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Many things have happened in the PRC this year that echo phenomena discussed in China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance, including the recent renewal of Shanghai protests relating to train lines. As Associated Press reporter Elaine Kurtenbach notes in her valuable dispatch on the subject, the latest demonstrations have been on a smaller scale than the early 2008 ones discussed in our book. They have also been directed toward a more conventional kind of railway (albeit one that moves very fast) rather than a Magnetic levitation (Maglev) one.

Nevertheless, Kurtenbach’s summary of the situation (in this case regarding a line that would head out of the city in order to link Shanghai to Hangzhou, as opposed to one that would run through the heart of the metropolis to connect its eastern and western districts) describes a familiar source of discontent. Here’s how she puts it: “China’s top-down style of governing and state-controlled media allow for scant public input, and increasing affluence has left many residents expecting more opportunities to be heard.”

The developing situation seems similar enough overall that of the early 2008 anti-Maglev “strolls” (a term used by protesters to suggest a reasonable and non-confrontational call to be heard rather than a militant action) and some other urban struggles of the last couple of years (e.g., the 2007 Xiamen demonstrations trigged by plans to built a chemicle plant) that it seems useful to provide a few links here to commentaries on those events of the recent past. The use of the acronym “NIMBY, standing for "Not in My Backyard,” seems appropriate again (it is a term that some of us commenting on the anti-Maglev protests used at the time), since the 2009 railway protests again involve homeowners and renters trying to protect the livability of neighborhoods and sometimes also the health of their children and their property values.

If you happen to have China in 2008 handy, you can find a good deal of background reading that helps put the latest railway protests into perspective. On pages 15-21, for example, you will find two views of Chinese NIMBY protests–protests that, it is worth noting, have sometimes achieved at least some degree of success, delaying if not always derailing (pardon the cheap pun) the development plans to which the demonstrators involved objected.

The first of these two pieces from the book that I have in mind is a short commentary on the subject that I wrote in January 2008, which first appeared and is still available online at the Nation’s website here, where you will find it accompanied by a Youtube clip of an anti-Maglev demonstration. (Much that I say there dovetails with what others wrote about the subject before or after I weighed in on it, but I think I am still the only one to have placed the Shanghai protests into a historical context that takes in not just the Xiamen ones of the previous year but the actions of rickshaw pullers worried about the introduction of streetcars that threatened their livelihoods early in the 1900s.)

The other relevant contribution to China in 2008 I was thinking of is a reprint of an interview that blogger and freelance journalist Angilee Shah did with political scientist Benjamin L. Read, who has been doing important work on homeowners’ associations in both the PRC and Taiwan. That interview, which first appeared as a very early China Beat post, can be found online here.

Other valuable takes on the phenomenon that are just a click away include:
1) This smart piece on the anti-Maglev protests of early 2008 (again with a YouTube video accompaniment and nods back to Xiamen) by Maureen Fan.

2) This extended analysis of "strolls" and other forms of non-confrontational protests (and their possible impact over the long run) by two social scientists, George J. Gilboy and the aforementioned Read, which appeared in the Summer 2008 issue of The Washington Quarterly.

3) This look at Chengdu protests of May 2008, with nods back to Xiamen and Shanghai, by Jeremy Goldkorn of the invaluable Danwei.org site, who quotes liberally from a New York Times report but also makes some additional points of his own and lets the interested reader know the characters used
for a couple of the terms mentioned (in case they were wondering what "stroll" looks like in Chinese, for example, though alas we do not get his gloss of NIMBY in Mandarin). There are also some interesting comments from readers appended to the piece.

4) This useful report by Jonathan Watts of the *Guardian* on Beijing NIMBY protests (by people who wore surgical masks to highlight their concern over pollution) in the aftermath of the Olympics.

5) This wide-ranging and thoughtful essay surveying the rise, during the years immediately preceding the Xiamen protests, of various forms of environmental activism, much of which relied on the use of new media of communication of the sort that have figured in all of the actions just mentioned. Assessing the potential of a new "green public sphere," this article was co-written by Guobin Yang (who also deals with many related issues in his important new book on the Chinese Internet) and Craig Calhoun (President of the Social Science Research Council and author of one of the best book-length studies of the Tiananmen Uprising of 1989).