

## Comparison of the NIMBY Issues in US and China

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**Keywords:** NIMBY, High-speed rail, Comparison, Case study

**Abstract:** NIMBY has become a more and more non-negligible issue in China in recent years, while in the US, it has evolved for more than 30 years since its appearance. This passage tries to compare the differences between NIMBY in China and the US by analyzing two cases, the maglev project in Shanghai, China, and the high-speed rail project in California, US. Several differences are found: first, these two countries share different understandings of the concept of “NIMBY” and the rationality and motives behind it. Second, the NIMBY struggles in the US and China adopt different forms. Americans have more methods of NIMBY struggles like lawsuits, while the Chinese do not. Third, the governments and societies of the two countries have very different perceptions of the NIMBY struggle. Americans find it normal and inevitable, while many Chinese find it harmful and unacceptable. And last, the officials of China and the US have different sources of pressure, due to different power structures. It is found that, for a late NIMBY country like China, there are several ways to broaden and deepen NIMBY governance.

### 1. Introduction

NIMBY, an acronym for the phrase “Not in My Backyard”, stands for a characterization of the opposition of residents toward proposed constructions in their local areas. These construction developments are usually essential for the everyday lives of the residents in a larger scope, but invariably cause negative effects on the residents living in the immediate vicinity, thus becoming the locally unwanted projects. NIMBY first originated in the US in the 1970s when the citizens’ awareness of environmental consciousness was aroused as the result of the banning of indiscriminate dumping of industrial waste by the US government. Growing needs of large corporations in the storage and treatment of those hazardous waste clash with local residents’ unwillingness and resistance. Since 1980, and the scope of facilities it opposes has shifted from traditional facilities, like incinerators, landfills, to airports, shelters, prisons, and even public housing. Though many residents believe these facilities are indispensable, they still object to these facilities being built in their backyards.

O’Hare first came up with the concept of NIMBY in 1977 [1]. Then this concept quickly became the “popular political philosophy of the 1980s” in the United States [2]. Over the years, American scholars have come up with various theories to explain the nature of NIMBY. Some believe that NIMBY is caused by the negative external influence of certain facilities [3]. Ordinary residents usually have a higher perception of risk than experts, especially when the available information is ambivalent. Those cognition errors trigger their overreaction towards these constructions [4]. Other scholars believe that NIMBY conflicts are the emotional reactions of unreasonable selfishness and provincialism of nearby residents, who affirm the necessity of these facilities to the whole region but reject the detriments to their small scope [5]. Other research shows that NIMBY is the multifactorial function of different variables, such as distrust of project investors, limited information, localism perspectives, risks and costs, emotional assessment of options, general and specific hazards, etc [6].

Throughout history, the NIMBY phenomenon approximately synchronizes with the process of urbanization and industrialization. Population concentration due to urbanization and

industrialization makes the development of public infrastructure inevitable. With a huge amount of population pouring into Chinese cities, a large number of municipal facilities must be built to deal with the increasing needs, and clearly, the frequency of NIMBY conflicts has increased dramatically since 2000 in China. Thus, it can be expected that the NIMBY conflicts of municipal facilities will continue to plague urban developments and construction of China in the foreseeable future. Many of the NIMBY concepts developed in the US are gradually adopted by Chinese scholars, but some features of Chinese society render them broader connotations, and differences between Chinese practices and overseas theories are often observed [7]. Analyses and comparisons between China and the US in terms of NIMBY will allow more advanced measurements and experience borrowed into China.

In the following parts, two cases, NIMBY caused by maglev train in Shanghai, and high-speed railway in California, will be analyzed and compared. These two cases are chosen specifically so that they share many similarities as the following. The main constructions were both high-speed rails, they both happened in the most developed regions in the US and China, and they both occurred several years after entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, both of these two epitomize the status quo of rail construction in China and the US. But efforts are made to explore the differences between the two cases' practices and the reasons behind them, and see if they can learn from each other.

## 2. NIMBY Conflicts Caused by Magnetically Levitated Train in Shanghai

Shanghai-Hangzhou Maglev Project aimed to connect Shanghai and Hangzhou. Started from 2006 and suspended in 2008, though the local government has made lots of efforts to promote this project, strong objections among residents finally stopped this plan. It embodies a lot of revealing features of Chinese NIMBY conflicts and is thus worth discussing. NIMBY conflicts were manifested as a prolonged confrontation between residents and government in this process [8], which are listed chronologically in the following table.

