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 Nanhui 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 implementation 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 something 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. 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 understandings 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 based on the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I am grateful to the staff there, past and present, for making me welcome and comfortable on my numerous visits there.

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Stonefields, Auckland

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