

# *Fiat Lingua*

Title: A glimpse over the Great Wall: A review of Mark Rosenfelder's China Construction Kit

Author: David Johnson

MS Date: 12-12-2016

FL Date: 01-01-2017

FL Number: FL-000040-00

Citation: Johnson, David. 2016. " A glimpse over the Great Wall: A review of Mark Rosenfelder's China Construction Kit." FL-000040-00, *Fiat Lingua*, <<http://fiatlingua.org>>. Web. 01 January 2017.

Copyright: © 2016 David Johnson. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

# **A glimpse over the Great Wall: a review of Mark Rosenfelder's *China construction kit***

by  
David Johnson

Just over six years ago now, Mark Rosenfelder (a.k.a. Zompist) published a print version of his well-known *Language Construction Kit* which has been available for many years over the internet. The *LCK* is accessible to the non-specialist and written in the author's characteristic informative-yet-entertaining style. The book proved a hit with the conlang audience and further similar titles quickly followed.

What do you do though, once you've written a good range of general conlanging and conworlding guidebooks? For that matter, where does the reader turn once they have read the general guides? One answer, for both writers and readers, is to move on to specialist guides.

This book is, I believe, the first conlang and conworld guide to specialise in a single culture and language. Such specialisation enables the author to build on the material covered in general guides like the *LCK* and to go into much greater detail in his chosen field. This is an interesting approach and the choice of study area is interesting too. China has a long written history and a culture and language noticeably different from European models.

Indeed, it is a goal of the *China Construction Kit* (henceforth the *CCK*) to enable the reader to better understand China so as to escape the trap of Eurocentric preconceptions in conlanging and conworlding. I'm sure we've all used European models in our work and often unconsciously: the ancient Empire replaced by nation states, the long tables of verb conjugations or noun declensions and so on. I know I have.

One could dispute the author's claims about the importance of studying China and Chinese, but I don't think the book's value depends on China's importance. The language and history of the country are sufficiently interesting and different from western models to earn our attention. So I'd argue that the book definitely has a place on the market.

I came to it with little knowledge of these Chinese models. I am merely an interested naïf. So I'm unable to correct the author on points of fact. However, this puts me firmly in the *CCK*'s target audience. Or rather, one of its target audiences. According to [zompist.com](http://zompist.com) the book is aimed at conlangers, conworlders, anyone seeking to know more about China and Chinese, as well as at writers who want to try a non-Western setting. This has important consequences for the selection of material it contains, as we shall see.

The *CCK* is published by Yonagu books. It is available in print from Amazon or Create Space and for Kindle from Amazon only. The print version costs \$15.95 and the Kindle one \$5.77. This reviewer tries to avoid using Amazon on account of their tax and employment policies, but sometimes there's just no alternative. Buying through Create Space gives more money to the author though, so that might be the way to go if you want the print copy.

What then, do you get for your USD 15.95 or 5.77? For a start you get a whole 400 pages. You get a complete history of China, two sketch grammars (Mandarin and Old Chinese), an introduction to the writing system, a chapter of lessons for the conworlder, plus several chapters on aspects of Chinese culture. There's also an index and a bibliography.

Just wandering through the index gives you some idea of the ambition and scope of this book. There's "cabbage, calendar, canals," then "Mandarin, mandate of heaven, manga" and even "Sichuān, Siddhārta, silk". A book so comprehensive is an exciting prospect to someone with an interest in its subject matter, but does the author live up to his own ambitions?

By and large yes. Very much so, in fact. However, China has a long history and a lot of written culture. Inevitably, the *CCK* can't include everything, some things have to give. Either that or the book lengthens and the price goes up.

I could not think of any topics that were wholly absent, though as I read I often caught myself thinking, "I'd like more detail on that". One could of course provide more on *A* and *B* whilst cutting out *C* and *D*. This would keep the length and price down. There isn't anything though, that I would cut.

The history section takes several chapters. I was pleased to see that there are plenty of pauses for recaps and overviews, plus some maps. These devices all enable you to see the longer, deeper rhythms of Chinese history that lie beneath the passing facts. There's the north versus the south, everyone against the steppe nomads, a long-lived state and a surprisingly early bureaucracy.

The author has a good eye for a telling anecdote, a human-interest story that entertains, but tells us something about the times as well. There is also an intriguing passage on possible reasons why China did not have an industrial revolution.

There follows a short chapter that distills the main lessons conworlders can take from the study of China's history. Perhaps this section is kept short because, as noted, the book is not aimed solely at conworlders and conlangers. Though perhaps also the chapter is short because the book is already a good length and something has to give?

All the same, I'd have preferred it if this chapter was longer and contained some examples, perhaps taken from the author's own conworlding work. One can always search the Zompist site for oneself of course, but it would be nice to be directed towards the relevant sections.

