

Gawking in Jiangkou

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Light bulb moments



I wanted to start this letter describing how I had this inspiration - this light bulb moment - when I suddenly worked out how it was that there a so many Chinese, in their nineties, who are fit and healthy working away in their gardens.

But that is not the way lightbulb moments happen. Light bulb moments are not some magic moment when everything falls into place like fitting the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle into

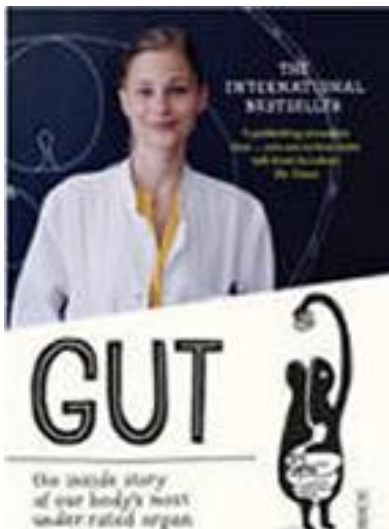
place.

If I was to tell you that the way to complete a jigsaw is to first put all the other pieces together then rotate the last piece until it fits the remaining hole you would tell me to get back onto my medication. We would need a dull boring talk about how to put all the other bits together first.

I have been studying the relation between diet and health now for many years and really it is a bit of a mess.



High fat v low fat, good fat v bad fat, frequent eating v fasting there just seems to be an ongoing divergence of views - even among professionally qualified medical practitioners who are no doubt honest and genuine. Throw in the quacks and commercial interest who manipulate our food supply and as they say if you are not confused you have no idea what is going on.



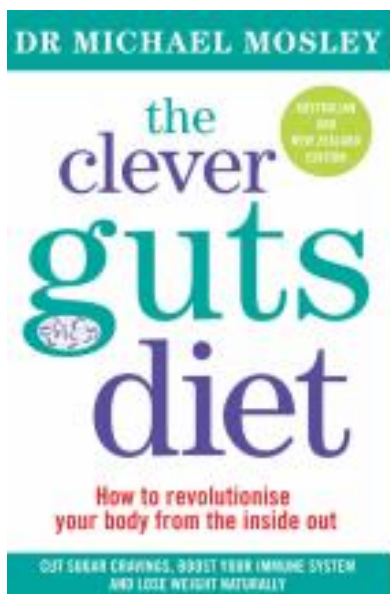
However, there is one topic of universal agreement - the importance of gut bacteria. But again, there are multiple views on how to achieve a beneficial gut bacteria.

Major companies and quacks are promoting their pro-biotics but when I read the conference papers I read how difficult it is for a probiotic to survive the journey through the highly acid gut to where it needs to be.

Many gut bacteria cannot survive outside the gut so the only way of detecting which varieties are present is to examine the DNA of the dead bacteria.

(Tip when searching for a particular subject it is useful to type in conference papers after the subject - then kind Mr Google will give you the latest scientific thinking without the surrounding commercial crap).

Many commercial pro-biotics contain members of the lactobacillus family. Even if the probiotic reaches the lower gut they won't do much good as unless you are starving, dead or both then most probably both your gut is probably already full of this tough little family so there will be no improvement.



Analysing all this information would make a very dull and boring letter for me to write and you to read. Fortunately, I don't have to do this as while I was in Jiangkou I received my copy of the e-book 'The clever gut diet by Michael Mosley'.

I am not on any commission but this book explains how we have been thinking incorrectly about the human body as some form of dumb machine. In reality, it is an intelligent self-regulating system with our gut biology playing a major role in determining our set points which control our appetite, weight and how we digest our food.

It is really a must read and as it is so professionally researched based on all the latest research that I am not even going to attempt to paraphrase it and will assume you have read it when I get around to explaining the health of the aging Chinese in my next letter.

Another must read book is The Obesity Code by Jason Fung.

But the inspiration really came to me in Jiangkou which is a place where I had a great time so now I am going to talk about my fun time in Jiangkou.

