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## Etymology of the Word “Macrobiotic:s” and Its Use in Modern Chinese Scholarship

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**Etymology of the Word *Macrobiotic:s*  
and Its Use in Modern Chinese Scholarship**

Roy Collins and David Kerr

*"And certaynly our langage now used varyeth ferre from  
that whiche us used and spoken when I was borne. For we  
englysshe men ben borne under the domynacyon of the  
mone, whiche is never stedfaste, but waverynge, wexyng  
one season, and waneth and descreaseth another season."*

-- William Caxton

So said Caxton at the end of the fifteenth century <sup>1</sup> and with all certainty it will remain that the English language, and all languages, will continue to change as long as civilized societies continue to evolve as knowledge is increased through the experience of living.

This is a normal and inevitable process according to linguist Henry Alexander, since, "Speech is a form of human activity and, like every other human activity, is subject to change and modification. It is not more surprising to find changes in our speech than, let us say, in our fashions in dress or our method of dancing, which we can see developing new features from year to year. Speech, which reflects life, has to keep pace with life...." <sup>2</sup>

In this philological essay we hope to shed more light on the word *macrobiotic:s*, a "new-age" language addition that is starting to become more pronounced in modern Chinese scholarship. The reasons for using the word *macrobiotic:s* by modern Chinese scholars, especially as a modifying element to the word *hygienics* are not wholly clear. However, the attempt to widen its meaning in an age where it (the word, *macrobiotic:s*) has entered the modern colloquial to mean a specific dietary regimen and philosophical school makes it more confusing, and undermines the intent of the adherents of this well-known and broad-based, philosophical/dietetic system.

The authors will attempt to present positive evidence to support their hypothesis of misuse, and to offer substantial word substitutes that would more properly fit the context in which Chinese scholars are currently using the word *macrobiotic:s*. Hopefully this essay will make scholars more aware of this dichotomy in usage and help to halt the proliferation of a word that has been the central part of the vernacular from a set mode of speech/thought that dates back to over two hundred years.

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1. William Caxton (1422-1491) is acclaimed to be the first person to print a book in the English language, *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1474). The typefaces he used were close facsimilies of the Gothic character.
  2. H. Alexander, *The Story of Our Language* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969), p. 16.

## English Word Origins, Cognate Grouping and Word Changes

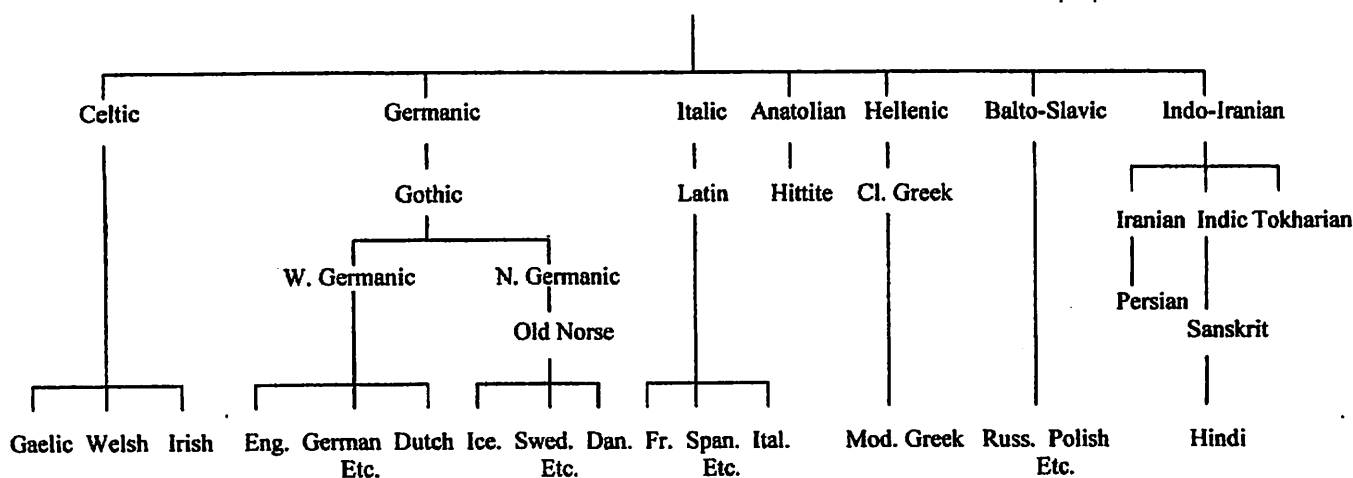
Prior to the invention of writing by the Sumerians around 3500 BCE, there was no certain way to track language morphology. Since literacy is based on the written word, it is simply impossible to determine which languages existed before writing or how the grammatical and lexical structure of word groups differed from those used in modern language. As archaeologist/linguist, Elizabeth Wayland Barber, so eloquently put it, "In the course of time thousands of ancient languages all over the world must have dropped off their language tress without a trace, like overripe plums."<sup>3</sup>

Yet from received texts it is possible to discover the etymology of a large number of words that give us some clues as to how they originated and the context in which they were used. Within each "plum" therein lies a seed with genetic information waiting to be decoded. In many instances these seeds can be traced back to a common ancestral language group or *cognate* that together share a number of similarities.

The science of philology has determined, for instance, that the English language arose during prehistoric times from the Germanic family of languages in northern Europe. It has also been found that the structure of the Germanic family resembles other languages, and by comparing these similarities it has been concluded that the Germanic family is a branch of a larger linguistic family that includes most of the European, as well as some of the Indian languages.