The *Body & Soul* chapter is good on folk belief. It brings out the connections between diverse concepts, how for example the five elements are all associated with colours, directions, organs of the body and years in the calendar.

Somewhat confusingly though, the main entries on Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are not found here. These were dealt with earlier under history. They needed to be introduced earlier to enable discussion of their role in Chinese history. I guess there is just no ideal place to put them.

A series of short chapters follow on other aspects of the culture: *Architecture*; *Clothing*; *Technology*; and *Literature*. Like in the *Body & Soul* chapter, some things are oddly assigned: food comes under *Technology* and opera and movies under *Literature*. There are some fascinating passages, though, things that might not make it into a formal, systematic introduction, but which Westerners have always wanted to know about. There's a section on how Chinese roofs are built with upturned eaves and another on how to count using an abacus. Both are well illustrated.

The next chapter is a short introduction to the Chinese languages, then there's a phonetics chapter. Then come my favourite chapters: the two sketch grammars. For some reason these appear in reverse chronological order, perhaps because Mandarin is the more familiar? Whatever the reason, there is a wealth of material in both of them.

The author has managed to give us the main points plus some interesting details. The structure of these chapters loosely follows that of a formal reference grammar, but they are written in an approachable informal style.

First up is Mandarin. Readers will no doubt be aware that Mandarin is an isolating language that puts the noun at the end of the noun phrase and uses subject-verb-object order in clauses. One could therefore be forgiven for expecting sentence structure to be much like English. At first glance, this is indeed the case.

Helpfully though, the author directs our attention to those numerous areas of divergence between Mandarin and English syntax. Negation and numeral building are both simpler than in English and to my mind more logical. There is also a neat subordination device,

### **[blah] de N**

Here, “[blah]” can be a possessor, an attribute or even an entire relative clause. The use of aspect in preference to tense is clarified as are the use of measure words and the distinction between subjects and topics. All rich pickings for the conlanger.

The chapter on Old Chinese proved something of a revelation. The language is impressively concise. Again our attention is directed to points of divergence, this time where Old Chinese differs from Mandarin. These mainly concern choice of word and the move from monosyllables to disyllables. You also get a good sense of how some content words of OC become grammaticalised in Mandarin.

There is little information on sound changes between OC and Mandarin, but in part this will be because the writing system is not phonetic.

At this point, I would have liked a short chapter on lessons for conlangers from the study of OC and Mandarin. Perhaps such a section is another thing that had to give for reasons of space, but I still think there could have been some pointers here to the Chinese influence in the author's own work. I know such influences can be found in his Lé and Uyse? languages, but how many other readers would know where to look?

For me, the main lesson of the two grammars is that isolating languages are not boring. What they lack in declension tables and irregular conjugations, they make up for with complex syntax. Viewed historically, isolating languages show variation in syntax and lexicon.

The *Writing System* chapter seems to draw heavily on material from the [zompist.com](http://zompist.com) website. The approach is historical. We learn how some graphemes started out as pictograms and became stylised, whilst others are based on the rebus principle. This latter group relies on rhyme, giving us some insight into the pronunciation of older forms of the language.

A glossary follows, then the book is rounded off by an index and a bibliography. The bibliography is the usual extensive list we have come to expect from Rosenfelder. If you want more detail on any particular point, this is the obvious place to start. I've followed up

reading recommendations from some of his earlier works and they have always proved to be good, solid works. That said, they tend to be the sort of book you borrow from a library rather than buy for yourself.

To sum up then, the *CCK* is an entertaining and informative read and good value for the money. I would have liked more hints and tips on how its material might be used in conworlding and conlanging, but I accept that this is due to space constraints. It is not a major loss, either, as one can generate one's own ideas, but not one's own real-world models.

Intriguingly, Rosenfelder has mused about writing further civilisation-specific construction kits if this one sells. I for one relish the prospect of titles like, say, the *Indian Construction Kit* or the *Middle Eastern Construction Kit*. I would even make a case for an *English Construction Kit*. Viewing the familiar through fresh eyes could prove surprisingly informative.

If these or similar titles are to see the light of day though, people need to buy the *CCK*!

\* \* \*

#### THE REVIEWER:

David Johnson was first inspired to create languages in his teens when, like so many, he came across the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. He received a Philosophy degree from the University of Warwick in 1981 and currently works as a librarian, cataloguing books in the Romance languages.

He is a member of several of conlang and conworld communities. Under the username of “Ketumak”, he is a member of the Zompist and Conlanger Bulletin Boards. Under his own name he is a member of the Language Creation Society and the Conlang Mailing List.

His conlang efforts have ranged from simple projects like Lesdekan to more advanced ones like Õtari. In recent years he has become interested in isolating languages. Both Õtari and his current project [Lemohai](#) reflect that interest.

Outside of conlanging he likes walking, reading, music, politics and live theatre.