My journey to Jiangkou



I am going to guess that you have never heard of Jiangkou and wondering where on earth it is and why I should go there. Now if you never heard of Jiangkou don't worry as even Mr. Google - who knows everything - doesn't know about it either.

Let's take a one minute flight around China starting at the Pearl River industrial strip from Guangzhou to Shenzhen. This is the technical power house of China - a sort of Chinese Silicon Valley. Zap around the coast and look down

on the major exporting cities of the east coast until we head North to the heavy industrial belt.



China is a country of contrast but the general image is of wealth with Lamborghini's and Porsche's fighting for parking spots and a generally comfortable middle class. But there is poverty everywhere in China with old ladies picking empty bottles out of rubbish bins while the men search for food scraps. But it is an 80/20 split between wealth and poverty.

A place well worth the study - particularly if your interest is in the exploding diabetes epidemic invading prosperous China.



Now we zoom across the desert land of the Northern deserts. The major cause of death here is falling off - then being trampled to death - by your camel. The major food is camel - camel stew, camel soup, even camel pancakes. Unless you have a camel fetish this not the most interesting place for study.



As we close our loop we see the major industrial cities of the inland, Wuhan, Chongqing, Chengdu etc. are simply massive conurbations. The conurbation of Chongqing has a population of over thirty million. What do they do in these major conurbations? - as far as I can see making bits for assembly in the export cities on the east coast.



Finally, we fly over the mountains of Szechuan and Yunnan. Absolutely magnificent country with mountains with incredible valleys, gorges rapids and waterfalls. Fast developing as a tourist location. You can read about my previous trip to Yunnan at www.waterright.com.au/yunnan.

We missed a bit



But in our quick fly over China we missed a bit - the bit in the middle and Jiangkou is right in the middle of the middle. All these areas around the rim of China are simply spectacular for one reason or another. So, what makes Jiangkou so spectacular that I decided to go there for several weeks to study? It is the lack of anything spectacular and I went there to gawk at a place that was completely unspectacular.

The art of gawking



change computers for ever.

OK I know this makes absolutely no sense but let me explain about the art of gawking and why it is so important. If you look it up in any dictionary you find the shortest definition is mindless looking - it may also contain words like stupid, imbecilic or the likes.

Yet gawking has resulted in the most significant innovations in modern society. Did Bill Gates go to Xerox labs to learn how to develop windows? No, he went to gawk and saw graphical user interfaces and it clicked that this would

Did Steve Jobs decide to develop the smart phone and go purposely seek out touch screens? No, he went out gawking - saw the early primitive touch screens and it clicked that this would enable him to develop the smart phone.



I have had similar success with gawking. I used to go out on four-wheel drive trips to the desert regions of Australia - no particular reason just to gawk at the unspoilt environment. My gawking showed green areas where a clay pan had filled with sand and formed a subsurface water reservoir which led me to Wicking Beds.

Gawking is a fundamental part of innovation - all school children should be trained in gawking and no serious

University should exist with a professor of gawking and there should be a degree of B. Gawk.



If you think there may be nothing to gawking then try this experiment. Take a married couple ask them to walk - arm in arm - around the block. The ask them what they saw.

Without being sexist the man may say he saw the Lamborghini show room next to the tool shop and a bit further along he saw a garden supply store with a new ride on mower. His wife may say she saw a really smart dress in the first shop, a Szechuan restaurant that looked really inviting and a new shop selling supplies for school kids.

Let me tell you it is really hard to be totally mindless, stupid and imbecilic.

It is incredibly difficult to avoid seeing what you want to see and actually see what is there.

This has terrible consequences for the truth.

The google syndrome - seeing what we want to see

Just play with what I call the google syndrome. Just google 'health benefits of red wine and chocolate' (3.7 million articles) or 'health hazards of red wine and chocolate' (4.4 million articles). Because the hazard search wins in numbers do we deduce that red wine and chocolate are actually a health hazard - of course not - we decide which answer we want to be true and use the multimillion responses to justify our decision.



Am I just being silly (well may be a bit) but this is the way the modern world works. We have vast amounts of data which with the sophisticated data mining software can prove virtually anything we want. That's pretty much what happened with the 'fats are bad' argument which has led to the premature death of millions of people who stuffed themselves with low fat sugary products.