This larger grouping is usually referred to as the Indo-European (I-E) family of languages. Although the I-E group constitutes only a fraction of the world's total linguistic resources, it has been the dominant language family since recorded history, and most likely much earlier.

### *Indo-European Language Family*



3. E.W. Barber, *The Mummies of Ürümchi* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), p. 119.

*Macrobiotic:s* is a fairly recent word with I-E roots that was "invented" by borrowing parts from the Greek word *makrobios* by the German, Christoph Hufeland, at the end of the eighteenth century. It was originally spelled *makrobiotik* in order to accommodate German language tradition. Although the word *makrobiotik* (or *macrobiotic*) does not appear in the Greek lexicon, the word *macrobios* (μακροβιος) does. The roots of *macrobios* are derived from the Indo-European "mak^-ro" (long, thin) and "gWei-" (to live.)<sup>4</sup>

The earliest literary example of the use of the word *macrobios* comes from the Greek historian, Herodotus (484? - 425 BCE) in his *History*, "After this Cambyses planned three expeditions against the Carchedonians, and against the Ammonians, and against the long-lived [μακροβιος] Ethiopians, who dwelt on the Libyan coast of the southern sea."<sup>5</sup>

Prior to Herodotus we do not find *macrobios* in the compound form, but rather as two separate words, as in the works of the 8<sup>th</sup> BCE poet, Hesiod, "Father Zeus, would that you had given me a shorter span of life [βιος] to be mine and wisdom of heart like that of mortal men; but now you have honored me not even a little, though you ordained me to have a long [μακρος] span of life [βιος], and to live through seven generations of mortal kind."<sup>6</sup>

Hippocrates (460?-377? BCE) followed Herodotus' example. A few years after *History*, Hippocrates wrote *Airs, Waters, Places* wherein the great physician used the word *macrobios* in two different chapters. The first was in reference to the effects of cold wind and hard water on men who lived in cities: "Instances of the disease called 'sacred' are rare but violent. These men are more likely to be long-lived [μακροβιος] than are others."<sup>7</sup> The second occurs in connection with leg diseases caused by 'bad water', "Children are very subject to hernia and men to enlarged veins and to ulcers on the legs, so that such constitutions cannot be long-lived [μακροβιος] but must grow prematurely old."<sup>8</sup>

Next came Aristotle, (384-322 BCE) who, in his *Rhetoric*, used grammatical variants of *macrobios* to discuss the importance of vitality and strength in order to enjoy a longer life. The 2<sup>nd</sup>- century Greek grammarian, Apollodorus, as well as Lucian, the rhetorician, from the same era, followed this trend in usage. Galen, the popular physician of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century would come later and would incorporate in his writing passages from Hippocrates' works using the word *macrobios*.

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4. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Fourth edition, 2000.

5. A. Godley, tr., *Herodotus* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1920), Book III, p. 25.

6. H. Evelyn-White, tr., *Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. Part. 2, "The Melampodia"  
(Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 269

7. W. Jones, tr., *Airs, Waters, Places* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), Section IV, p. 79

8. *Ibid*, Section VII, p. 87



*Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland (1762-1836)*

Ohio State University linguist Brian Joseph<sup>9</sup> reminds us that the word *macrobios* may also have variant spellings in Greek in order to accommodate different grammatical forms of the same word (e.g. plural vs. singular, etc.) Hence we might run across the word *makrobioti* (μακροβιοι) when used in the plural form, or regarding the longevity of plants, it may be glossed as μακροβιον as is the case when we read the early botanical works of Theophrastus (372-287 BCE). *Makrobotita* and *makrozoia* also mean longevity in Greek.

From these extant works and their context we can determine that the word *macrobios* simply means "long-lived." Longevity does not appear to be connected to any specific form of physical exercise, nor is there a stipulation on dietetics, although moderation of both is sometimes inferred.

In his book, titled *The Art of Prolonging Life*, translated into English in 1796, Hufeland defined the word *macrobiotic* (English spelling) as a science founded upon, "dietetic rules and a medical mode of treatment for preserving life."<sup>10</sup> More specifically, the diet he recommended was one that incorporated a mainstay of seasonal vegetable quality food and a near abstinence from animal flesh, "We find that it is not those who lived on flesh, but on vegetables, pulse, fruit, and milk, who attained the greatest age."<sup>11</sup>

The clue to Hufeland's use of the word *makrobotik* comes from chapter five in his book that cites various instances of longevity in ancient times. Hufeland then gives an account by Lucian, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Greek writer/rhetorician, who, in turn, gives an account of the ancient Chinese who achieved a great age, "They are expressly called *Macrobii*; and Lucian ascribes their longevity to their drinking water in great abundance."<sup>12</sup>

In volume one of Lucian's works, there is a chapter titled "μακροβιοι" (translated into English as *Octogenarians*). The topic of discussion in this work is that of longevity, and as Hufeland stated, there is an account of the Chinese ("Seres") and their methods for achieving old age.

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9. Personal correspondence (April, 2001).

10. C. Hufeland, *The Art of Prolonging Life* (New York: Arno Press, 1979, reprint of 1854 ed.)

11. *Ibid*, p. 284.

12. *Ibid*, p. 75.

