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A case of 'people power' in China?

By Chris Hogg
BBC News, Shanghai

It has been hailed elsewhere as a victory for "people power" in China.

But have the demonstrators who appear to have halted plans for an extension of a hi-tech magnetic levitation train line through the suburbs of Shanghai really triumphed?

Or does their story just highlight the limits on the power that ordinary citizens can enjoy in an authoritarian country like China?



These houses would have to make way for the maglev line

It was mainly middle class demonstrators who opposed plans to extend the magnetic levitation line, or maglev for short.

Homeowners in particular - a group which has not traditionally been at the forefront of large-scale protests in this country - objected to the extension, which was designed to link Shanghai's two airports and go on to the neighbouring city of Hangzhou.

After decades of economic development here, these were the winners, not the losers.

They are the people who benefited from China's economic growth, and invested huge amounts relative to their income to purchase their homes, only to see those investments threatened by the proposed new maglev line.

They said that the value of their houses had already been badly damaged by the proposal to site the line so close to their front doors.

And they feared the magnetic fields used to propel the maglev train down the tracks would damage their health.



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Protest 'strolls'

In January 2008, the demonstrators held what they called "strolls" - not protest marches - to try to get the project halted. Turnout was huge.

Following the demonstrations, progress on the project slowed and now the respected business magazine Caijing says the plans have been "suspended".

By now the engineering work should have been completed; it has not even started.

“ We thought we had won,
now we're not so sure ”
Resident of Minghang district

The first trains were scheduled to run on the new stretch of track before the end of this year. In a sense, the residents have won a partial victory as clearly that timetable will not be met.

Little change

It is a sign perhaps of how much has changed in this country that protest movements like this can block the grand schemes of officials.

However, those who led the demonstrations and courted publicity 14 months ago are now reluctant to speak openly about their campaign. We don't want to cause any trouble, they say.

That suggests that in other ways, little has changed.

People are still nervous about challenging the authority of the state. A victory of any sort does not make them feel stronger.

In any case, a visit to the Minghang district, where many of the demonstrators come from, suggests the victory may have been called prematurely.

On the Ping Yang Lu Jia Yuan estate, a peaceful, tidy, unremarkable sort of place, there is no sense of triumph when you talk to people about the maglev issue.

One woman, a ringleader of last year's protest, is at first very reluctant to talk. She does not want us to reveal her name, or have her photograph taken.

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She and the other residents do not really know if they have won, she says.

"We thought we had, because we thought a developer was building new homes right next to the proposed route near our estate.

"We figured no developer would do that if they thought the line was to go ahead.

"Now though, we have discovered it's not going to be homes, but shops or a factory, whose value might not be damaged by the maglev passing so close. So now we're not so sure," she says.

Another woman, Yao Hong Jun, is walking through the grounds with her two-year-old son, Sun Yu Yao.

She is more willing to talk about the maglev, but again is unwilling to be photographed. She does not think they have won either.

"If the government starts to build it, then people might protest again," she insists.

"But of course, it's useless. If the government decides to do something, then we can't win."

'No influence'

The feeling of empowerment they displayed here in January 2008 seems to have been replaced by a sense of the limits of their power.



The Maglev shuttles passengers at more than 500km/h (310mph)

An old man, sitting on a bench at the back of one of the apartment blocks, playing with his pug dog, scoffs when he is asked what he has heard about the fate of the maglev project.

"There's no point asking us," he says.
"Ordinary people have no influence. If you want to know what's happening, ask the mayor."



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In China, the process of approval for such a major infrastructure project is opaque, and our efforts to try to establish from the mayor's office and from other officials whether or not the plan for the maglev extension had been halted proved fruitless.

Under discussion

A journalist from the business magazine *Caijing* was recently told by a senior official that since ground had been broken in the last few weeks on a high-speed, conventional rail link connecting Shanghai and Hangzhou, the maglev link between the two cities was now "meaningless".

Shanghai's mayor, Han Zheng, had earlier insisted that the maglev project was still "under discussion".

When we asked his office if that was no longer the case, they denied that anything had changed.

The maglev is still "in the discussion phase", they said.

Officials in Hangzhou, the city the maglev extension is supposed to connect to Shanghai, were less sure though.

"I go to most of the mayor's meetings," a bureaucrat in the public information office at the provincial government headquarters said, "and no one has talked about the maglev for months."

Chen Weihua, the chief commentator at the Shanghai office of the state-owned newspaper *China Daily*, says no-one really knows what is happening.

"The Shanghai government has basically been saying we'll have public hearings, we'll hear from experts about whether it will damage public health, or whether we should revise the plans.



“ I think they should be more transparent. There should be regular briefings for the public about what's going on ”

Chen Weihua, chief commentator,
China Daily

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"For almost two years they have been saying that repeatedly, but I don't think they have come out to say how this is progressing."

Dormant project

"I think they should be more transparent. There should be regular briefings for the public about what's going on," he says.

It appears still too early to be sure who has prevailed here - the demonstrators or the officials.

In a country where maintaining social stability is seen as one of the most important tasks officials have, what has happened to the maglev project is a good example of the compromises that have to be entered into to try to avoid unrest.

The project lies dormant, but not abandoned. It can be revived at any time, if the conditions become more favourable.

In the meantime, the threat of its reinstatement hangs over those who opposed it, cowing them in a way, perhaps even ensuring they do not cause any more trouble.

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