But in these days of mega data there is a trap of just taking data, running correlation exercises and coming to totally the wrong conclusions. Let me give you a couple of examples.



Traditional Chinese farming uses animal and human manure so most vegetables are either cooked or fermented with very little raw vegetables being consumed. Also, while the Chinese medical system is now pretty good many of the now elderly Chinese had very poor medical services.

So, a dumb correlation analysis would say that the way to longer life is to avoid fresh vegetables and medical support and you will remain healthy into old age. This is so obviously ridiculous that it well illustrates how blind correlation exercises will lead to daft conclusions.

You really have to get down to the nitty gritty and work out what is really going on and this is where gawking comes in.

I wanted to go to a place which was pretty well unspoilt by modern technology and have a good old gawk at what happens.

Experimental design v gawking

Every young scientist is trained in the design of experiments. I followed pretty much that path with my search into fermentation. The literature search shows that the early models of how our body works were over simplistic - the calorie balance leading to the eat less - exercise more formulae simply has not worked.



Our bodies are intelligent with our guts playing a crucial role in this intelligent machine. Changing the gut biology is the most effective way of changing how our bodies work and eating fermented food is in turn the most effective way of changing gut biology.

I did the standard search on fermentation and had a model in my mind rather like the French cheese industry with each town having their own secret inoculant or 'mothers'. I had experimented with a range of these inoculants and mothers back home so had got my feet wet on the learning path.

I went to China hoping to learn from the masters - after all they have been fermenting for thousands of years.

What did I find - none of the speciality techniques I was hoping for but everyone ferments in any old way - and they all pretty much work with fermented vegetables forming an important stable in their diet.

But even an inexperienced gawker could not miss the high proportion of healthy elderly people in China - and I have been perfecting the art of being a gormless mindless observer for a long time and have made reasonable progress. If you want to take up the honourable profession of gawking you will just have to work at being mindless.

So off to Jiangkou for some series gawking.

The train journey



Let me tell you I have had a lot of confusion on this project. My trips to Shanghai and Shenzhen fitted into a normal pattern I thought I understood but then I decided to take a trip to Jiangkou which is situation about 10 k from the middle of nowhere in particular.

Talk about a state of confusion - I left Shenzhen by China's high-speed rail - it stopped at Dongguan the centre of China's electronics industry which produced much of the worlds high tech electronics, then onto Guangzhou but then it starts the real journey on the way to Wuhan which is the major industrial complex in virtually the centre of China.

It passes through the mountain ranges in the centre of China which may be a little less spectacular than the Mountains of Yunnan and Szechuan at the foot hills of the Himalayan

mountains but to someone used to the towering peaks of Bundaberg (The hump -100 metres) they are still pretty impressive.

Now just imagine me - comfortably sitting in the train at 314kph looking out of the window as the view changes from the high-rise techno-complex of the pearl river delta as it zooms through the nowhere in particular rural areas on the way to Wuhan.

The shack

I see an old guy coming out of his shack with a carrying stick over his shoulder with two big baskets of night soil which he is carefully (hopefully anyway) spreading onto his little patch of vegetables which no doubt is his livelihood.



The shack is seriously shabby - no such things as straight lines let alone horizontal or vertical. I have no doubt that the roof would be full of holes which would allow any rain to deluge into the living rooms below during any of the frequent rain storms in this area. The plural room(s) meaning two - cooking and sleeping.

But the deluges won't flood the shack because the solar panels on the roof provide protection. These are not just to provide the luxuries of modern living but to charge up the

gleaming new electric car at the front of the shack.

I am allowed to be confused - China is a seriously confusing country.

Not just China - everywhere

But we live in a confusing world - America is just as confusing. Its expenditure on its military is just mind boggling - greater than the combined military spending of the next seven countries on the list (which includes countries like China and North Korea).



How does it finance this massive expenditure? Well ultimately it is by borrowing money (I know it is bonds but it is still borrowing) from the country which it probably sees as its number one rival to world domination - China. What sort of system is it where you borrow money from your arch rival so you can potentially go to war with them?