Interestingly, Lucian's account is slightly broader than Hufeland's, "Indeed, there are whole nations that are very long-lived, like the Seres, who are said to live three hundred years; some attribute their old age to the climate, others to the soil and still others to their diet, for they say that this entire nation drinks nothing but water."<sup>13</sup>

Although diet is mentioned in nearly every one of Lucian's profiles, the *type* of diet is not so specific that animal foods are completely eliminated. Moderation of food intake, seasonal availability, and abstinence from stimulant drinks are more the course.

For nearly a century after the release of *The Art of Prolonging Life*, the word *macrobiotic:s* (or *makrobiotik* in German) had great appeal in the realm of physical culture in Europe. Consider the first part of the following political editorial from an 1879 edition of *Punch* magazine satirizing two adherents of the *makrobiotik* system in connection to the benefits of citrus fruit:

*Dr. Richardson, founder of Hygeiapolis, and discoverer of Salut-land, is a great makrobiotik sage, but Dr. Wilhelm Schmoele, Professor of Pathology and Graduate of Bonn University, it must be confessed, is a greater. For if Dr. Richardson has discovered how to prolong life to six-score, Dr. Schmoele has found out the way to lengthen it indefinitely, and by a much shorter cut. To reach Dr. Richardson's six score, men must submit themselves to the discipline of Hygeiapolis, and become un-naturalised citizens of Salut-land, where butcher's meat is prohibited, and politics forbidden....*<sup>14</sup>

LEMON-AID TO LONG LIFE.



Note the German spelling of *makrobiotik* in the text as well as in the print on the book in the accompanying illustration:

In 1871, British writer Thomas De Quincey (*Confessions of an English Opium Eater*) used the word *macrobiotics* in his discussion on the longevity of the rhetorician/orator, Isocrates. This time, however, *macrobiotics* is not used in the context of a hygienic science, but simply an indication of old age – in the same way the Greek word *macrobios* has been applied, "Old age, such as his, was a very rare thing in Greece; a fact which is evident from a Greek work surviving on the subject of Macrobiotics: few cases occur beyond seventy. This accident, therefore, of longevity in Isocrates, must have made him already one of the standing lions in Athens for the last twenty-six years of his life...."<sup>15</sup>

13. A. Harmon, tr., *Lucian* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1913), Vol. I. p. 225

14. *Punch*, November 1, 1879, p. 201

15. T. De Quincey, *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1871), Vol. 10, p. 251

On the North American continent a decade later, however, an article by Felix Oswald, M.D., titled "Longevity," appeared in *Popular Science Monthly*, that used the word *macrobiote:s* in nearly the same context that the word *macrobiotic:s* had been used previously. The magazine article made reference to the long-lived Thessalin mountaineers in the century of Trajan, during the Roman Empire. In Oswald's opinion, a vegetarian-based diet was central to attaining the state of longevity:

*Frugality, in the sense of vegetarianism, is the sometimes involuntary virtue of most Orientals, and may help neutralize their narcotics; the flesh-abhorring Hindoos attain to a surprising age, considering their penchant for betel-poison and their ultra-Arabian poverty. Our carnivorous red-skins are the most short-lived of all out-door dwellers, and clearly in consequence of their diet, for in South America, too, even the inhabitants of the malarious sea-port towns survive the gauchos, whose menu is limited to three courses and one entremets—dried beef, fresh beef, salted beef, and beef tallow.*<sup>16</sup>

The word *macrobiote:s* does not exist in the Greek lexicon, according to Brian Joseph, and is clearly of later English coinage. Adjectives in Greek will usually end in *-ikos*, which if it were to occur in the language would be written as *makrobiotikos*.

De Quincey seems to be the only author during this time frame to deviate from the more restricted meaning of *macrobiotics* and, therefore may be said to have used it inappropriately. In the cases of Hufeland, Oswald, Richardson, and Schmoele, longevity is achieved by practicing a certain amount of physical exercise, along with a frugal lifestyle and adherence to a wholesome, vegetable-based (not necessarily meatless) diet.

The variance in the spelling of *macrobiotic:s* (*makrobiotik*, *makrobii*, *makrobioi*, *makrobiotita*, etc.) seems not to depart from the basic meaning in the application of this science of life prolongation.

### **The Map Is Not the Territory**

*Macrobian* is another English variant of the word *macrobios*, used much like the Greek μακροβιοι, as an attempt to describe "long-lived" people, but not necessarily those who follow the *macrobiotic* diet/philosophy system. Such is the case in Sir Richard Burton's 1856 book *First Footsteps In East Africa* when he described the simple, but rugged, lives of a group of Egyptian Bedouins, "This simple life is varied by an occasional birth and marriage, dance and foray, disease and murder. Their maladies are few and simple; death usually comes by the spear, and the Bedouin is naturally long-lived. I have seen Macrobian's hale and strong, preserving their powers and faculties in spite of eighty and ninety years."<sup>17</sup>

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16. F. Oswald, "Longevity," *Popular Science Monthly*, 21 (May-October, 1882), p. 590

17. R. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa* (London/New York: J.M. Dent/Dutton, 1924 reprint of 1856 ed.), pps. 130-131. Burton is also well known as the translator of *Arabian Nights* and the *Kama Sutra*.



A footnote for the above quotation mentions that the main diet of the Bedouins consisted of camels' or goats' flesh and milk; clarified butter and Bussorah dates. So here, again, we can affirm that the use of *macrobian* is synonymous with the Greek *macrobios* (μακροβιος) and is *not* related to the *macrobiotic* dietary/philosophical system.

