China’s railway chief dismissed
By Geoff Dyer in Beijing
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China’s minister of railways, Liu Zhijun, has been removed from the top job at the ministry and put under investigation for “severe disciplinary violations”, according to a report from the Xinhua news agency.

Mr Liu is the most senior Chinese official to come under investigation since the Shanghai party boss Chen Liangyu was forced out of office in 2006 and later sentenced to 18 years in prison for corruption.

Although Xinhua provided no details about the reason for the probe, it is likely to raise questions about China’s big investment in high-speed rail, which Mr Liu spearheaded.

Mr Liu had been removed from his position as the Communist party secretary at the railways ministry, Xinhua said, citing the party’s central commission for discipline inspection. While there was no announcement on whether Mr Liu was still a minister, the public disclosure of such investigations is often the precursor for formal criminal charges. On the ministry’s website, the page outlining its leadership structure was taken down at the weekend.

Aware of simmering public anger about corruption, Beijing has launched a string of probes in recent years that have led to the prosecution of a number of senior officials, including the head of the state food and drug administration, Zheng Xiaoyu, who was executed in 2007 for taking bribes. According to Xinhua, 146,517 officials at all levels of government were punished for corruption last year.

Analysts believe, however, that high-profile arrests at the top levels of government usually involve a broader political agenda. Mr Chen, the former Shanghai boss, was believed to have clashed with Wen Jiabao, Chinese premier, at politburo meetings over economic policy before he was ousted.

In the past the railways ministry has been one of the most independent of the country’s main bureaucracies and has resisted attempts to reform some of its procedures.

Mr Liu, a career official in the rail sector, has been railways minister since 2003, an unusually long period. He was also a member of the party’s central committee.
The railways ministry said last month that domestic rail investment for 2011 would top Rmb700bn ($106bn), roughly the same as last year, with about 70 intercity projects scheduled to break ground.

However, critics have suggested that some of the lines will be uneconomical because the fares will be out of reach for many rail passengers.

China already has the world's largest high-speed rail network, with a combined 8,358km by the end of 2010. But that total will reach 13,000km by next year and exceed 16,000km by 2015, according to the railways ministry.

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