It is the same system where the Government subsidise crops which are processed to produce de-facto poisons.

Even more bizarre is the way the country elevates bankers

to hero status as they develop devious schemes which nearly brought the entire western system to collapse but are rewarded by multi-million bonuses which are paid for from Government funds as part of the bail out.

Why do I talk about this - well in gawking we need to look at anything and everything and as I hope to show the social aspects are just as important as diet. But at over 300kph it takes less than three hours to reach the terminus then another hour by car and we roll into Jiangkou for some serious gawking.

Arrival in Jiangkou



Now let me square with you - I didn't choose Jiangkou - it chose me. You see I married Xiulan - a Chinese lady - and when you marry a Chinese lady you don't just get a wife - you acquire an entire extended family and it just so happened that this extended family had its roots in Jiangkou.



We had an hour's drive from the railway terminus to Jiangkou where we were greeted by fireworks. I have never been welcomed by a firework display before but I was to learn that this town was firework crazy - more later.

Then of course we had to have a meal. The Chinese are food obsesses so although we weren't particularly hungry we had to go through the ritual.

In the major cities of the East food is a source of entertainment with a complete spectrum of food varieties from all over China and elsewhere readily available - all managed by Chinese and often offering a much better fare than in their country of origin.



On that basis, my first ranking of Jiangkou food would be wholesome and functional. But a few trips to the market and local farms gave a much better insight into the local food.

But more of that later - my first job was to undertake an expeditionary gawk and check out the town.



Breaking the ice



I was in for a shock.

China is not well known as a respecter of personal space or privacy. That would reach a peak in Jiangkou.

No one is going to argue with me if I say there is not a lot happening in Jiangkou - it seems that most people sit on a little stool outside their house waiting for a space ship to land and out pour some weird alien creatures which may start to eat their children.

As very few people in Jiangkou had ever seen a foreigner I was an 'item of interest' in an otherwise boring day.



If I had arrived in a jump jet I would have won first prize as an alien intruder but I am - in poly speak - rhino endowed - in other words I have a singularly large nose - which amazes most Chinese. It has been measured by incredulous Chinese many times and is twice as big in the x,y and z directions meaning a volume of eight times a normal Chinese nose.

I walked along the street I felt these rows of eyes upon me - I was being grossly out-gawked and needed to take action. I needed to find a way of establishing human contact.



The first part of my plan was to resolve not to eat any children in the first week. The Chinese are incredibly protective of their children from both space men and foreigners.



Next, I went to the local school and met up with the English teachers, in particular Denise and Cathy, who turned out to be the stars of my trip, and each evening after school I would meet up with them and just chat with their students.

This began to break the ice as obviously they went home and told their parents that there was an alien creature in town that spoke perfect English.

No doubt the parents worked out that an alien creature is unlikely to speak English and even if they did it would be with a distinct accent so deduced I must actually be a foreigner.

Also, I think that the family connections began to work and I soon found people become very friendly - communication was a bit of a problem as they spoke a local dialect and often had poor Mandarin while my Mandarin pronunciation is regarded as a joke by my most Chinese.

But with a lot of smiling and arm waving I began to make progress.

The Coffin maker



One of first contract was the local coffin maker who had his workshop just off the main street. It seems that Chinese coffins are nothing like Western coffins but are massively strong construction from tree trunks - no poltergeists allowed.

I thought this would be an opportunity to find out more about the average age of death in Jiangkou and that is what I thought my question in my laughable Chinese was asking.

After much deliberation, he thought I was asking how old you had to be for him to make a coffin. No doubt the thought I was a prospective customer just checking things out ahead of time.

His answer was that there was no fixed age for having a coffin made - you just had to be dead. Not really informative and not exactly true either.

Score - one confused Chinese man and one frustrated Australian man.

I later learned that in some families they would have the coffin made before death and have it placed in an adjacent room to the dying person. Apparently, this was supposed to give reassurance to the dying person that all was well prepared.



Not too sure I buy that - sounds too much like a big hint to get on with it - but the Chinese and Westerns have a different thought process.

It turns out that death ceremonies are very important in this town and I will get back to the later - there is no sequence in gawking. Back to food.

