

“Parallel reflexes and vocalic shift in Early Chinese”

Drawing on unpublished manuscripts and correspondence, this paper discusses two little-known innovations by the late Jerry Norman (1936–2012), on the problem of reconstruction of an early stage of Chinese.

Background: In the mid-20th century, George A. Kennedy and Edwin G. Pulleyblank each suggested that the ancestor of modern Chinese dialects underwent palatalization of a large proportion of the syllables in the language, affecting words not originally palatalized.

Norman’s best known contribution to historical phonology is the proposal that the Hàn-time ancestor of modern Chinese had two features preventing such palatalization in later periods: pharyngealization and retroflexion. Norman considered all syllables with either one of those two features to be phonologically marked. He proposed that it was only unmarked syllables that underwent palatalization.

(Norman’s proposal of pharyngealization has gained wide currency through the work of William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart. Note that Norman himself called that early ancestral language “Proto-Hàn” or “Early Chinese,” asserting that his conception differed significantly from the “Archaic Chinese” or “Old Chinese” of most hands in the field since Karlgren’s time.)

Main argument: Largely unknown today are two other proposals of Norman’s about Early Chinese.

First was that Chinese underwent large-scale “vocalic shift” (restructuring of the relationships among main vowels) before the formation of the middle-era ancestor of most modern Chinese dialects, as well as before the compilation of the *Qiyùn* reference book (which Norman considered not to represent a historical stage of natural language).

Second was that Early Chinese was phonologically quite simple, and much like the 1970s version of his Proto-Mǐn reconstruction, and that part of what is responsible for the complexity of the *Qiyùn* is parallel reflexes — that is, two middle-era syllables deriving from a single etymon in the early period, without conditioning but instead at times involving vocalic shift.

Norman used the idea of parallel reflexes and vocalic shift to explain a range of problems that make it vexatious to hazard a conventional “Old Chinese” language as ancestor of the mainstream dialects and the *Qiyùn*: overloaded *-r-*, “overlapping rimes” (*chóngyùn* 重韻), the *kāikǒu-hékǒu* 開口合口 contrast in some rime-groups, conditions for dentilabialization, doublets, and the *chóngniǔ* 重紐 contrast.

The mechanism of parallel reflexes is rarely invoked in Chinese historical phonology of the early period, although Schuessler’s “vowel warping” is somewhat similar.

Keywords: History of Linguistics; Old Chinese; Markedness; Parallel reflexes; Vocalic shift.