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Benjamin Read on homeowners' protests in Shanghai

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A lot has been written about a rise in the number of protests in China – particularly mass demonstrations and those by farmers and villagers who face government land seizures. (Historian Charles Hayford wrote an [interesting essay](#) about the terminology journalists use to describe different classes of people in China.)

But protests from the middle class in China are also garnering increased attention from the American press. The latest protest, a January “stroll” by homeowners in Shanghai who disagreed with an extension of the city’s famous Maglev train, have been described as “the strongest sign yet of rising resentment among China’s fast-growing middle class” (*The New York Times*) and “a quiet middle-class battle against government officials” (*Washington Post*). The *South China Morning Post* [reported](#) today (subscription required) that some residents say they’ve applied to hold a “legal protest” against the Maglev expansion this weekend.



[Benjamin L. Read](#) (right), from the Department of Political Science at the University of Iowa, has been researching grassroots organizing with a particular focus since 1999 on homeowners movements in China. In a Q&A over email with *The China Beat*, Read puts the Shanghai protests in context.

AS: [Your research](#) has been on organizations in East Asia, including what you call “Civil Society Organizations.” Can you tell me a bit more about your research and what kinds of civil society organizations you’ve studied?

BR: By “civil society organization,” I mean groups or associations of people that have substantial autonomy from the state. In other words, those that are not controlled by the government or otherwise dependent on it. Civil society is a term that goes back centuries in Western philosophy, and its definition has evolved over time. There have been extensive debates over whether civil society groups existed in different parts of Chinese history, whether Confucian thought contains ideas related to the notion of civil society, and more generally how relevant it is to China at all.

So it’s a somewhat controversial concept. But it has become a term used around the world by social scientists and activists and others to capture the common-sense idea that citizens getting together in self-organizing groups are able to communicate, deliberate and act politically in distinctive ways. You can do things in groups that you can’t do alone. Whether we use the term civil society or some other term, this kind of activity is taking place in China to some extent and I think it’s worth studying.

Civil society organizations contrast with other kinds of organizations, for instance those that are managed or fostered by the state. My research in China started off looking at Residents Committees (jumin weiyuanhui, or RCs), the official, government-organized groups that go back at least to the 1950s and are found in most urban neighborhoods. This general type of local organization, closely linked to the state, is prevalent not just in China but in most parts of East and Southeast Asia, and I find them intensely interesting in their own way. But in the course of studying the RCs in 1999 and 2000, I came across some of the early homeowner organizations, called yezhu weiyuanhui or yeweihui, and I started writing about them as well.

AS: How strong do you think organizations that are not run by the state are in China? What kinds of things can they accomplish and whom do they serve most often?

BR: The homeowner groups in China's new private housing estates (xiaoqu) are a complicated mosaic. Some of them can be seen as a manifestation of civil society, while others are something else. For instance, a lot of them are not actually controlled by the homeowners themselves but instead are dominated by the property developers and their management companies. Sometimes the homeowners themselves become factionalized and get bogged down in internal conflict, so that there's no functioning organization. In some places the government has blocked the formation of a formal yewehui, although there can be informal activity regardless. In other neighborhoods, the homeowner group functions well, holding regular meetings and elections and representing the residents' interests much as, say, a healthy condo association might in the United States.

AS: The [Washington Post report](#) on the January protests against extending the Maglev train in Shanghai highlights the role of a residential organization. The *Post* did not explicitly call these residents a housing association, but is this kind of civil society organization you are referring to?

BR: It's clear that homeowners in the new, private neighborhoods I talked about above played a central role in these demonstrations. One thing that's not immediately obvious from Chinese or Western sources is to what extent the homeowner organizations (yewehui) themselves or their leaders encouraged members to participate in the protests. Concerns about noise and harmful radiation from the maglev trains seem to have galvanized large numbers of people who might not previously have been involved in the homeowner movement.

Regardless, it is clear that the protests drew on infrastructure that is very much a part of that movement, notably the new neighborhoods' web-based bulletin boards. Some of the posts from the first weeks of January have now been removed from these forums, some are still there. But they carried a flurry of posts and discussion, and this was a key part of how information about the maglev line extension plan came to the attention of homeowners who stood to be affected by it, and how they encouraged each other to turn out for the rally in downtown Shanghai on January 12. Moreover, residents in some neighborhoods hung large protest banners from their windows, which is a tactic you often see in the homeowners' struggles against exploitative property developers and management companies. And according to reports in the livelier parts of the Chinese media like *Southern Metropolis* (*Nanfang Dushibao*) and *Beijing News* (*Xin Jing Bao*), residents of some of the neighborhoods organized representatives to talk to government officials about the plans.

AS: One of *The China Beat*'s founders, Jeff Wasserstrom, [writes](#) that the Shanghai protests were about practical demands.

BR: Wasserstrom's essay makes the point that the Shanghai protests look like a form of NIMBY-ism (Not In My Back Yard). People's motivation seems to be based, at least in the first instance, on property rights rather than more inclusive notions like human rights or civil rights. So they don't look as idealistic as some protests in the past did. But as he suggests, the line between local or self-regarding motivations and broader, society-wide claims can be a fine one. Commentators in China have hailed these euphemistically termed "walks" as a healthy form of public expression, and I think we can agree without reservation.

The reasons that NIMBY protests have a negative connotation are first, that such movements may thwart the creation of necessary public infrastructure, and second, that unwanted institutions may be dumped into communities that are less wealthy or vocal. But in this case, with regard to the first point, protesters question the need to extend the train line at all. The second point is potentially valid, but in my view it is far outweighed by the desirability of subjecting government to forceful public input. If Chinese homeowners help bring about checks and balances on state decisions previously hidden behind closed doors, then more power to them.

AS: What kinds of trends do you see among property owners in China?

BR: To the extent that these Shanghai protests were fueled by homeowners, it constitutes a new departure in that the great majority of the time when homeowners undertake collective action it's one neighborhood at a time and inward-focused, not about public policy. Usually the spur to action will be something like high management fees, control over neighborhood assets or shoddy construction. To

the extent that homeowners contact and lobby the government in these cases, they are trying to win support from the authorities against the developers, not protesting against something the government is doing. The maglev extension plan is unusual in that it's something the government is directly responsible for, affecting a large number of neighborhoods (one report said nearly 40) in the same way all at once.

So I think we should guard against reading too much into this event. Howard W. French, in his [New York Times story](#) makes a rather bold claim that the protests are "the strongest sign yet of rising resentment among China's fast-growing middle class over a lack of say in decision making." Social classes rarely act in unified ways politically, and it's questionable at best whether the middle class in China is generally characterized by resentment.

Still, I agree that we're looking at an important form of political action that deserves our attention. It was undertaken by people who now have resources (money, education, communication tools like cell phones, the internet and video cameras) that were missing or less prevalent in earlier parts of PRC history. When they buy expensive homes in these new housing developments it gives them a strong interest in protecting that investment — British Thatcherites and U.S. "ownership society" advocates would nod their heads at this.

But I think homeowners are also motivated by a sense that when they acquire their piece of what we might call the "Chinese dream," there's an implicit social contract going with it. The system in China now encourages people to devote their energy to getting ahead in the new economy, and once they "make it" by acquiring a nice, modern home, once of the ultimate markers of success, they feel entitled to certain things: fair treatment in matters concerning their home, veto power over unreasonable arrangements, some control over the neighborhood environment, peace and quiet, privacy, and freedom from certain kinds of impositions. This sense of being entitled to things beyond what's specified on the property deed is a big part of what underlies the homeowner movement more generally.