

Borrowed Scenery: Public Parks in Modern Shanghai (1842-1948)

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The notion of public urban parks is a particularly modern conception in Chinese Cities. The first urban park in Shanghai, Huangpu Park, was built along the Bund in 1868, but access was only granted to foreigners in the various international concessions established after the Opium War. This study examines the foreign, especially western, influence on public parks built during the late Qing Dynasty and Republican era with an emphasis of their political ideologies, membership, formal qualities and relationship to urban development.

The analysis is completed through site visits, archival research at the Shanghai Municipal Archives, and a literature review of the public parks built during this particular era. It chronicles the initial development of public parks as the representation of foreign power and its later manifestation of democratic ideals, all borrowing forms of open space from western references. Although eventually designers sought to “localize” these parks through imitating forms and materials of traditional Chinese gardens, the spatial structure and programmatic intent still reflect a decidedly western influence. These large public parks inform the urban form of Shanghai, creating a highly legible landscape structure that continues to structure urban growth and development in the city today.