Preface

This book is the outcome of nearly 20 years spent in China and Japan with lengthy periods of research in the major port cities of Asia: Tōkyō, Yokohama, Kōbe, Niigata, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kaohsiung, Shanghai and Tientsin. These years spent in situ have convinced me of the need to define East Asia in functional rather than geographical or political terms. That is to say, as areas of production for non-contiguous markets which are bound together by a shared respect for legality, as was the case in the medieval Mediterranean world.

It may seem paradoxical to compare the great continental empire of 21st-century China to the maritime European city-states in the late Middle Ages. And yet, from the 11th to the 15th century, China was a major maritime power, and the radical changes taking place today within its heavily centralised economy are leading to a gradual shift away from its continental perspective towards a rediscovered maritime vocation.

This book is constructed like a boat. Its keel, the main supporting idea running through it, is that the affiliations between coastal cities developed at the margins of the state, and even in opposition to it, with no need for tutelary guidance. Its ribs, giving shape to the hull, are pertinent case studies of maritime and continental economies past and present.

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Transcription from Chinese in this volume will be in pinyin, except for
the few places whose names are established in the historical records, such
as Peking, Tientsin, Canton and Nanking. The Chinese and Japanese
usage which places a person’s surname first will be followed.

Peking, 15 January 2011