



Chapter 21

At a Crossroads

If I were to follow the advice of the sunflower and continue to care about the world, the first issue would undoubtedly be advertising.

It seems I've come across a phrase somewhere: "Where there are humans, there are advertisements." At that time, I thought this notion was quite absurd. I remember during my time in the paradise of Fengxiang County, I had never seen an advertisement. Occasionally, I would see a piece of red paper pasted on a wall at a street corner. You're mistaken if you think that this was rental advertising; the red paper read: "O Heaven Royal, O Earth Royal, my house has a night-crying child. Passersby please recite this and the child will sleep soundly till dawn." What is this? In reality, it was a way for families to cope with their crying babies by soliciting spiritual comfort from passersby.

Later, when I arrived in Chengdu, I immediately understood the importance of advertisements, as I had to choose which movie to watch on Sundays. After moving to Guangzhou, forget it! "Tiger Balm" and "Ho Tong Wo" were everywhere, so ingrained you could hardly even push them out of your mind. Now, whether in Taipei or Beijing, one can indeed say that where there are humans, there are advertisements. The advertising industry has seamlessly permeated all avenues of life.

What is advertising? Before China's reform and opening-up, I hadn't been there, but I could imagine that no one, except possibly Mao Zedong, dared to advertise themselves or their companies. Advertisements are emblematic of capitalist societies and are a concrete realization of the theories of economics master Keynes. Nowadays, it has gone even further into obsession.

There is no doubt that advertising has become a crucial part

of the modern economic operation. There is an introductory book on advertising (there are plenty of such books in bookstores), which mentions “copywriting.” Copywriting pertains to the text or language used in advertisements and must avoid using words associated with failure, difficulty, cost, sales, death, contracts, worry, or other concepts that induce tragic or rational thoughts. Instead, it must emphasize magical words such as free, save, discover love, happy, victory, and win. In other words, advertising can be seen as a form of hypnosis, exerting every effort to encourage you to spend money—an elaborate strategy to manipulate consumer behavior. Since the global economic depression of 1929, economists have realized that encouraging consumption is the only means to achieve economic prosperity. The traditional saying about frugality has long lost its relevance. Advertisers, driven by manufacturers, aim to incite your desire to purchase, even if it's impulsive. Whether you end up using, discarding, or shelving the product, it doesn't matter because the mere

act of consumption promotes economic growth, including reducing the unemployment rate. Consumption has even become akin to a charitable act. Every time you use a credit card, many benefit—the bank, the shop assistant, the landlord renting premises, the transport industry, the manufacturers' workers, and don't forget the admen and advertising platforms.

In fact, this beast called advertising—does it adhere to the principles of fairness and justice? It is not only unfair but even fundamentally contradicting to these principles.

Taking a representative instance on the topic of "human rights"—elections—where one man, one vote is supposed to epitomize fairness. During the 2004 presidential election in Taiwan, how much money was spent on media by both parties? In the same year, the US presidential candidates—Bush, who owned a baseball team, and Cheney, who was a known wealthy individual too, faced opponents from the

Democratic Party who were also incredibly affluent. Thus, elections had turned into a game tailored for wealthy individuals. Does it mean that those lacking wealth are inherently less capable or passionate about serving the public? Irrespective of this, US presidents are not known for recouping their invested campaign funds with interest once in office. Is it the same for Southeast Asian countries, where, from local to presidential elections, how many elected officials truly possess a zeal for public service and how many aim to exploit their power for personal gain?

During Lincoln's campaign for the presidency, he had to personally visit voters, persuading them station to station. Today, the era is different; advertising has become a packaging art. As long as you are willing to spend money, you can effectively influence voters' minds. Over the years, US elections have formulated detailed rules limiting candidate expenditure on media advertisements. What about Southeast Asian countries? With generous budgets,

there are always those who will rake their brains to turn black into white for you. For the poor, the so-called "election" bears neither fairness nor justice. A leader elected without fairness and justice will hardly serve the entire nation, especially the poor. Probably, the leader's top priority is to serve the wealthy elites who funded his campaign.

Advertising has reached a stage where it is twisting human rationality. One case is enough to depict this: There is a U.S. company called Nike, which manufactures sports goods and clothing. Perhaps, some in Taiwan might not be familiar with the name, but almost everyone knows basketball superstar Michael Jordan. Nike is unwilling to spend money on the workers manufacturing its products. Behind Michael Jordan lies a dark, money-grubbing heart. Starting from 1992, Nike has completely shut down its factories in the U.S., opting to move all manufacturing to low-wage Asian countries. Irrespective of cost, they hire cheap labor, even

child labor, demanding extended working hours. On average, only about five dollars from every hundred-dollar pair of sneakers implicates labor costs. Consumers are not entirely ignorant of this exploitation, yet overwhelmed by Michael Jordan's charisma and the appeal of brand names, even young trendsetters in exploitation-ground locales like China, Indonesia, and Vietnam still wear Nike shoes.

