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Jared Hall

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# Beijing Subway's "Great Leap Forward" Provokes Resistance

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By Jared Hall

An elderly couple camped outside as most of the city took shelter from the winter chill. They were doused in gasoline, flanked by a box of matches and a coffin. A small crowd looked on solemnly as the pair read posters recounting their story. These were Wang Shibo's grandparents, whose store on the southern end of the popular Nanluoguxiang (南锣鼓巷) shopping street had been slated for demolition to make way for a new station along Beijing Subway's newly-extended Line Eight.

Wang Shibo and her family insisted they were driven to this bold, possibly risky, act of public protest because their entire family teetered on the brink of financial ruin. According to Wang, the family invested practically everything they had to renovate the small clothing shop. But when the subway corporation abruptly presented a notice of eviction, they were reportedly offered just two percent of their investment back in compensation. The very public confrontation with the subway corporation that followed attracted the interest of the [international press](#) and a [delegation from the National People's Congress](#). The shop was torn down two weeks later, but not before an agreement was quietly reached with the family.

Although the Wang case would surely rank high among the most dramatic acts of resistance to Beijing's ongoing subway expansion, the family is not alone. In recent years, city residents have pushed back against forced relocations, safety lapses, and other planning deficiencies.

To understand why something as innocuous as mass transit might provoke public outcry, one first has to appreciate just how rapidly the system has grown in recent years. "Urban rail-based transit is developing extremely quickly," [Beijing's vice mayor Huang Wei boasted recently to Nandu Weekly](#), "we have accomplished in ten years what took developed countries over a hundred years to achieve." Indeed, since 2001, Beijing's two-line 54 kilometer (33 mile) subway system has experienced staggering growth. Today, 14 lines are in operation, stretching 336 kilometers (209 miles). By the end of 2015, the city plans to open five more lines and extend another 40 percent in length, making Beijing's, at least by some measures, the world's largest subway system.

Not all have been as impressed with what the *Nandu Weekly* slyly satirized as China's subterranean "Great Leap Forward." Safety concerns have escalated alongside the pace of construction. Since 2003, Beijing Subway has admitted three separate incidents of stations collapsing during construction, each resulting in worker fatalities. Public uneasiness has been further heightened by tragedies elsewhere, including the [massive sinkhole that appeared above a subway line in Hangzhou](#) that claimed dozens of lives in 2008. Concerns have also been raised over incidents of poor planning that have compounded minor problems and created major disruptions for Beijing residents. In one case earlier this year, occupants of a building adjacent to the Daxing extension of Line Four [protested when trains passing on the elevated line rattled their homes](#). A subsequent investigation revealed the tracks had been laid too close to existing buildings, and that basic sound and vibration management technology had been scrapped to cut costs.

The Daxing extension case is illustrative of two common features of the subway corporation's interaction with Beijing residents. First, the above-ground project was implemented without any community participation in the planning process. When inquiries from those affected were directed to the company, they were simply ignored. Of course, this high-handed approach to planning extends well beyond mass transit authorities. It is endemic among transportation-related initiatives ranging from road-widening to car registration, and reflects an attitude that permeates a much wider swath of the public and quasi-public sectors in China. At the same

time, it is still striking to see how blatantly the corporation disregards voices from the precise population it pledges to serve.

Second, although residents only discovered engineering deficiencies after the line had begun operation, they swiftly developed a coordinated strategy to redress their grievances. Their tactics included a combination of petitions and visits to government offices, public demonstrations, as well as lawsuits directed against the subway corporation. This particular repertoire of actions aligns exactly with those described by [You-tien Hsing in her discussion of urban households resisting demolition](#) more broadly. Even while operating within the political constraints of the capital, residents' ability to first draw press coverage and then to extract a commitment from the subway corporation to rectify the problem should warn against dismissing localized resistance to expansion as futile.

Nevertheless, some have persisted in dismissing resistance to subway expansion as narrow-minded. This is partly because conflicts appear to emerge in the form of individuals or small groups defending what might be characterized as "private interests" staking claims against the subway corporation, an entity charged with promoting the "public interest." This contrast is sharply apparent in press accounts and online chatter deriding holdouts against demolition as "nail households" (钉子户) or "tigers blocking the road to progress" (拦路虎).

The subway corporation itself defends cost-cutting measures and meager compensation rates by citing the immense cost associated with such an infrastructure. Without a doubt, the cost of laying new underground track is staggering. Initial construction alone costs an estimated 500 million yuan per kilometer (or 48 million U.S. dollars per mile). By this measure it takes just 20 kilometers of newly laid track to exceed the city's entire 2010 transportation budget of 8.92 billion yuan. None of this even takes into consideration operating costs or constraints on revenue, most notably the local government's 2 yuan (0.31 dollar) cap on ticket prices.

To fund its ambitious expansion program, Beijing Subway has had to look beyond ticket sales. State-owned banks have been part of the solution. Generous loan terms have provided the capital necessary to construct much of the new infrastructure. Even so, mounting debts have only worked to underscore the need for fresh sources of revenue. This has pushed the subway corporation into related sectors like vehicle manufacturing and advertising. If such moves appear harmless enough, others have exposed real contradictions with its public interest mandate.

None have been more controversial than real estate development. The subway corporation, making use of its mandated public authority, has seized scarce urban plots and large tracts of suburban land. Those with previous land-use rights are compensated--often at below-market rates--and the land is sold later to developers at a considerable profit. The scale of this practice is difficult to measure, but its results are evidenced by sleek luxury condos and high-end shopping plazas erected on land formerly cleared for subway construction.

Beijing Subway is hardly alone in this game of property speculation. Last December, [Shanghai Metro was called out](#) for seizing over 35,000 square meters (8.6 acres) of land to construct a 603 square meter (0.1 acre) station in Jing'an District. Not long after, an office complex was erected on the site zoned as "municipal utility." Wang Chengli, a professor researching urban transportation at Central South University in Changsha, [chided metro operators across the country](#) for "being led by the nose by developers." He pointed to local officials as complicit in the practice, with some even going so far as to "operate ministries for profit."

Despite being intentionally kept in the dark, those with pre-existing land-use rights have hardly been blind to the yawning gap between the compensation offered and prices quoted for newly built housing units. After all, it is this very price disparity that prevents retirees or other low-income residents of the Old City (the central area bounded by the Second Ring Road) from finding new housing remotely close to their original neighborhoods in the city center. Facing the break-up of communities and two-hour commutes to jobs or senior health check ups, resistance against evictions has been understandably robust.

As with the cases of Wang Shibo and the Daxing extension line, *hutong* residents often work collectively to lobby government ministries, organize demonstrations, and file legal challenges. Nevertheless, few succeed in attracting nearly the same degree of media attention. Even fewer—if any—force a realignment of the subway’s late-stage plans.

While Beijing Subway provides an essential public good as it constructs a sorely-needed mass transit infrastructure, it might avoid similar confrontations in the future by listening more closely to the concerns of local residents and taking steps to balance the advantages of development with the disadvantages posed by the disruption and displacement of existing residents.

*Jared Hall lives in Beijing, where he teaches Chinese and World History at the International Division of Peking University’s Affiliated High School. He can be found online on [twitter](#) and on his blog, [Beijing Time Machine](#).*