Table 1. NIMBY conflicts during the Shanghai maglev project

Date	Government/ Maglev Corporation	Residents along the planned route
March 2006	State Council of China approved the project.	Large controversies arose.
July 2006	Government website published the environmental impact report, claiming the impact is within standards, and the project is feasible.	
January 2007	Maglev corporation submitted the environmental impact report to State Environmental Protection Administration.	Vehement objections, continuous protests, and petitions were triggered.
February 2007	Maglev corporation released the demolition announcement.	
March 2007	Maglev corporation tried to incorporate the project into the massive supporting projects for the World Expo.	The residents still disapprove of the project, and situation became more sensitive.
May 2007	The government held another negotiating symposium.	
December 2007-January 2008	Shanghai Planning Bureau released an optimized draft of the maglev and a renewed environmental impact report.	Nearby residents disapproved strongly and continually rallied against the maglev.
January 2008	A negotiating conference was held between concerning departments, experts, and resident representatives.	No consensus was reached. Thousands of locals rallied at People's Square and proceeded to Nanjing Road.
January 13, 2008	Government sent publicity vans to persuade the residents to stay at home.	Some residents still rallied on Nanjing Road in the afternoon.
January 15, 2008	Shanghai Municipal Party Committee published an editorial criticizing the situation as "street politics", and undermining social harmony.	The conflict was pacified temporarily.

March 2008	The mayor said the project was not within the list of decided project.	
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By going through the whole process of the maglev conflict in Shanghai, several features of the Chinese NIMBY conflict are found. First, every step of the movement is triggered by the government, and the settlement is also government-oriented, since the Shanghai Maglev Transportation Development Corporation is dominated by Shanghai municipal people's government. Second, the attitude of residents always exhibits a continual and determinant objection, though the reasons for their objection are not diversified. Finally, the handling of this project failed and led to the forever suspension of the project.

### 3. NIMBY Conflicts Caused by High-speed Railway in California

In 2008, the voters in California approved the issuance of 9 billion USD in bonds for high-speed rail in Proposition 1A, as a symbol of initiating the whole project [9]. The whole project aimed to connect downtown San Francisco, San Jose, Anaheim, and downtown Los Angeles through the Central Valley in the first phase, and develop further branches to connect San Diego via the Inland Empire, as well as Sacramento, which makes it the first and biggest high-speed rail project in the US. From 2010 to 2011, the federal government granted the high-speed rail authority 4 billion USD [10]. But numerous objections, protests, and lawsuits against the high-speed rail in different regions along the route severely dragged the progress of the project. After the ground-breaking ceremony in Fresno in 2015, though the farmers lost their cases by the state court's ruling, protracted land acquisition delayed the project for years and raised the cost astronomically. After years of struggles and debates, in February 2019, the new governor Gavin Newsom made the final decision to cut the entire project to only finishing the region from Merced to Bakersfield [11]. Concluded from dozens of articles from the Los Angeles Times, the project was challenged by groups of different backgrounds and diversified motives, resulting in the protracted conflicts, which are lists in the table below.

Table 2. Various resistance during the California high-speed rail project

Region	Groups	Viewpoint	Reasons
Southern Bay Area	Affluent communities	Require to use existing rails rather than build new elevated tracks, cause the speed limited to below 110 mph.	Dislike noises and unwilling to relocate.
Central Valley	Environmentalists and biologists	Warn against the project for environmental impact.	Impact on endangered species, contamination on rivers; increase of air pollutants
	Urban planning and local residents	Better connectivity to nearby metropolises will cause urban sprawl and encroach farmers' lands.	Small cities become potential bedrooms of metropolises; urban sprawl depends on local policies rather than high-speed rail.
	Famers and city and county officials	Lodge lawsuits against the authority claiming the project fails to fulfil the commitments set in 2008, require to defund the bullet train	Absence of farmer representative in the board, condescension, and ignorance of state officials, unbearable low compensation, unwilling to remove
Southern California	Working communities	Resist the route pass through them, rally against the rail authority.	Environmental injustice, noises, demolition, unwilling to remove, segregation of the community
	Protesters from San Fernando Valley	Protest against the rail authority, chant "Hell, no! The high-speed rail has to go."	Noises, demolition, unwilling to remove,
	Other residents	strongly oppose the underground	Ruin their equestrian communities

		route, running through the San Gabriel Mountains,	and destroy the underground water on which both their wells and Los Angeles rely on.
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From the events above, it is apparent that the motives for NIMBY are more diversified in the US. Because of the decentralization of interests in American society, different groups from different regions and different backgrounds own very diverse perspectives and standpoints, thus resulting in larger difficulties of negotiation and governance. The complete legal and democratic system, and the equal position between civilians and government, make the settlement of lawsuits a ‘life-long’ process.

#### 4. Analysis and comparison

After analyzing the two cases, three differences are found in terms of the NIMBY phenomena and its handling, as listed in the following.