The little electric car



I had borrowed a little electric car to run around town and the local area - with guidance from the local family.

Nothing to do with the story but I really fell in love with this little electric car. I would describe it as a two seater with two kids' seats in the back - the Chinese see this as a five-seater off-road vehicle with room for a week's shopping to a max of 500Kg.

After all - it is normal to see five people and a load of furniture on an electric scooter so five in a car is luxury.

Needless to say, we got bogged on some goat track but this was no issue - the five (large) adults simply picked the car up and carried it back to tera-firma.

When in China do as the Chinese do.

If you are from Mungallala (don't blink or you will miss it) in Northern Queensland you would think that Jiangkou was a big town - otherwise not.



But it is the metropolis for the surrounding villages.

Now as far as I can see Chinese villages work on an entirely different concept. A group of local farmers (often family) will group together to build a big house. Often this has an atrium or inner square for the communal living (and of course the chickens) with the outer ring providing the accommodation.



They may have a plaque to commemorate and document the shareholders.

This valiant little car took us five adults to explore these villages along tracks I would only attempt in a full sized four-wheel drive in Australia.



Rice is the staple food with the paddies cut into the side of the hills. I did see a number of hand operated paddle driven rotary hoe type machines and the local cows can sometimes be persuaded to join with a bit of ploughing muscle power but otherwise it seemed to be largely by human muscle power.



The physical achievements of the people can only be a credit to their diet - but perhaps not the Chinese dental skills.



I saw many ancient rice processing machines but they looked more like museum pieces.



I did see many small factories in the town itself and I think these may have taken over the rice processing but I never actually found one. I did find small factories converting rice flour into noodles and grinding up seeds to make cooking oil.

These were all small-scale family type businesses.



There was a fundamental difference in handling waste. When I was a toddler I had it drummed into me not to waste food - I had to clean my plate - 'or else'. I am not sure what the or 'else' meant but I was told about the starving children in Africa so I had this mental image of the Government organising the collection of half eaten toast crust from the tables of three years old's and having Navy escorted convoys to take them to darkest Africa.



I am afraid that at three my sense of political cynicism had not developed properly. But we still have this idea in the west that it is polite to finish off a meal showing the host that you had enjoyed the meal.

The Chinese - as usual have a totally different interpretation of the same facts. If you leave an empty plate that means the cook did not prepare enough food as an empty plate is interpreted as a sever insult.



To avoid this, they always cook twice as much food as can possibly be eaten and will simply keep on topping up your plate until you burst. It took me a long time on my trips to China to work this out and leave food on the plate as a signal I was full.

The best of this food is sorted and often placed under a fly proof cover to form the basis of the many courses at the next meal. It occurred to me that there may be some benefit in this as this food would pick up bacteria from the air and may help gut bacteria.



Much of the waste food however would be fed to the chickens and pigs. The Chinese love multiple courses so at a typical meal there would be one plate of pork and one of chicken. I have never been a fan of having a chicken's head sitting on my plate looking up at me so I would normally give the chicken dish a miss.

But the pork! This would send a nutritionist into either paralysis or ecstasy depending on whether they were from

the low fat or high fat school.

From the point of view of a simple gawker I can only observe that they marinated this in some hyper tasty potent secret brew and was totally irresistible even if you had just read all the Cornish, Esselstyn's warnings on the danger of fat.



It would be pretty obvious to even the lowest grade gawker that the Chinese are not into calorie restriction, low fat or slow eating. They simply consume vast amounts of fatty food in a matter of minutes - simply incredible.

Sorry low fatters - that is not why the elderly Chinese are so healthy.



On the positive side, they do eat a lot of vegetables. In addition to the regular Chinese and western vegetables they eat what they call forest plants. The old ladies go out to any bit of uncultivated land and collect plants - many are what I would call weeds but other are completely unknown to me but clearly recognised and regarded as prizes by the Chinese.



In addition to the trays of meat and vegetables there is typically a plate of some fish dish - often small fish, eels, crustaceans, frogs, turtles and generally weird creatures caught in the local streams.

