

# Road to riches

**G. Bin Zhao** says a Silk Road economic belt, with Xian at the centre, should be part of a long-term strategy to bring economic prosperity to China's underdeveloped western region

President Xi Jinping (习近平) has again repeated his desire to create a Silk Road economic belt following a recent visit to Kazakhstan, where he proposed the idea as a way for European and Asian nations to promote closer economic ties.

In addition to its international strategic significance, the creation of the Silk Road belt would enhance economic development in western China, and have a far-reaching impact on regional development in general.

As China gradually moves forward with a new round of reform and opening up, the recent overall slowdown in economic growth has led to expectations that the development of western China will become the next great economic growth point. Furthermore, at the national level, there is a clear need to create a regional economic centre in western China.

Therefore, the creation of this so-called economic belt, with Xian (西安) as the leading city, has become a priority. It will promote the western region and transform it into the fourth national economic pole along with the Yangtze River, the Pearl River Delta Region, and the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Economic Zone.

The creation of the Silk Road economic belt should be included as a part of the long-term development strategy for China, and the Greater Xian area – a region covering more than 12,000 square kilometres – should be designated as the core of this economic region.

Years of experience have shown that large-scale urban development and construction can have a significant effect in leading regional economic development. Xian, the historical starting point of the ancient Silk Road and the economic centre of northwest China – as well as a world famous historical, cultural, and international tourist city – is the best choice to be at the core of this economic belt.

In June 2009, the State Council issued the Guanzhong-Tianshui Economic Zone Development Plan, which stated that the area would be developed as a "strategic high ground for national economic development and opening up". Xian, as the largest city in this economic zone, was to have had an important role to play. Since that time, however, the region has not gained any significant policy support at the national level.

Without the strong support of the central government in promoting the balanced development of the region, capital and technology cannot be expected to automatically converge in the more economically backward regions, and this is

especially true in the market-oriented economy we strive to build.

Without economic development in the western region, a vast country like China cannot successfully modernise. Without significant improvements in the conditions in western China, especially in the unstable frontier regions, the country's security, stability and unity will be affected in the long run.



## Without economic development in the western region, a vast country like China cannot modernise

The Silk Road economic belt will bring development to the poorer western China. The implementation of the Western Development Plan in 2000, though fruitful, did not significantly narrow its gap with the eastern coastal areas, and the regional imbalances in the country's economic development were not effectively mitigated.

Currently, 12 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities are involved in the plan, and three economic zones – the

Guanzhong-Tianshui, the Chengdu-Chongqing, and the Guangxi-Beibu Gulf – have been identified. The creation of the Silk Road economic belt would horizontally strengthen the western region's development. Practical experience has proved that regional development requires both the driving force and the dissemination effect of a strong central city along with an overall plan.

The Greater Xian area is an obvious choice to lead the Silk Road economic belt, and Xian is in a unique position to act as a bridgehead, ready to welcome industries that transfer from eastern China and to play its part in opening up western parts of the country.

The total economic output of Xian places it at the top of the cities in northwest China, and it is the largest city, with a current resident population of about 8.5 million. It is an important base for scientific research, higher education, defence, and other hi-tech industries.

As one of the world's four ancient capitals, it has the distinction of being the capital during the greatest number of dynasties in Chinese history, and as a result it has many cultural relics and tourist attractions. The city also has many research institutions and universities, placing it among the most developed areas for technology and education in China.

The Greater Xian area will be a centrally placed international city in the northwest

comparable with Chongqing (重庆). In the current context of a new round of reform and opening up, combined with the recent economic slowdown, the time is right to develop this economic belt, in order to create the fourth national "economic star region" – along with the Shenzhen special economic zone, the Pudong new area, and the Tianjin-Binhai new area.

Finally, in order to more efficiently develop the Silk Road economic belt, balance the efforts directed at western development, and gather more resources in key cities, the feasibility of designating Xian as a municipality – and relocating the capital of Shaanxi (陕西) province – should be studied.

As President Xi proposed, it is certainly reasonable to hope that the development of a Silk Road economic belt, with Xian at the forefront, will recreate the prosperous era that existed during the time of the ancient Silk Road, restoring the city to a position as one of the world's leading cultural and economic centres, driving economic development in northwestern China and boosting economic prosperity in the other western regions of the country.

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## Life's the test

**Kelly Yang** says the reason Chinese students should learn English is so they can exchange ideas, not to pass university entrance exams



Last week I was having coffee with a few other parents. The topic of professions came up. I told the group that I am an English writing teacher. However, I was woefully unprepared for the looks of pity I got back. Has learning English become "so last season?"

