



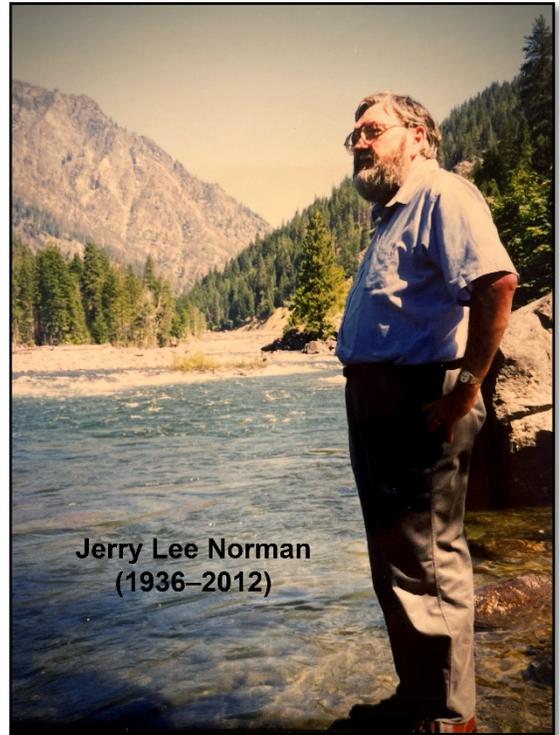
EARLY CHINA SEMINAR LECTURE SERIES

Jerry Norman's Ideas on the Reconstruction of Chinese

David Branner • Independent Scholar

Linguistic reconstruction holds a curious place in sinology and early Chinese studies. On one hand, it is hard to imagine replacing it, for use with ancient texts or in expressing etymological relationships. On the other, what goes into making reconstructions is little understood by the larger field. The matter is so arcane that most students of sinology lack the enthusiasm to inquire closely into the issues and are content using reconstruction as a sort of “Pīnyīn” for application to historical texts. Curiously, in East Asia, linguistic reconstruction of Chinese is generally the purview of students of Chinese literature, as a matter of implementation and praxis, while in the West it is a specialized and immensely technical field. It is also curious that the principal applications and sources for Chinese

linguistic reconstruction are rather different from reconstruction in most other modern language families: normally comparative method (using evidence from modern languages) is the foundation, but in the case of Chinese, philological evidence has primacy, supplemented by long-range comparison. That is, the reconstruction of early Chinese is generally treated as though it is more important than the primary comparative evidence of modern languages. The late Jerry Norman, however, had an unusual outlook on these issues; his reconstruction is the first one based entirely on the evidence of living forms of Chinese rather than philological sources. This paper describes and justifies the premises he held about Chinese reconstruction and illustrates it in application to premodern literature.



Jerry Lee Norman
(1936–2012)

September 30, 2022, 4:30–6:30pm

Faculty House, 64 Morningside Drive, Columbia University

*Please check the announcement board in the first-floor lobby for room information

Seminar Co-Chairs:

Glenda Chao, Ursinus College

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