They also eat a lot of fungi type things - I say fungi type things because some are clearly recognisable as from the mushroom family while others are jelly like mounds which looks as though they have been taken from a science fiction TV prop department. They tasted OK though.



But rice - white rice at that - they eat it by the ton.

Sorry low carbers - that is not why the elderly Chinese are so healthy.



OK professional dieticians you may be saying that it is because they don't snack. Well the Chinese will deny they snack but I have eyes in my head and look.

Just wander around the streets and they are full of little shops selling all sorts of food, one common bun like thing has the Chinese name which sounds something like laopobeang. It is really tasty and is like a rice bun with some dried fruit in the middle. They say that is not snacking because it is Chinese food.



Then of course there are the Chinese celebrations which have a special food which is eaten between meals. These celebrations occur in any week in which Wednesday follows Tuesday and last all week.

Sorry all you calorie restrictors - the Chinese eat a lot and all the time.



So, all Chinese eat massively, are slim and healthy into their nineties? Sorry all you statistician who love to simplify complex issues to a single number - wrong. The family I stayed with had three sisters and a daughter who were fat.

But their energy level was staggering - running up and down flights of stairs as though they did not exist. But their grandmother and brother were as thin as a rake



The Chinese also have what I can euphemistically call an inbuilt exercise routine. As they walk along the street they will be waving their arms about, clapping their hands even walking backwards as though they were a three-year-old with excess energy to dispose of urgently.

Most alarming is their habit of vibrating their legs at high speed. I have no idea how they do this - I can't - but it is quite disturbing to sit next to someone who is vibrating away as though they are about to explode.



But they are not all vibrating lumps of fat. Some, particularly the very old are pencil thin and will be totally motionless. It is quite disconcerting - like a humanised version of a praying mantis waiting for its prey.

But then this elderly stick insect lady will pick up her carrying stick (which is a remarkable piece of flexible suspension technology) fill up two giant bottles of water which must weigh some 30Kg each - load then onto the carrying stick and climb several flights of stairs to her apartment. I don't think I could do that. She is ninety and have numerous photos of elderly Chinese just like her.

OK Mr statistician I know I have no data on the number of people who died before reaching ninety but show me a bunch of pictures similar to mine taken in Bundaberg.



I think you will find a lot of ninety year olds sitting in a wheel chair covered in a blanket wondering whether it is wet from dribble or pee.

Now I am just gawking - collecting mental pictures - in my next letter I have to stop being a mindless imbecile and make some sense of all this - that's going to be fun.

Amateur gawkers

Wooh! I am in danger of becoming an amateur low-quality gawker by starting to think about what I have just gawked. Thinking is not allowed! A truly professional gawker must be a mindless imbecile and does not think about the result (until the gawking phase is finished) so I must get back to high quality gawking.

It is just so easy to have pre-set views and then you will always find evidence to support your preconceived views.

Don't worry as soon as I have finished gawking I will analyse my findings and write this up in my next newsletter (or newsletters) - it may be a bit of a slog but just give me time.

If you hang around you will find I have some pretty interesting ways of converting mindless gawking into useful solutions. It is just that I am old and haven't quite mastered the concept that any problem - even as complex as why millions of people can be dying from a bad diet - can be solved by a three-word slogan.

The market



There is probably no better place to learn about a Chinese town than by high quality gawking at the local market. I went virtually every day.

It seemed totally devoid of regulations. Anyone could come along - lay out a piece of sacking on the ground - stoop down as only the Chinese can - spread out your merchandise whatever it may be - chicken feet, frogs, medical herbs and you are in business.

In fact, the whole town seemed devoid of law. Children who looked as though they were waiting for their tenth birthday would roar around on scooters. If petrol - rather than the ubiquitous electric scooter - the idea is to remove the

exhaust system and drive flat out in the comfort that everyone could hear you coming and get out of the way.

I would have suggested to the military that if they were misguided enough to want to invade China that Jiangkou would be a good place for a parachute landing. That was until I had one of those close experiences.

How world war three was avoided

I was driving along in my little electric car and being an older person suffer from that curse of aging of needing more frequent bladder stops than I would prefer. Fortunately, rural China is pretty relaxed about that sort of thing so I pulled up alongside a suitable tree.

