

Chapter 21

Reached a Fork in the Road

If I follow Sunflower's advice and continue to care about the world, the first issue to address should be advertising.
I recall reading somewhere, "Where there are humans, there are advertisements." At the time, I found this statement absurd. I remember in the utopian haven of Fengxiang County, I never saw any advertisements. Occasionally, on the walls at street corners, I saw someone paste a red paper. But you are mistaken; that wasn't a rental ad. The red paper read, "O Heaven, O

Earth, my child cries at night. Gentlemen passing by, read this once, and he'll sleep until dawn." What is this? It turns out that their baby cried incessantly at night, and they had no choice but to ask everyone to "chant" as a form of spiritual comfort.
Later, when I arrived in Chengdu, I immediately recognized the importance of advertising because I needed to choose which movie to watch on Sundays. After moving to Guangzhou, names like "Tiger Balm" and "Hok Kao Fung" seemed impossible to forget. Nowadays, whether in

Taipei or Beijing, it is correct to say that where there are humans, there are advertisements. Advertising has penetrated to an extreme extent.

What is advertising? Before China's reform and opening up, I had never been there, but I can imagine that, aside from Chairman Mao, no one—whether individuals, companies, or merchants—dared to advertise themselves. Advertising is a primary representation of capitalist society and the concrete realization of the theories of

economic master Keynes, albeit taken to an extreme today.
Undoubtedly, advertising has become a crucial element in the economic operations of modern society. In a book about advertising basics, which are plentiful in bookstores, it mentions writing "copy". The copy is the text or language in advertisements, and certain words must be avoided, such as failure, difficulty, cost, selling, death, contract, worry, and other tragic or rational words. Instead, they emphasize magical terms like free, save, discover love, joy,

victory, and win. In other words, advertising is a form of hypnosis that uses every method to encourage consumer spending and is a means of guiding people to consume.

Since the Great Depression of 1929 in the U.S. and the world, economists have understood that the only way to a prosperous economy is to encourage consumption. The old maxim from the Family Precepts of the Zhu family, "One grain of porridge, one meal of rice, one must think how they come about; half a

thread, half a strip, never forget the efforts that produced them," is outdated. Advertisers driven by manufacturers stimulate your desire to buy, even if it’s just a momentary impulse. Whether you use, discard, or set aside what you purchase doesn’t matter; as long as you spend, you've already helped economic growth, including reducing unemployment. Consumption becomes akin to charity. When you swipe your card and consume, banks, salespeople, landlords who lease to businesses, the transport industry, factory workers, and

of course, the advertisers and media providing these ads benefit.

Actually, is advertising, this monster, in line with fairness and justice? It is not only unfair and unjust but can be said to go against such principles. Considering human rights and the most representative topic: elections. One person, one vote, all votes equal—considered the fairest matter. In Taiwan's 2004 presidential election, how much money did both sides spend on media ads? The U.S. presidential candidates in the 2004

election—Bush, a baseball team owner, couldn't have become one without a billion-dollar fortune. Cheney, the vice-presidential candidate, was also a known wealthy man. The Democratic candidates were also extremely wealthy. See, elections have essentially become a game for billionaires. Does it mean the working class lacks the ability or enthusiasm to serve the nation? In any case, American presidents dare not entertain thoughts of recouping their investment after election. In several Southeast Asian

countries, from local to presidential elections, how much enthusiasm do the winners have for public service compared to their desire to leverage their power for personal gain?

When Lincoln ran for president, he had to persuade voters face-to-face, station by station. Today it’s very different; advertising is a form of packaging. As long as you are willing to spend, convincing voters is not an issue. In the U.S., election advertising on media is regulated, limiting how much can be spent. But in

Southeast Asia, if you have enough money, someone will figure out how to turn black into white for you. So-called elections offer no fairness or justice to the poor. Leaders elected without fairness and justice—how will they serve all people, especially the poor? They're more likely to serve the wealthy patrons who funded their campaigns.

Advertising has now reached a level where it distorts human intellect. Nike, for example, is familiar to everyone in Taiwan because of basketball legend Michael Jordan. But Nike is

reluctant to spend on the workers who manufacture their products. Hidden behind Michael Jordan is a dark, profit-driven heart. Since 1992, Nike has had no factories in the U.S.; they manufacture in low-wage Asian countries, willing to employ child labor, with workers working excessive hours. For each pair of $100 sneakers, less than $5 is spent on workers. Consumers are not completely unaware, but succumb to Jordan's allure and brand worship, so young people in China, Indonesia, and Vietnam are still willing to buy Nike

shoes.