The word *macrobian* appears to have slipped into the English language via an unnoticed crack in the language door. Our first encounter with this word came during the Middle Ages and was used in association with cartography. Although the spelling is identical with the synonym for "long-lived," in actuality it is a homograph -- based on the name of Macrobius, the Roman neoplatonic grammarian (395-423.) In Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *De Republica* (Book 6), certain geographical theories were also put forth. Maps that were based on these theories were later drawn in Spain depicting the habitable world of the northern hemisphere and the uninhabited in the southern. The *Macrobian* maps, unlike other medieval maps, were oriented with North at the top. The "i" in this word is pronounced "ee."

*Macrobian World Map, 1483 facsimile.*



As Alfred Korzybski, founder of the Institute of General Semantics had warned us early in the 1930's, maps are not actual territory but representations only, and likewise, words are not things: "the only possible link between the objective world and the linguistic world is found in *structure*, and *structure alone*." <sup>18</sup>

Clearly we can see from the above example that the word describing the maps of Macrobius is definitely *not* being employed in the same context as the word used to represent long-lived people.

The next example of English usage for the word *macrobian* in literary form appeared in 1708, from the pen of Peter Anthony Motteux, in his translation of Francois Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. In Book 5 of *Pantagruel*, Chapter II "How Ringing Island had become Inhabited by Siticines who were become Birds," we read the following: "Nor did we think it more reasonable to doubt of the transmogrifications of the Macrobian children into swans, or that of the Men of Pallene in Thrace into Birds, as soon as they have bath'd themselves in the Tritonic Lake." <sup>19</sup>

18. A. Korzybski, *Science and Sanity* (Lakeville: International Non-Aristotelian Library, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1958), p. 61

19. P. Motteux and T. Urquhart, trs., *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (New York, AMS Press, Inc., 1967 reprint), p. 250

In comparing this translation to the original French written some 150 years earlier, we notice that the word *Macrobian* has replaced the proper name, *Matabrune*: "Peu de difficulté aussi feismes-nous des enfans de Matabrune convertis en signes, et des homes des Phaluces en Thrace, lesquels, soubdain que par neuf fois se baignet ou palude Tritomen, sont en oyseaulx transfroméz." <sup>20</sup>



*Portrait of Rabelais by Michel Lanse from the 1626 edition of Rabelais' Works*

To whom or what does *Matabrune* refer? There is a French fairy tale that dates (roughly) from the 12<sup>th</sup> century about Lohengrin the Swan-Knight. It was loosely connected with Godfrey of Bouillon, concocted to help glorify the House of Bouillon by ascribing to it supernatural origins.

In later French poems on this subject, the children are the offspring of a union between a king and a fairy – the king's mother (L. "mater") plays a villain (Goth. "brune" – "burning.") The children eventually are transformed into swans as a result of their being deprived of necklaces they received when they were born. Once the necklaces are restored the children are transformed back into human form. *Matabrune* is synonymous with *Hel* (English "hell"), the Norse Queen of the Underworld. "Burning Hel" (*Brunehilde*) is also the name of the valiant Valkyrie leader.

In this literary scenario, Rabelais was referring to the villainous mother of the king from the French swan story, whose name was *Matabrune* -- a critical landmark that Motteux failed to see in this language map. What was Motteux thinking to cause him to use the word *Macrobian* (long-lived) instead? There are two other clues in this work that might help us to solve this mystery: The first shows up in the second paragraph following the one already cited. In this paragraph, Rabelais describes the poor hygiene that the human-like swans have, stating: "[they] do nothing but buzz, eat and spoil every thing: so, for these last Three Hundred Years, a vast Swarm of Bigottelo's flockt I don't know how among these goodly Birds every fifth Full Moon, and have bemuted, bewray'd, and conskited the whole Island." <sup>21</sup>

In other words, these messy, buzzing swans were able to live to the advanced age of three hundred years. Maybe Motteux was not totally off the map. From the information provided about the swans in the two paragraphs cited, it would be correct to say that the swans were *macrobian*s. Yet, due to their gross behavior and gluttonous habits, they would probably not fulfill the criteria for becoming *macrobiotic*s.

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20. J. Boulenger, ed., *Rabelais Oeuvres Completes* (Dijon: De la Pleiade Bibliotheque, 1955), pps 776-777

21. P. Motteux and T. Urquhart, trs., *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, p. 251

Then we have a second clue from Chapter XXV of Rabelais' previous book (number four) of the same title. Here we meet Pantraguuel on the Islands of the *Macraeons*. The author tells us that the island was named *Macraeons* as it "signifies in Greek an Old Man, or one much stricken in Years."<sup>22</sup> A smart cookie Rabelais was; he took the first part of the Greek *makro* and combined it with another Greek word for long life – *aio:n* (source of our word "eon"), whose adverb form is *aiei* 'forever.'

Biographical sketches of Rabelais life show that he was a Greek scholar and was fully versed in the Greek classics by the time he began his monastic studies in 1519. A few years later, Rabelais moved to Lyon where he studied medicine and set up his own practice as a physician. During this period he issued his first important publications, including a reprint of Hippocrates' *Aphorisms*. Rabelais' admiration for ancient Greek thought is evident in most of his writing, and in every chapter of *Pantraguuel* the names of Greek (and Roman) authors figure prominently.

Therefore, when we come upon the word *Macraeon* in Rabelais' work there is little doubt that he is alluding to Lucian's long-lived *macrobioi*. This can further be confirmed by the name he gives to the Elderman who oversees Macraeon Island, which is *Macrobe*. It may be of interest to note that in French, the word *macrobie* also means extremely long-lived, and its etymological roots are derived from the Greek *macrobios*. This would have been the most opportune time for Motteux to use the word *macrobian*, but he did not.