From nowhere there appeared a brigade or so of young extremely fit looking young men in military uniform. I anticipated that my deficient Mandarin may not be up to the job. My four Chinese companions leapt out of the car and talking simultaneously in very loud voices - as is the Chinese normal mode of communication - presumably tried to explain my predicament.

Not only was world war three averted but the young military men waved me on to a piece of vegetation which looked exactly like the one I was trying to use for natural reasons while grinning all over their faces at an old man's predicament.

Back to Chinese contradictions

I realised I was failing in my rules of gawking by actually looking for what I wanted to find rather than what was there by focusing on natural food. It would not have made any difference as the market was just full of the widest range of food and home-made stuff that there was no serious error incurred.

I would give a list of all the food stuffs I saw but won't nominally because there was too many but in reality, because I had no idea what most of them were.

But I did decide to pay homage by visiting the super market next to the market. This fell into the pattern of contradiction which is the norm in China - full of the same processed food in the super market near my base in Shenzhen. I just have to get used to this country of contradictions.

In the school, I visited each night to talk to the students there is what looks to me like a Natural Chinese Medicine clinic with pictures of the acupuncture points. Yet at night I see the kids coming out with ice creams and hot dogs - clearly traditional Chinese medicine is being upgraded.

What makes Jiangkou tick

I spent many hours just wondering around Jiangkou - sometimes breaking the rules of gawking - by wondering what makes this place tick - how did people earn a crust.

Farming was obviously important but I got the feeling was largely for local consumption.



There were a few operations - I can't call them factories - making bits for assembly into TV's and the like in Guangzhou, toys or clothes - but not enough to feed a town.

So, what made Jiangkou tick? The beauty of gawking is you see things that are a bit surprising. In Shenzhen, you see babies but nothing like in Jiangkou - they are everywhere - there are lots of kids and marginally older children creating mayhem on their scooters.

Of course, there are mums looking after their babies, but also older children and grandparents. But where were all the young and middle-aged adults? I was not seeing them.



For a rather tasteless joke I said to my friend Cathy and Denise - the English teachers - that the main industry in Jiangkou was rearing babies to be reared and be shipped to the factories of Guangzhou.

I realised that this may not be a good thing to say but I had got to know them pretty well by now and they were broad minded but I still expected some smart reply.

But no, they actually agreed with me. As I thought about this it made me a bit sad. I was living in a town where I could easily imagine was a China of two centuries ago - but when the old people died there was no one to replace them so it

would all be gone - and old China is lifestyle which is worth preserving.



But it is more that nostalgia - there is a treasure trove of information here on how the elderly Chinese people can still be healthy. My mobile phone was bulging with pictures of them (and some actually still have teeth).

But this explains one little problem I was having. I have already said this town was firework mad. These fireworks are nothing like what we have in Australia - they are extreme with no consideration for safety - the noise is just incredible.

In this tiny town there was almost a whole street dedicated to selling these military grade fireworks - why?

But I could not work out why they let them off at 2 in the morning - what is there to celebrate at that time of night?

Now I understood it was the celebration of a successful conception - or at least one that felt good enough that it should be a conception. Another child to be reared for the factories of Guangzhou.

The circus comes to town

You don't have to be an expert gawker to see the demand for entertainments - Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift don't hold concerts here every Friday. The town pretty well shuts down for Mah-jong after the dinner nap. But as luck would have it a circus came to town.

Well I say circus - it was really just a travelling troop of three guys, a girl and a monkey in a beat up old truck.



They set up shop in the main road and started their show. The flame thrower was first and pretty impressive I have to say - then a guy balancing on a bike on top of some distinctly rickety chairs. Chinese acrobats are always impressive and these lived up to the image.

A bit of conjuring then out they came with a chicken which they appeared to cut the legs off. The stumps were displayed for all to see.

Then they came out with a giant pot from which they proceeded to pull a variety of dead creatures - a snake, a small crocodile, frogs and many more. They dipped a rag into the oily liquid in the pot and bandaged up the chicken's legs.

