Preface and acknowledgements

My interest in writing this book can be traced back to my reading some three years ago in the Universities Service Centre for China Studies, a library on contemporary China belonging to the Main Library of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I was intrigued by three things at that time. The first was the fast development of China’s train industry, especially its high-speed railway, in the past decade or so. Early in my childhood, I was curious about trains, as toys and as the real thing, the real thing being the old diesel trains running from a terminus station near Star Ferry in the Kowloon Peninsula, Hong Kong, to Fanling in the New Territories. I had also been a little proud quietly of myself since my primary school days when I read in history books that the ‘Father of China’s Railway’, a US-trained engineer called Zhan Tianyou (1861–1919), was born in Nanhai prefecture near Guangzhou, my ancestral home!

The second thing that intrigued me was and still is the New Silk Road initiated by the Chinese government to rekindle the former glory of the trading activities along the ancient Silk Road. This ancient Silk Road connecting Xi’an and other Chinese cities to Venice via Central Asia was a major conduit of ‘globalisation’ between the East and West, not only in terms of trade but also in the exchange of ideas among many captivating old civilisations, well before the coming of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. I have wanted to do something about the international relations of the old Silk Road for a long time, only to be able to realise this submerged yearning now, but in quite a different way.

The third thing was China’s idea of establishing an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Like many observers of China some three years ago, I was amazed at how little was known about this bank. I began to keep an eye on the development of the bank, out of curiosity and my ongoing interest in China’s compliance in global financial affairs.

These three things – China’s high-speed rail, the New Silk Road and the AIIB – turn out to be intricately linked. The New Silk Road, or the ‘one belt, one road’ (OBOR) initiative has now become China’s signature foreign policy. It aims to make infrastructure connections and to promote global trade. China’s high-speed rail diplomacy has become a major part
of this initiative. And the AIIB has become one of the new multilateral
development institutions led by China to help finance many mega
infrastructure projects in Asia and beyond. In this book, I will focus on
these three things, examine their linkages, assess their implications and
try to theorise China’s developmental path as a result of the implement-
tation of OBOR.

The sub-title of this book – Silk Roads and Bullet Trains – evokes in the
mind something soft and something hard, something old and yet some-
thing new. Soft in terms of the smooth feel of silk, hard in terms of metal
trains and concrete constructions. The Silk Road has a long and glorious
past with a nostalgic feel to it, while bullet trains are relatively new
manufactures possessing an exciting feel of speed and modern comfort.
The old Silk Road (in fact consisting of many different routes and roads)
was first built more than 3,000 years ago; it became a thoroughfare more
than 2,000 years ago, and reached its climax of activities about 1,400 years
ago.1 China was an old participant to the exchange of goods and ideas
between East and West along the ancient Silk Road. Bullet trains were first
built in Japan in 1964 to coincide with the celebrations of the Tokyo
Olympics. China is a latecomer to high-speed rail. It started to operate
high-speed trains only after the Beijing Olympics in 2006. Now high-
speed trains have huge potential to provide a convenient infrastructure
connection to enhance the flow of trade, people and ideas along the routes
traversing Eurasia to bring Europe and Asia closer together, opening up
new possibilities in politico-economic developments and new under-
standings of international relations.

In the course of writing this book, I have incurred a lot of debts to
many friends and institutions. Nearly all my research since my doctoral
days has benefited in one way or another from my association with the
Universities Service Centre (USC) for China Studies, previously located
on Argyle Street near Kowloon City in the 1980s and now physically
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grateful to the staff there, past and present, for making me welcome and
comfortable on my numerous visits there.

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I am grateful to the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies for inviting me to give a TEDx Talk on China’s high-speed rail diplomacy in Seoul in August 2015. The talk gave me a chance to distil some of my thoughts and to cement my interest and determination to work further on the topic.

I count myself lucky to have been awarded a fellowship in 2015–16 by the East Asian Institute in Seoul to work on a project related to China’s high-speed rail diplomacy. The fellowship helped to affirm the value of my research area and direction. It supported my visits not only to Seoul, but also to Tokyo, Taipei, Shanghai and Beijing to make presentations based on my research, to exchange ideas with specialists and to do further reading, thinking and writing. Apart from the East Asian Institute, my principal host, colleagues in the field of China and East Asian studies at Keio University, Waseda University, the National Taiwan University, Fudan University and Peking University exceeded their calls of duty to make me feel so purposeful. While in China, I consciously took the high-speed train running between Shanghai and Beijing in October 2016 in order to gain some first-hand experience. I have definitely enjoyed my many rides on the Hong Kong Express train between Hong Kong International Airport and the city centre, which is notable for its speed and comfort, only to realise most recently that it was a bit shaky, compared with the smooth rides between Shanghai and Beijing.


I have received help of one kind or another from many institutions: my home university, the University of Auckland, especially the Faculty of Arts, the School of Social Sciences, and the New Zealand Asia Institute; the Chinese University of Hong Kong; Fudan University, Shanghai; Peking University, Beijing; Nanking University, Nanjing; National Taiwan University, Taipei; Waseda University, Tokyo; Keio University, Tokyo; East Asian Institute, Seoul; the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies, Seoul; the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; and the Centre for Global
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Stonefields, Auckland

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