First, these two countries share different understandings of the concept of “NIMBY”, especially in academia: in the context of the US, this word becomes a derogatory term, while in the Chinese context, this word functions as a commendatory term under many circumstances. In June 2015, a former senator called Lou Correa, expressed that many opinions of the protesters were good, but a sense of NIMBYism was also detected [12]. In April 2016, series of union leaders suggested the board ignore those only protecting their own backyards, and called upon to transcend those short-sighted and parochial interests [13]. Through the birth and earlier research of NIMBY, American scholars defined its motive as pure selfishness and self-interest because individuals recognize the need of the construction, but want the construction happening somewhere else rather than in their neighborhoods. This is explained by the functioning mode of American society, in which a project is determined by the masses through a rather democratic process instead of a few officials, and thus the necessity of the project is fully validated by the will of the majority. But construction in China is primarily promoted by the government, and the participation and informing of the public remain a limited scale. As the concept of NIMBY gradually imported to China, scholars endowed it with the emerging civic awareness of defending their legal rights, because some constructions in China would potentially damage their lives without their approval. Many scholars in China regard NIMBY as a method to balance the power of citizens and government, and an impulsion to move society forward, thus seeking the rationality within the NIMBY phenomenon.

Second, the NIMBY struggles in the US and China adopt different forms. In the US, besides protests and demonstrations, lawsuits are the main form of NIMBY struggle, while in China, the NIMBY conflicts are often restrained in administration rather than legal process. The undoing of the doomed high-speed rail in California is largely due to the procrastination caused by lawsuits launched by farmers in Central Valley. The private ownership of land in the US makes the government extremely difficult at land acquisition. Though the state government is capable of claiming possession of private properties under the orders of state jurisdiction, those farmers’ combativeness and determination of defending their own properties, cultivated by the essence of freedom and individualism in American culture, propels them to resist the project by all means possible. According to the founding principles of America, separation of powers allows state courts to dominate the process acting as an arbitrator between civilians and the state government. As for the California case, agents and groups representing the interests of residents in Central Valley prosecuted the high-speed rail authority of state government of violating the Proposition 1A, for failing to fulfill the promises, and required defunding of the railway from the bond approved by Proposition 1A, as a method to stop land acquisitions. However, the NIMBY case of Shanghai takes the form of direct interactions and exchanges between local government and civilians, because the Chinese power system is a more top-down hierarchy with authorities centralized around a core of every level, making the jurisdiction dependent on administrative power. The residents use different methods like rallies and protests to exert pressure on governments, and the changes are reflected directly by changing the policies, rather than decisions made by the courts. Thus, conflicts with governments are often confined in administrative negotiation rather than lawsuits, and the processes

become more government-oriented due to the pyramidal power structure. As for the Shanghai maglev case, though the maglev project is planned by the Shanghai Maglev Transportation Development Corporation, actually the corporation is under the full command of the municipal government. Therefore, the conflict was finally settled only when the mayor stopped the project.

Third, the governments and societies of the two countries have very different perceptions of the struggle caused by the NIMBY phenomenon. Dated back to the 1970s, NIMBY in the US evolved complete and mature processes through history, like protests, demonstrations, and lawsuits. Because of the local autonomy and election of America, local officials are only responsible for their electorate, and therefore they tend to defend the locals' interests. It is seen clearly in the California case, in which the local mayors and county headmen launched the lawsuits against the state government on behalf of their voters. Most of the time, NIMBY conflicts are regarded as normal and inevitable during any kind of construction, and forces on all sides are accustomed to the game and trade-off in this race. Whereas in China, officials are all appointed by their superiors, and they need to be responsible for their superiors. The unrest caused by NIMBY is deemed as harmful and obstructive by the government, and maintaining social harmony is an important criterion judging the competence and career of an official, which explains why publicity vans drove into communities to persuade the residents to stay at home. Thus, when construction caused dissatisfaction, they initially try to stifle, and when the dissatisfaction becomes unrest, the project will be suspended quickly as long as the unrest is calmed, as shown in the outcome of the maglev case. However, in the California case, it is witnessed that how protracted the conflicts between governments and residents are.

## 5. Conclusion

Concluded from the two cases, many differences exist between the US and China, in terms of the perception of the concepts, struggle, and response of NIMBY, which is due to various reasons, like the different power structures, traditions, cultures, and mindsets. Generally speaking, NIMBY is an outright and mature phenomenon in the US after more than 30 years' evolution, while in China, NIMBY incidents first appeared after 2000 in the meantime of the environmental justice awareness of urban middle class. Struggles, such as protests and lawsuits are regarded as ordinary routines of NIMBY in the US, while the Chinese deem them as inefficient, and a threat to social harmony partially because China is still at the initial stage of NIMBY, while it is burgeoning quickly through the country. According to the analysis of the two cases, for late NIMBY countries like China, several measurements can be taken to broaden the governance methods and governance elements, such as the legal solutions to NIMBY conflicts, higher regulations of environmental protection, and transparent and public decision-making.

This discussion only focuses on some small parts of the railway construction of the US and China, and more comparative studies can be conducted in the future to probe into the many aspects of high-speed railway construction in China and the US. This may help to answer many questions, such as the reasons behind the high efficiency of high-speed rail construction in China, and the real hindrance for high-speed train construction in the US.

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