

# ‘Do not walk on the grass:’ Are signs of change afoot?

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Shanghai, a city renowned for its stylish concrete landscape, is now at the center of a “grassroots” debate over public lawn areas in the city.

At issue: How urban green space should be used and managed.

In an incident that attracted local media attention in October, a security guard at Jing’an Sculpture Park shooed a group of children and their teacher from a grassy area where they wanted to sit and rest during a park tour.

It puzzled not only the teacher but also other visitors, who questioned why such restrictions existed when lawn areas in other countries are freely accessible for leisure activities.

“People should be allowed to walk on the grass,” a UK expat who identified himself only as William told Shanghai Daily. “It’s a lovely area and safe for children.”

William, who has lived in Shanghai for four years, said he often walks barefoot on the lawns in Zhongshan and Fuxing parks, which he considers a healthy activity.

“Governments and developers have created the concrete jungles we live in,” he said. “They should be giving back and making as many allowances as possible to benefit the public.”

German scientist Sonja Sudimac said a 60-minute walk in green spaces or parks can also help prevent mental stress, like anxiety and depression.

In China, lawns are traditionally used as ornamental landscapes, contrasting with Europe, North America and Australia, where grassy areas are commonly accessible for activities like playing, picnicking and sunbathing.



Tents pop up on the central lawn of Pudong’s Century Park on weekends. — IC

With the rising popularity of camping and picnicking in China, the demand for accessible lawns areas has been growing in Shanghai and other cities in recent years.

Shanghai has more than 400 parks, but only a handful — mainly in suburban areas — permit public to access lawns. The “Do Not Walk on the Grass” signs are commonplace across the city.

Li Mingjie, a 30-year-old Shanghai resident and father of two, fondly recalls childhood memories of playing on the grass in Luxun Park in Hongkou District and laments the restrictions now placed on his children.

“Those lawns were my playground,” he said. “It’s disheartening to see my kids unable to enjoy the same experience.”

Shanghai’s policy on public access to lawns varies from district to district. While central areas like Jing’an and Huangpu mainly feature ornamental lawns, larger parks in the outer districts offer more access to grassy areas.

Fuxing Park in Huangpu District stands out as the only park in Huangpu with grassed areas open to public use. Its football pitch-sized central lawn is covered with a breed of durable grass able to withstand heavy

foot traffic. It stays green year round.

“Many central parks in Shanghai are designed with small, ornamental lawns not intended for foot traffic,” an official from Huangpu District’s park management department explained. “Opening these lawns for public use would require frequent and costly grass maintenance and replacement.”

Parks in Yangpu, Minhang and Pudong offer more accessible green spaces, with unfenced lawns available for public recreation. During certain holidays and weekends, many parks also open tent zones for public camping.

In suburban Jinshan, access to green spaces is even greater, with over 10 park grassed areas open to the public.

“I generally don’t have a problem with parks banning visitors from lawns in high traffic areas to protect the grass,” said Craig Williams, a US expat in Shanghai.

He said if everyone were allowed to walk, play and set up tents on the grass, it would be trampled to death.

“There are always alternative parks and places to visit, especially in the outer districts,” he added.

Historically, lawns were not an integral feature in

traditional Chinese gardens, Liu Yuelai, a landscape expert and professor at Tongji University, told Shanghai Daily.

It wasn’t until more recent times that cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou have incorporated lawns as part of garden features, he noted. However, high population density and heavy foot traffic in Chinese cities make lawn maintenance constant and costly, he added.

Liu has been actively involved in local environmental projects, including the construction of community and pocket parks. He said he strongly supports public access to grassy areas in Shanghai.

However, it takes time, he said, for authorities to switch to durable, trample-resistant grass because it lacks a certain aesthetic value.

“The traditional view favors lawns that that are always impeccably green, while more durable forms of grass often turn yellow in winter — a natural phenomenon that is not universally appreciated by finicky landscapers,” he said.

He noted that the trend in Western countries of letting grassy areas grow more wildly could play a bigger role in urban management of green areas.

Amid the ongoing debate, a recent directive from the Ministry of Housing and Urban-



Visitors enjoy picnic on the central lawn of Gucun Park in Baoshan District. — IC

Rural Development signals a shift toward more inclusive urban park policies.

The directive released last February encourages cities to increase the public access to parkland and green areas.

Shanghai and the provinces of Guangdong and Hubei have launched pilot projects granting greater access to green spaces.

In Pudong’s Century Park, lawn area equivalent to 20 standard football pitches, has been opened for public enjoyment.

Similarly, the city of Guangzhou in Guangdong Province initiated the opening of 24 park lawns for tent camping, and the city of Yichang in Hubei has set aside lawn areas in several parks for camping and leisure activities.

There are downsides to wider public access. Litter becomes more prevalent, and heavily trafficked lawn areas are often pockmarked with brown dead grass.

To address this, Shanghai and Guangzhou have issued management guidelines and sought public feedback to encourage responsible and respectful use of these areas.

Pudong, for instance, has developed a smart phone reservation system for camping sites.

Lawns can always play a role in cities like Shanghai, Professor Liu said. And even if grassy areas have limited or no access, they can provide a sense of openness and freshness amid urban concrete.