for anywhere from RMB80 (an "ordinary lawn") to RMB800 (for a "top-quality mini-park") per square metre.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly, there is more green space in Shanghai now than there ever had been, but exactly how much, and of what quality is each space, remains unclear. Going forward, it remains to be seen how that all plays out. 



TOP AND MIDDLE ROWS Expo Park  
(Photos: National Parks Board, Singapore).  
BOTTOM ROW Senlin Park  
(Photos: City Weekend Shanghai).

- 1 [http://www.shanghaidiaries.com/archives/2003/05/30/green\\_acres/](http://www.shanghaidiaries.com/archives/2003/05/30/green_acres/)
- 2 [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-01/17/content\\_299850.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-01/17/content_299850.htm)
- 3 <http://china.org.cn/english/environment/84765.htm>
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