If the Chinese *gaokao* is any indication, the answer is yes. Last week, the Chinese education authorities announced that the English language section of the *gaokao*, the Chinese national university entrance exam, will be cut substantially. The English sections of the exam will now earn 100 points instead of 150. In comparison, the Chinese portions will earn 180, up from 150. In addition, in Shandong (山东), English listening skills will be excluded from next year's English test paper.

This is in line with what many Chinese politicians have been saying lately about shifting the focus away from English back to Chinese. In March, Zhang Shuhua, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, criticised English learning as being "destructive", resulting in an "unprecedented crisis" in education.

Indeed, a 2010 study by *China Youth Daily* showed that 80 per cent of people polled agreed that Chinese skills were deteriorating. More than half blamed this on the emphasis on foreign language study.

As an English teacher, I applaud the shift in *gaokao*, particularly the much-welcomed change to allow students to take the test twice a year instead of just once a year. However, my support is not because I think English is unimportant. It's because I believe English is not a language best learned through tests.

I'll never forget the time my cousin in mainland China was preparing for the *gaokao*. He turned to me, practically in tears with frustration, and demanded to know how I remembered the difference between past perfect tense and past continuous tense. I shrugged and admitted I didn't remember the exact rules off the top of my head. "But you speak and write such good English!" he exclaimed.

I told him the same thing I tell my students in Hong Kong. English is best learned through doing. In order to speak and write it well, you have to use it every day. The best thing you can do to learn English grammar is to pick up a real book, not a grammar workbook.

The problem with the *gaokao* and other English grammar tests is that they completely sap students' interest in the language. Instead of embracing English as a beautiful language and an art form, students see it as a stubborn and sneaky trap, designed to trick them at every opportunity. If forced to do enough of these tests, these kids might become experts at identifying misplaced modifiers, but weak at – or, even worse, fearful of – actually exchanging ideas.

That would be a shame, too, because exchanging ideas is the real point of learning English or any other language. And given that an estimated 750 million people around the world speak English, Chinese students should continue to learn it, not for the *gaokao*, but for another exam – the exam of life.

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## Consumers can help tame waste 'monster'

**Dennis Posadas** says getting rid of redundant packaging would eliminate a lot of waste

Chances are in your daily activities, you probably munch on a burger, drink a soft drink, open a candy bar, get a new dishwashing sponge, or do other activities where you come into contact with product packaging. Whether it's from a big multinational or a small company, product packaging is everywhere.

Once we have used or consumed the product, chances are the packaging goes into the trash and we want nothing to do with it.

That kind of thinking will probably mean more trash and more waste around us. As current trends continue, many major countries and towns and cities worldwide – including Hong Kong – will see an explosion in waste.

We will see more landfills or waste-to-energy plants that need to be built to handle residual waste, after trash has hopefully been sorted and the recyclable materials sent to recyclers and the biodegradable waste sent to compost or anaerobic digester energy facilities. Corporations need to examine whether product packaging needs to be there in the first place.

A food item might need a wrapper to protect it from dirt and maintain product safety. But for other items such as tools or gadgets, is a product package really necessary? Companies need to think not just about product marketing, but also about how their activities contribute to or detract from sustainable business practices.

Every day, a lot of waste ends up in the landfills and incinerators worldwide when a lot of it could have been avoided and was in fact not needed. For some companies, sustainability is simply a buzzword they use to get on the good side of their consumers. What is really needed is for companies to internalise these principles, even in areas not visible to their target markets.

Consumers can do their part by writing to customer service departments about their thoughts on product packaging. Does a dishwashing sponge really need a piece of plastic wrapping to protect it? If the consumer says it is OK to sell it with other sponges in a clean bin, the manufacturer may reconsider the need.

Consumers can also properly dispose of their trash and segregate it. Putting that cigarette butt inside a glass soft drink bottle makes it more difficult to recycle the glass.

With everyone's participation, both on the consumer and producer end, we can come to grips with the multi-headed monster that is the waste issue. It cannot simply be left to the policymakers and the engineers.

Waste reduction is something we all need to contribute to unless we want to find ourselves in the future swimming in it.

Dennis Posadas is the author of *Greenegized*, and is working on a new business fable on innovation and sustainability

## Man Booker rule change reflects borderless world

**Peter Gordon** says the prize will be different, though perhaps not better

Eleanor Catton recently won the last Man Booker prize of its kind. The prize will now, after all these years, be open to Americans. Not just to Americans: to anyone writing in English and published in Britain. But it's the Americans that have caused all the excitement and consternation: "Well, that's the end of the Booker prize, then," said Philip Hensher in *The Guardian*.

