

VERTU SELECT



Record-breaking Chinese railways speed ahead

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'Why have all the cars on the highway stopped?' I asked. Then the realisation hit – when you're travelling at 350kmph, everything appears to be stationary.

On 3 December last year, China thundered into the record books with its CRH380A train hitting 486.1kmph – the fastest speed ever achieved by an operational conventional train. In doing so, it shattered the previous record of 416.6kmph set earlier in 2010 by the same train type on the Shanghai-Hangzhou line. And, in January, the newly developed CRH380BL narrowly edged out the previous record when it reached 487kmph.

These feats may grab the headlines, but the impact has been nothing short of revolutionary. Less than five years ago, rail travel in China meant a journey of a day or more on lumbering sleeper trains. High-speed trains have been rolled out in two phases. In the first, existing tracks were upgraded and services officially started in April 2007. Trains typically reached top speeds of around 250kmph, but, for much of the journey, they travelled considerably slower. In time for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the first purpose-built line opened, linking the capital with the nearby port city of Tianjin. These elevated tracks, which can be operated at speeds in excess of 350kmph, are gradually linking major cities across the country.

China experimented with domestically designed and built high-speed trains earlier in the decade. However, these trains proved insufficiently reliable for commercial operations and the decision was made to initially use foreign technology, albeit with the proviso of technology transfer to build up domestic capability.

So, China Railways High-speed (CRH) debuted with trains built in conjunction with Kawasaki, Siemens, Alstom and Bombardier. Gradually, localised content was increased to the extent that foreign assistance was no longer required.

China has been keen to court other countries with newly 'developed' high-speed rail technology. California's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, has already beaten a path to China's door, and plans are afoot for a partnership between China and Saudi Arabia. With China now boasting the world's longest high-speed rail network of 7,531km, and with thousands more under construction, this interest is understandable.

When the Guangzhou to Wuhan railway opened in December 2009, it cut the previously quickest journey time of 10 and a half hours to three. Similarly, when the purpose-built Beijing to Shanghai high-speed line opens this year, the journey time will be cut from around 10 hours to four. China's ambition won't stop here and plans to build 200kmph routes linking China to Southeast Asian countries are already advanced. Rapidly, China is shrinking not only the distances across its own vast territory but that of its neighbours as well.