The chicken made a miraculous recovery and by some accident escaped and had to be chased by the audience. The chicken was fast but was eventually caught by some young kids and was then proudly displayed by the ring master to the audience. You would have thought that he would have been more careful to prevent this prize exhibit escaping.

A cynic might even think it was stage managed.

The ringmaster then asked for volunteers who were suffering from back or neck pains and he applied a few drops of the oily brew onto their tender spots and they all agreed they had a miraculous improvement.

He then poured a bit of this magic potion into tiny bottles which he offered to sell - he did a roaring trade and no doubt made a handsome profit that night.

Next night the next town.

I am still in gawk mode but remember this little story for the next letter when I move into analysis mode and talk about modern methods of mass deception. But give this travelling troop a go - they had all the tricks well lined up - no doubt well learned from their ancestors.

Novel idea

Why not ask the Chinese why they are so healthy in old age? I tried this - the initial response was typically diet but then they quickly talked about the support structure which they seemed to rank as more important overall.



This takes many forms - one which I find particularly difficult to get my head around is rubbish. I was indoctrinated when young to always put my rubbish in the bin - by contrast the Chinese will throw their rubbish into the street - something I find very difficult to do.

The explanation they give me is that there is little in the way of social security in China (it is getting better but from a low base). But as far as I can find out there is some requirement from higher up the chain in the complex system of Government that requires local councils to keep the streets clean so they are virtually forced to employ street sweepers (which you see everywhere).

The average Chinese simply look on this as a form of social security (at least as long as you are healthy).

But if you get sick then you turn to the next level of insurance. There appears to be an invisible red line in Chinese society. If you are inside the line, which is largely around family but also includes close friends then the red envelope system comes into play.



You are expected (and people do) put money - according to their wealth - into a red envelope which is handed to the out of luck person.

Xiulan is always complaining to me that because we are seen as foreigners we are therefore seen as wealthy and must make a big contribution (although it is nominally secret).



But from a very young age children are brought up to be part of a community. Every morning you see the local kindergartens having the toddlers on parade marching, dancing and singing in unison. The little kids can put on a remarkable show with bouncing balls in perfect unison.

But this continues through the education system and even into old age where you see dancing and exercise groups on any bit of spare land or preferably in the parks which abound in China.

I keep on popping in and out of China every year and will often join in the street dancing (they seem to regard an epileptic kangaroo in their midst as normal). I see the same people year in and year out, often dressed in a common dress style - they are clearly a very close-knit community.



But it does not stop at death. Ancestral graves dot the farms and the ceremony of burning paper houses compete with dog and money may provide some comfort.

The end of gawking

Now in gawking I am not allowed to wonder whether it is the exercise or being part of a community group which has health benefits but in my next letter I have to stop the mindless gawking and work out a way of turning all the information I have collected into something useful.

I assume (and seriously hope) that you have taken my little stories and ramblings in the spirit in which they were intended. But in my next letter I have to be a bit more serious as the damage to our health is one of the major challenges facing modern society.

But don't expect some hyper brilliant extraction from the chaos that gawking creates - but we may be able to extract some effective working system based on managing the unknowns.

This is a bit like cooking where you start off with a mass of weird ingredients and somehow turn it into something really good. Maybe we could call this gooking.

But don't think it will be totally boring and all about the crazy statistics which infest modern dietary analysis. There are some really excellent publications from authors like Jason Fung, Tin Noaks and Michael Mosely which are inspiring reads and provide a sound analysis of the current state of dietary technology.

My approach is not to try and compete with these masters of science but to take a different approach. There is so much we still don't know about how our bodies really work at the scientific level and scientist have been debating this for over fifty years. I have no delusions that I am going to reveal the magic universal solution to the worlds dietary conflicts.

But I do not have to solve the worlds dietary problem rather I have to find a pragmatic solution from all the confusing and conflicting information which will work for you and me. I have asked Mr. Google for a word which means 'finding a pragmatic solution from confusing and conflicting information' but so far, he has failed to deliver.

Maybe you can help with a real or invented word - if not my next letter will be 'Pragging my gawks in China'.