Rather than being either a brave expansion or a craven surrender to commercial forces, it may just be that the national distinctions of old can be hard to maintain in a globalised world where writers are particularly peripatetic. Setting up the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2006 demonstrated, at least to me, how difficult it can be to define and maintain national, geographical and other eligibility requirements that yield the desired results of inclusion and exclusion.

The thing is that Americans have been eligible for the Man Booker for a while; granted, not all Americans, but those who can also claim sufficient British or Commonwealth connection. Jhumpa Lahiri, who was on this year's shortlist, is American – American enough, anyway, for her also to be a finalist for this year's US National Book Award. And Lahiri now lives in Italy.

The Man Booker is not the only prize where this sort of thing happens. American Claire Messud was up for this year's Giller Prize in Canada on the basis, according to *The Globe & Mail*, of having grown up "partly in Toronto".

If American writers can't be excluded from the Man Booker, perhaps it's just better – or at least more consistent – not to restrict them at all.

The Booker had never been a national prize. It was in practice a prize for pretty much everyone – everyone anglophone, anyway – but not Americans. But a great many "Americans" are no longer just American. And vice versa.

Will the Man Booker be better or worse as a result? Since every possible outcome has been predicted, one is bound to be borne out.



## The Man Booker Prize ... has done a good job in setting and upholding a standard

The prize will probably be different after this change. But it was becoming different anyway, and an argument can be made that it's better for those in charge to control change rather than be controlled by it.

As we were working out the original rules for the Asian prize and attempting to predict the outcome of any given detail or rule, a wise colleague informed me a prize's reputation derives from its winners: if it chooses the "right" books and authors, then it will succeed. He was perhaps channelling the proverbial "It is

not titles that honour men, but men that honour titles". The Man Booker Prize may not have always got it right, but it has, over the years and in aggregate, done a good job in setting and upholding a standard.

One wonders how much thought was given – I know some was – to a separate regional Booker that would have maintained the distinction. By widening the catchment in this way, the new Man Booker may, perhaps counter-intuitively, narrow its definition of "best". A bigger spotlight in this case may shine more tightly. Asian writers will now be in an even larger pool and are therefore – on the basis of probability if nothing else – less likely to submit for consideration.

And by defining a sort of global English-language literary area, the new extended Man Booker may, ironically, separate English-language Asian writers from the rest of Asia even more than they were previously, making the demise of the Hong Kong-based Asian prize in Man's stable all the more regrettable. English-language literature is a very large tent, but it isn't the only one.

Peter Gordon is editor of the Asian Review of Books. He ran the Man Asian Literary Prize during its inception and for its first two years

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## Australia's best market may be on its doorstep

**Sandra Seno-Alday** says it must look beyond its mineral exports to China and diversify its trade

It is unsurprising that China has emerged in the past few years as Australia's top trading partner. As an export destination, China was at the top of the list in the last financial year, accounting for almost 70 per cent more exports in dollar terms compared to Japan, Australia's second largest export destination.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott has made recent commitments to accelerate the free-trade-agreement discussions between Australia and China. However, it doesn't appear as though Australian businesses require any additional help in recognising the importance of China in the region. It begs the question; does Australia really need to negotiate even freer trade with China?

Over the past decade, Australia's exports of goods and services to China have consistently been dominated by minerals. According to 2011 data from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, minerals accounted for 66 per cent of Australia's total exports to China, with iron ore alone representing 57 per cent.

Furthermore, government data indicates that in 2012 only around 7 per cent of Australian businesses sold their goods or services in overseas markets, up from 4 per cent in 1998. This clearly underlines the fact that only a handful of Australian businesses are driving Australia's exports to China.

This also sends a strong message that given the changes in China's economy, such as the

continuing expansion of the country's middle class, there is significant scope for Australia to diversify its China trade portfolio.

There is also a challenge for Australia to diversify its trade portfolio in the rest of the region. This will prove to be tougher to do, given that the other Asia-Pacific economies are much smaller compared to the current regional giants.

Southeast Asia – made up of countries that are geographically closest to Australia – presents an interesting proposition. With the exception of Indonesia, the Southeast Asian economies are small. But if the Association of Southeast Asian Nations succeeds in its quest for greater economic integration, similar to the EU common market, then this would effectively create a single market of around 600 million people right at Australia's doorstep.

While Southeast Asia is predominantly composed of middle- to low-income countries – with the exception of Singapore – it is still difficult for Australia to ignore the fact that this region has exhibited high annual average economic growth rate (of some 11 per cent) for in recent decades.

Indeed, Australia's efforts to foster a more stable and more integrated Asean region may be its best medium- to long-term investment yet.

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