From the perspective of capitalism's reality, the lower the workers' wages and the longer their work hours, the greater the benefits to the bosses. There is no illusion that employers would voluntarily increase wages or reduce hours. "Benefiting others at no cost" truly epitomizes the employers' mentality. What can counterbalance this capitalist tendency? Unions—yes, unions. With the right to strike, unions can force employers to increase wages and reduce work hours. The most clamorous slogan in America is human rights, with the U.S. government employing "human rights" to pressure certain Asian countries.

However, Nike and similar firms prefer locations without such rights protections like China and Vietnam. This is because these countries either prohibit or limit the formation of powerful unions capable of protecting workers' rights, relying on the marginal "sympathy" of regimes remaining from the communist era. How much protection can this scant "sympathy" provide workers?

Above is the second point regarding the lack of fairness and justice in advertising. Here's the third—media. Modern humans rely entirely on media, including television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, for information. Without these, one can hardly imagine how people would live today. What sustains the media? Advertising. As long as you have money, you can buy any form of advertisement—on TV, in newspapers, magazines, etc.—and barrage the public until they willingly accept your ideas or pay out of their pockets for your products. Statistics show that the average American discards a quarter of their food untouched, which

is strongly linked to the success of advertising strategies.

Currently, "embedded marketing" is also in vogue, incorporating advertisements within news in such a seamless manner that when you hungrily consume media information, you unwittingly become a target of hypnosis. Pity those who think they are well-informed, not realizing how much of what they "know" has been manipulated to entrap them.

To understand the role of media in modern society, one only needs to consider the saying, "There are people who do head-dealing business, but no one does money-losing business." This holds true unless the media are subsidized by governments, political parties, or conglomerates. Once the media take such subsidies, they cannot stand on the side of fairness and justice.

We've often heard TV news slogans like "Give me thirty

minutes, and I'll give you the world." Do they truly offer the whole world? No, they provide a narrowed-down version, selectively picked by them. A thick stack of newspapers selling for just ten dollars surely doesn't cover the cost of the paper, not to mention the costs of reporting, editing, production, printing, and distribution, which isn't even a fiftieth of the real cost. Where does the money come from? The answer is simple: TV, newspapers, and magazines all survive on advertising. Why are many capitalists and employers willing to buy advertising space? The answer is equally simple: to sell products. Now, do advertisers choose their media? Certainly, they do. Fashion magazines prioritize ads for cosmetics, cigarettes, alcohol, high-end real estate, and luxury hotels. No media that serves fairness, justice, or speaks for the poor can expect to survive. Even if media representing the poor could amass thousands, millions, or even more readers and viewers, and despite their applauses, could they afford luxury homes? Would they buy diet pills? A thousand poor readers or

viewers can't match the financial clout of a single wealthy individual.

Think about it—are abstract concepts like fairness and justice more important, or is cold, hard cash?

Do you know the current state of our Earth? One-fifth of the world's population lives on less than a dollar a day, and 2.8 billion people, about half the world's population, live on less than two dollars a day. Over a billion people don't have access to clean drinking water. Dreaming of a future where the poor in these countries gradually gain income is plausible and possible—their income may rise to three dollars a day or more. Meanwhile, the desks of multinational company executives are already piled high with plans, and global advertising giants are primed with copywriting. How can local colas stand against multinational brands like 7-Up or Coca-Cola? The true essence of “globalization” is making all opportunities

available to multinational corporations. You drink Coke, eat McDonald's, and wear Nike shoes.

Can such a world ever achieve global harmony? In reality, it's leading us towards a "global divergence," where the rich and the rich countries are getting richer, while the poor and poor countries are becoming poorer. Survival of the fittest, where the strong prey on the weak—isn't that the undeniable truth? Threatened species still receive aid from faux aristocrats, but marginalized small farmers, workers, and the proletariat? Who cares about them? Well, some do care, but their concern lies in how to extract that extra dollar from the poor through sweet talk and dazzling advertisements.

Humankind stands at a crossroads. One path emphasizes continued consumerism to drive growth, a way China, India, and other populous nations are avidly progressing. The other path? Advocates of this alternate route aren't scarce,

ranging from religious and moral leaders to today's environmentalists. But how can they change the reality where advertising manipulates media, and media in turn fuels consumerism? Can a disaster film like "The Day After Tomorrow" showing massive floods compare to the persuasive power of an advertisement that says, "Buy a car, and enjoy a lifestyle as enviable as an American"?

Countries like China and India are charging towards the capitalist, consumer-driven model and are achieving considerable results. Americans can't live without cars, causing the government to shamelessly plunder Middle Eastern resources. Would Chinese and Indians one day readily join the club squandering earth's resources?

In the past, humanity waged numerous wars for tribes, beliefs, nations, slogans, pride, and a multitude of reasons. Now, even with the clear knowledge of limited Earth resources, we still depend on lavish consumption to

survive. If future wars break out over dwindling survival resources, they'll be battles not just for survival, but for destruction.

Can we mobilize human ingenuity and virtue to lead us down a self-preserving path? In late August 2005, Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on four southern U.S. states. Will this calamity at least prompt Americans to reflect on their consumption habits?