Yet, in the English version of *Gargantua and Pantagrue*, we do not see the word *Macrobe*, but *Macrobius* instead, and the spelling of *Macraeons* gets changed to *Macreons*. This time, the translator has failed Korzybski's test in structural logic. Upon seeing *Macrobius* we immediately shift our thoughts to the ancient Greek grammarian/map-maker. Owing to Rabelais' intimate knowledge of Greek thought, had it been his intent to reference the grammarian/map-maker, he surely would have.

The popularity of Rabelais' work grew at an astonishing rate in English-speaking territories -- so much, in fact, that it was read more than the Bible. In 1727 we find the word *macrobian* in the *Dictionnaire Oeconomique*,<sup>23</sup> published in Dublin, Ireland.

Under the category for "age" we find a description for *Macrobian Pills*, complete with instructions for their preparation. In the case of these pills, which contained a minimum of natural ingredients with a prescribed diet of bread, meat, or pottage, one might find them a benefit even from a *macrobiotic* standpoint.

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22. *Ibid*, Book 4, p. 122-123

23. R. Bradley and M. Chomell, *Dictionnaire Oeconomique* (Dublin: Watts & Gates, 1727)



Since Wang's ideas are close to the central tenets promoted by Hufeland we can, in effect, say that Forke correctly applied the word *macrobiotic*, but in this case the Chinese term to best describe Wang's dietary philosophy would be *yangshengshu*

*Yangsheng* (or *zhisheng*) has its own interesting history of use. According to author Isabelle Robinet, *yangsheng* is translated as "nourishing the vital principle" -- a phrase used by Taoist philosopher Zhuang Zhou (active 4<sup>th</sup> c BCE) in conjunction with a way of life ruled by physico-mental hygienic principles.<sup>26</sup> Chinese historian Stephen Selby also backs this view, and cites the diet-based philosophical system founded by the Japanese thinker, Sagen Ishizuka (1850-1910), as being closest to the principles of *yangshengshu*.<sup>27</sup> According to Mitsuru Kakimoto, president of the Japanese Vegetarian Society, Isizuka's system was initially called *seishoku* 正食 (proper eating), and was based on *chōjuron* 長壽論 (long-life theory) which incorporated a vegetarian-based dietetic system that centered on the Chinese *yin/yang* dialectic.<sup>28</sup>

In the late 1940's Ishizuka's ideas were popularized by Yukikazu Sakurazawa (whose Anglicized name was George Ohsawa), and the name of this system was changed to *Macrobiotics*.

The definition of the Japanese *Macrobiotic* system of hygiene is best explained by Michio Kushi, one of Ohsawa's leading disciples: "It is the way of life according to the largest possible view, the infinite order of the universe. The practice of macrobiotics is the understanding and practical application of this order to our lifestyle, including the selection, preparation, and manner of eating of our daily food, as well as the orientation of consciousness."<sup>29</sup> It may be of interest to note that *both* Ohsawa and Hufeland are cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1992 edition) under the definition of *Macrobiotic:s*.

Over time, however, the religious Taoists (*Dao Jiao*), especially those following the *Xian* (transcendent) cult, modified the idea of the *yangsheng* system of hygiene by adding magico-religious elements to it. These included such diverse practices as controlled breathing, exorcism, specialized sexual techniques, and alchemical (*external* and *internal*) practices that were correlated with gods and symbols. The main goal of the religious Taoists was to achieve immortality.

External alchemy includes the practice of ingesting such toxic substances as mercury, lead and quicksilver to help mortals attain immortality (which resulted in many deaths). Internal alchemy (*neidan*) attempts to alter physiology from within, without the use of elixirs, herbs, diet, minerals, or the sexual energy of a partner. The more common practices of *neidan* include calisthenics, meditation, and yogic postures.

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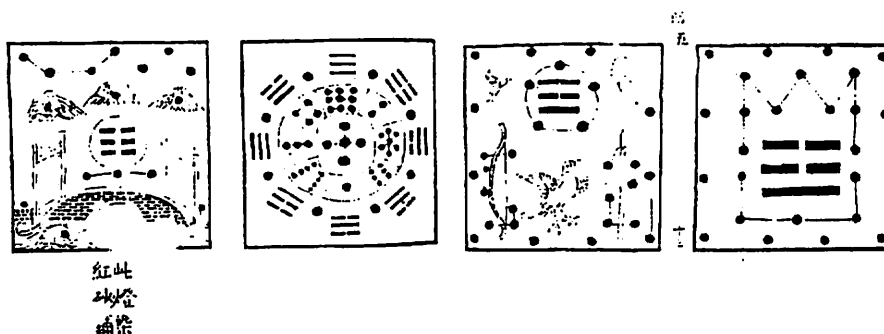
26. I. Robinet, P. Brooks, tr., *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 91

27. Stephen Selby is the author of *Chinese Archery*, published in 2000 by Hong Kong University Press. The information provided by Selby came through personal correspondence.

