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.

I am indebted to many pioneering thinkers who are no longer among us: Fernand Braudel, Louis Dermigny, Denys Lombard and Olivier Dollfuss. In the course of my years spent in Asia, my indebtedness to many others has increased. I would particularly like to thank an old friend, Hamashita Takeshi, whose contribution to our discussions has been decisive in shaping the present volume. I am equally grateful to Haneda Masashi, Maurice Aymard, Watanabe Toshio, Li Jingwen, Yuan Zhigang, Li Zhaoxi, Jun Il-soo, Meng Jianjun and my colleagues at the Centre Chine Corée Japon at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, particularly Patrick Beillevalle, Alain Delissen and Christian Lamouroux. I am also very grateful to the many Chinese, Japanese and European industrial and financial analysts, businesspeople and government officials who kindly agreed to share their knowledge and experience with me. Pierre-Yves Bély, Sally Bély, Peter Daniels, Alice Ekman, Guo Ruoyun, Peter Lighte, Meg Maggio, Hervé Pauze, Patrick Pouyanne, Lisa Robins, Mark
Selden, Chris Snuggs and Mia Turner have given me many valuable and inspiring suggestions in preparing the final draft of this book, for which I would like to express my deepest gratitude. Sheng Xin, Deng Jianping and Wu Liping, my research assistants from Tsinghua University, the People’s University and the Academy of Social Sciences, have offered tireless help in researching material. Finally, I am much indebted to Dianna Martin and Jonathan Hall for their translation, and to Hanna Ai and Sébastien Goulard for compiling the indexes.

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