28. Personal correspondence, June 7, 2001. See also S. Ishizuka's *Kagakuteki Shoku-Yo Chojuron* (Tokyo: Nippon C.I., revised 1975)

29. M. Kushi and A. Jack, *The Cancer Prevention Diet* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p.17

*Magic diagrams composed of lanterns and constellations used by religious Taoists to guide spirits. – from the Daozang (Taoist Canon) circa 1460.*



As we can see, these ideas of personal cultivation are for soteriological purposes and do not conform to those of the earlier philosophical school of Taoism (*Dao Jia*), nor to Wang Chong's ideas, nor to those who espouse *Macrobiotics* – all who use the *yin/yang* dialectic to measure the energetics of food to achieve balance between the individual and his/her living habitat.

The rationale behind the beliefs of this second group is realistic and their use of the *yin/yang* dialectic has a strong physical component, as opposed to the metaphysical.<sup>30</sup> They are closely aligned with Zhuang Zhou's concept of *yangsheng*, as well as with the OED's definition of the word *macrobiotic:s*.

It may be of interest to note that the OED also references the name of philologist Edmond Szekely<sup>31</sup> and his book *Cosmos, Man and Society* in their definition of *macrobiotics*. In this work there is a chapter titled "Macrobiotics, the Optimal and Omnilateral Correlations of Longevity"<sup>32</sup> that discusses the role a vegetable-based diet (mainly raw food) plays toward the achievement of health and longevity.

As in previous examples for attaining longevity by *macrobiotic* methods, Szekely adopts the same posture, stating: "Of those who have lived to a really advanced age, only about five percent who ate meat or toxins lived to be a hundred and ten or a hundred and twenty, but also had diseases; while the macrobiotes who did not eat toxins not only enjoyed a longer lifespan, living to a hundred and thirty, a hundred and forty and a hundred and fifty years of age, but also enjoyed a life without disease."<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, Szekely does not attribute the origin of the term *macrobiotics* directly to Hufeland, whose book on *macrobiotics* had been translated into French in 1809,<sup>34</sup> but mentions instead the

30. See R. Collins' *Fire Over Heaven* (Philadelphia, Xlibris, 2001) for in-depth discussion on these differences.

31. Edmond Bordeaux Szekely is well known for his important translations of the *Essene Gospel of Peace*, the *Zend Avesta*, and selected texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

32. E. Szekely and L. Weaver, tr., *Cosmos, Man and Society* (British Columbia: International Biogenic Society, 1989, reprint of 1936 ed.) The chapter cited in this essay (iii.ii.207) was removed from the 1989 reprint.

33. Szekely, Weaver, L., tr., *Cosmos, Man and Society*, p. 37

34. *L'art de prolonger la vie* (Paris: Bailliere). Translated into the French by Antoine Jacques Louis Jourdan. In 1838 *L'art de prolonger la vie* was changed to *La macrobiotique*.

science is recent, "beginning at the present period of culture, when the first documents began to be collected about individuals who lived to be more than one hundred and twenty years old."<sup>35</sup> Depending on how one defines "present period of culture," Szekely could have been talking about either Lucian (of our common era) or Hufeland (who lived a century before Szekely.) Both of these authors "collected" information about long-lived individuals.

According to Ron Kotzsch, in his book *Macrobiotics: Yesterday and Today*, George Ohsawa resided in France from 1929 to 1936 and was friends with Pulitzer Prize winning author Romain Rolland.<sup>36</sup> Szekely and Rolland also had an alliance together, which in 1928 led to their founding of the International Biogenic Society. How Szekely came to use the word *macrobiotic*, or *macrobiotique* in this case is difficult to determine since Ohsawa and Hufeland each had used the French spelling prior to publication of Szekely's book.<sup>37</sup>

### Holistics, Hygienics, and Mixed Fruit

Sixty-seven years after Forke we witness another attempt by a sinologist to redefine the word *macrobiotic:s* in order to impress novel ideas about China's scientific past upon a sophisticated Western audience. On this occasion we witness the first-time use of the word *macrobiotic:s* (*yangsheng shu*) in a soteriological context, that is, defined *not* as a diet-based philosophy to enhance health and longevity (on earth) but rather in reference to an alchemical system to enhance life "beyond old age" – *immortality*, to be exact.

In Joseph Needham's seminal corpus, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 5., (Pt. 2) the world reads this new definition for *macrobiotic:s*:

*Macrobiotics is a convenient term for the belief that it is possible to prepare, with the aid of botanical, zoological, mineralogical and above all chemical, knowledge, drugs or elixirs (tan) which will prolong human life beyond old age (shou lao), rejuvenating the body and its spiritual parts so that the adept (chen jen) can endure through centuries of longevity (chhang shêng), finally attaining the status of eternal life and arising with etherealised body a true Immortal (shêng hsien.)*<sup>38</sup>

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35. Szekely, Weaver, L., tr., *Cosmos, Man and Society*, p.31

36. R. Kotzsch, *Macrobiotics: Yesterday and Today* (Tokyo: Japan Publications, 1985), p. 107. In 1944, Ohsawa wrote a biography of Romain Rolland and Anatole France titled *Eien no Kodomo* published by Muso Genri Kenkyujo, Ohtsu City.

37. Ohsawa's *Le Principe Uniques de la Philosophie et de la Science d Extrême Orient* was first printed in 1929 (Paris: J. Vrin Librairie Philosophic).

38. J. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), Vol. 5, Pt 2, p. 11

Some of the "macrobiogens" used for attaining "material immortality" are potent chemical and physiological elixirs -- many containing metallic and other elements (mercury, arsenic, lead, and gold for instance.) In short, a wee bit stronger than *Macrobian Pills*. From Needham's description of this system we can clearly see that he is discussing the external alchemical techniques practiced by the religious Taoists (*Dao Jiao*) which is diametrically opposed to the meaning *macrobiotic:s* originally had.

Talk about writers resorting to artistic license! Needham deserves a citation for driving in the dark without his lights on! From the above definition of *macrobiotic:s* one might assume that Needham did not know of Ohsawa, or Forke, but that is certainly not the case here. A footnote to Needham's definition of *macrobiotics* is printed on the same page that includes references to both Ohsawa (Sakurazawa) and Forke, as well as Hippocrates and "other" German sinologists.

In the footnote, Needham incorrectly maintained that Forke used the term *macrobiotics* in the same manner as he defined it. This of course could not be further from the truth. Forke's subject was, of course, Wang Chong, who practiced a strict cereal-based diet and abhorred the use of drugs and elixirs, and even breathing exercises. As to Ohsawa's diet-based, philosophical system, Needham refers to it as "the name of a dietary cult in London and New York; with that we are not concerned here."

Author/translator, Donald Harper agrees that Needham went slightly overboard with the definition of *macrobiotics* as applied in the context of immortality. In Harper's opinion, however, the word *macrobiotic:s*, has nearly the same meaning as the Chinese term *changsheng* 長生.<sup>39</sup> *Changsheng* is used in the Mawangdui medical manuscripts to designate a somatic form of hygiene centering mainly on controlled breathing in conjunction with yogic exercises. The classical Greek term used to describe men who practiced this form of physical culture are called *gymnosophists*.

From our discussion it would appear that Harper's definition of *macrobiotic:s* is more in line with the Greek word *macrobios* (long-lived), rather than a specialized dietetic science. Chinese historian Selby agrees, saying that *changsheng* means longevity only, and has nothing to do with what *Macrobiotics* is all about. Recall the word *macrobian*, that means "long-lived," but that a specialized diet is not required to achieve longevity? *Changsheng* is synonymous with the English *macrobian*, and in today's world of "politically correct" language use, the term *macrobian* would be the preferred alternate to *macrobiotic/yangshengshu*, which might very well lead to *chengsheng* (long-life, *macrobios*).

Yet, if we look closely at Harper's essay "Warring States Natural Philosophy and Occult Thought", we are informed that the chief clientele for *macrobiotic* hygiene were elite men who rode in carriages and ate meat.<sup>40</sup> Clearly this group profile does not match that of the vegetable-based diet/philosophy schools that have been discussed throughout this essay.

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39. From personal correspondence with Donald Harper (4/27-4/30, 2001).

40. M. Loewe and M. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 880



In the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese medical classic, *Ishimpo*, there is a book titled "The Nurture of Life" that discusses the principles of *yangsheng*. In chapter one, "General Principles," the author Tamba writes, "The great principle of the nurture of life is to prevent the occurrence of hundreds of diseases, both internal and external, and to avoid the development of crisis, chaos, calamity, and damage, since the natural inclination of man is to be well. In other words to practice the nurture of life is to treat diseases before diseases occur. To conform to this tendency does not mean feasting on rosy skies and taking [healing] herbs as snacks, but really abiding by the hundred functions of man. When all the hundred functions are carefully maintained, even the herb snacks can be discontinued, for then the basis is provided for making long life possible."<sup>41</sup>

The chief "client" that Tamba points out for this "nurture of life" practice is nearly opposite in character from the "clients" cited above by Harper. Tamba describes him as: "He who is broadminded, takes things easy and is generous lives long. He who is stingy and overworked lives a short life. This is the difference between the open generous person and the ever-toiling parsimonious person. The tenant farmer lives long; the meat-eating rich man lives a short life. This is the effect of having more or fewer desires and lusts."<sup>42</sup> The definition Tamba gives for the practice of "nurturing life", as well as his characterization of its adherents, is consistent with the *modus operandi* of the diet-based philosophical groups, which limit animal food consumption to the bare minimum, and in some instances avoid it altogether.

In fact, Tamba's definition of *yangsheng* is nearly identical to the definition of *macrobiotics* used by Carl Ferre, director of the George Ohsawa Macrobiotic foundation, in Chico California, "A natural dietary and lifestyle therapy based on ancient philosophical principles leading to rejuvenation and self-transformation"<sup>43</sup>

Yet, according to Harper, the term *yangsheng* does not occur in the Mawangdui medical manuscripts and no general "concept" term for "long-life" hygiene existed at the time of their writing (-3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE). The term *changsheng*, however, did. Taking this information at face value, it would then be difficult to find a *macrobiotic* ideal in existence at that time as well. This, however, has not yet been confirmed.

Due to the popularity of both Needham's works and Harper's essay in the *Cambridge History of Ancient China* among students involved in East Asian studies, the term *macrobiotic hygiene* has begun to proliferate. Over the course of a few years the term *macrobiotic hygiene* has cropped up in seminars, East Asian course offerings, papers, and articles. In most instances, the context in which it is used is in a soteriological sense, with immortality being the chief goal.

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41. E. Hsia, I. Veith, and R. Geertsma, trs., *The Essentials of Medicine in Ancient China: Yasuroi Tamba's Ishimpo*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), p. 79

42. *Ibid*, p. 81

43. C. Ferre, "Passion for Life and Love," *Macrobiotics Today* (November/December, 2000), p. 4

One must ask how fair it is to suddenly change the meaning of a word whose use has been consistent for over 200 years? Not that any one group can claim ownership of a word, but out of respect for a tradition there needs to be some type of moral obligation on the part of the translator/transcriber. This, in effect will not undermine the intent and goals of those who are currently following the beliefs of a particular system and know from experience the definitions of the terms used to describe the various aspects of their practice.

Let us use an analogy to help clarify this point. Instead of using the diet-based philosophical school of hygiene known as *Macrobiotics*, let us focus on the diet-based *religious* school (sect) of Judaism, known as *Hasidim* that (like the *Macrobiotics*) has thousands of adherents. *Hasidim*, like *Macrobiotics*, began in Europe at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its founder was Israel ben Eliezer, who based his ideas on Lurianic *kabbalah*, and strove for communion with God through the cultivation of "joyful fervor in prayer, study, and the natural world."<sup>44</sup> A strict, kosher diet is maintained by adherents of this faith, and these foods are prepared by a set method. As in the *Macrobiotic* system, a specific diet is central to the criteria of being *Hasidic*. In other words, without the specialized foodstuffs these two practices have little meaning.

To continue: a group of research writers hear of a (fictitious) occult group in the Pacific who gorge themselves with non-kosher foods as a means of communing with negative spirits. The research group notices some elements in this food ritual to be alike in some manner to *Hasidim* – perhaps it is way the hands hold the fork, or the domed caps they wear. Because of these minor similarities the research group decides to call this food ritual *Hasidic hygiene*. Of course it is obvious that the meaning of *Hasidic* has been altered to fit the needs of the researchers.

Eventually the term *Hasidic hygiene* becomes prominent in the universities and later papers and books using this term are becoming best sellers. Classes at the YMCA are now being taught on *Hasidic hygiene* in the evenings.

Then adherents of the *Hasidic* faith hear this term that designates their religious group. They come to understand that it is being used in a way that is in opposition to their beliefs. To say the least, they are unhappy with the new circumstances but have little or no recourse against the perpetrators of this myth. What they had worked for over the years has suddenly become compromised.

This hypothetical scenario is not too far removed from the actual events that have occurred in regard to the use of the word *macrobiotic:s* by a select group of sinologists, translators and writers on East Asian subjects. Except for the inaccurate and contrived footnote in Needham's *Science and Civilisation*, there have been no attempts by users of this term to justify their use, nor to explain how it differs from both its colloquial and dictionary definitions. This oversight needs to be to be addressed and hopefully this essay has provided adequate background of how the term *macrobiotic:s* originated and evolved, as well as how it was originally defined.

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44. G. Parrinder, ed., *World Religions from Ancient History to the Present* (New York: Facts on File, 1983), p. 401

At the very least, more discussion on this topic may lead to the inclusion of more accurate footnotes in texts that use the term *macrobiotic:s* so that readers are not confused and adherents of the *macrobiotic* diet-based philosophy do not take offense or feel their intentions are being undermined by Chinese scholars.

Although many language trees exist in our world today, only one fruit can be designated a "plum" by its taste, look, aroma, and feel. We can mix it together with oranges, apples, pears, and grapes in one basket and call them "fruits" but each type is different and unique. The same idea hold true for the meaning of words. The map is not the territory; words are not things: "*the only possible link between the objective world and the linguistic world is found in structure, and structure alone.*" The word *macrobiotic:s* is such a fruit and its meaning is specifically connected with a diet-based philosophy. No matter how it is spelled or what language it is translated into, its meaning must be retained.

### Conclusion

Changes that occur in language are natural and inevitable and are due to a variety of factors. In some instances these changes are necessary but on some occasions, particularly when their history is tied to specific traditions, there is no reason to make unjustified changes. When this occurs, confusion results and the intentions of those who continue to uphold the traditional use of a specific term (to define their beliefs) gets undermined.

The term *macrobiotic:s* has a long history of use, and its meaning from the time of its conception related to a specialized diet-based philosophy of hygiene. Its Chinese synonym is *yangsheng shu*, as distinct from *changsheng*, which means "longevity" only, and thus is comparable to the Greek

Greek term *makrobios*, or the English *macrobian*. In 1974, Joseph Needham attempted to translate words for Chinese "ideas" and methods for achieving immortality by incorrectly using the traditional Western term *macrobiotics*. After Needham, the term *macrobiotics* was conflated with the Chinese term for "longevity", *changsheng*. The translator in this case used the term "macrobiotic hygiene" to designate specific Chinese somatic exercises, whose "clients" were an elite group of men who "rode in carriages and eat meat." Other Chinese scholars have followed this trend of misuse, and because of this have compromised the intentions of the numerous followers of the diet-based, philosophical school of hygiene, called *Macrobiotics*.

Over time the spelling of certain words may change, or they may be translated to other languages that appear dissimilar, even though the original meaning remains intact. There is an unstated moral obligation of translators, transcribers, and authors; to adhere to the basic context in which words are used. This obligation needs to be upheld by explaining the need for using the term *macrobiotics*, when other words are better suited. Notated passages in texts via the use of footnotes to delineate the various definitions of the term *macrobiotic:s* would also be helpful.

Roy Collins and David Kerr, "Etymology of the Word Macrobiotic:s,"  
*Sino-Platonic Papers*, 113 (August, 2001)

Editor's Note: Roy Collins is the author of *Fu Hsi I Ching: The Early Heaven Sequence* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), and *Fire Over Heaven: On the Origin, Interpretations and Evolution of the Yin/Yang Dialectic and I Ching* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2001). David Kerr has been practicing *Macrobiotics* for over 30 years.

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