From a capitalist perspective, lower wages and longer hours for workers benefit the bosses. There's no reason to expect bosses to voluntarily raise wages and reduce hours, as "not benefiting others, only oneself" is their real mentality. What balances capitalists? Trade unions. With the right to strike, unions can force employers to raise wages and lower hours if necessary. America touts human rights the loudest and uses it as a weapon to pressure certain Asian countries. Unfortunately,

companies like Nike prefer countries without human rights, like China and Vietnam, where unions that advocate workers' rights are restricted or non-existent. These countries rely on a residual sense of "sympathy" for workers from their communist past to extend some protection, though it’s minimal.

This is the second way advertising is not fair or just. The third is media. In modern society, we depend entirely on media—TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc. Without them, we wouldn't

know how to live. How does media survive? Advertising. With money, one can buy any ad spot. Media like TV, newspapers, and magazines bombard us until we willingly accept their ideas or purchase their products. Studies show Americans throw away a quarter of their food untouched, largely due to successful advertising strategies.

Now, "product placement" is trendy, hiding ads within media news. As you hungrily absorb information, you become a hypnotized subject, mistakenly

thinking you’re well-informed. How much of what you know is engineered traps set by hidden bosses? The media’s role is summed up by: “Some businesses will risk head-chopping deals, but no one commits to losing ones.” Unless government, political parties, or conglomerates subsidize a media outlet, it can’t stand on principles of fairness and justice.

A common TV news slogan is, "You give us thirty minutes, we
We often see the TV news slogan: "You give me thirty

minutes, I'll give you the world." Does it truly give us the world? The world it presents to us is narrow and selectively chosen by them. A thick stack of newspapers sells for just ten dollars; I doubt the cost of the paper itself is covered, let alone the costs of reporting, editing, printing, and distribution. Ten dollars must be far less than one-fiftieth of the cost. Where does the money come from? The answer is simple: TV, newspapers, and magazines all survive on advertising. Why are so many capitalists and employers willing to place ads?

The answer is also simple: to sell their products. Further asking whether those who pay for ads select their media is unnecessary; fashion magazine ads inevitably feature cosmetics, cigarettes, alcohol, luxury homes, and deluxe hotels. Any media that stands on fairness, justice, or representing the poor is doomed. Representing the poor might garner tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or millions of readers or viewers—who might cheer and applaud, but can they afford luxury homes? Will they buy slimming pills? Ten

thousand poor readers or viewers don't match the spending power of a wealthy individual.

Consider it: Which is more important, abstract concepts like fairness and justice or cold, hard cash?
Do you know the current condition of our planet? One-fifth of the world's population lives on less than a dollar a day, and two-point-eight billion people—about half the population—live on less than two dollars a day. Over a billion people lack access to clean drinking water. Dreaming

of the future, we pray that the poor in these impoverished countries will gradually have an increase in their incomes. This prayer might come true, with the possibility that the poor in these countries will earn three dollars a day or more. Yet, on the desks of business managers at multinational corporations, gigantic stacks of project plans have already piled up. Multinational advertising companies are sharpening their tools, ready with promotional "copy." How can local sodas compete with 7-Up or Coca-Cola? The true

meaning of "globalization" is to give all opportunities to multinational companies. You drink Coca-Cola, eat McDonald's, wear Nike sneakers.

Such a world cannot lead to global harmony. In fact, we are evidently moving towards "great global disparity," where rich countries and people become richer, and poor countries and people become poorer. Survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle—who can deny this truth? Endangered animals at least have genuine or fake aristocrats to rescue

them, but who cares about peasants, workers, and the proletariat being squeezed out of the economic market? No, someone cares; they care about how to coax that extra dollar out of the poor. They've long been prepared with various cunning words and spectacular visual advertisements.

Humanity stands at a fork in the road. One path is to continue stimulating consumption for growth, and populous countries like China and India are moving in this direction. The other path?

Historically, many have advocated for an alternative, from religious and moral leaders to today's environmentalists. But how can they change the reality of advertising-driven media, which in turn encourage consumption? Can a disaster film like "The Day After Tomorrow," depicting great floods, really compare to the effectiveness of a commercial saying, "Buy a car, and live the American dream"?

Countries like China and India also stride towards the American path of capitalism,

with notable success. Americans can't live without cars, so their government shamelessly plunders Middle Eastern resources. Will Chinese and Indians join the club of lavishly consuming Earth's resources too?

In times past, humanity endured countless wars and slaughters—for tribes, faith, "nation," slogans, face, and countless other reasons. Today, knowing Earth’s resources are limited, we ironically rely on squandering these resources to survive. Future wars for survival

resources, once ignited, will not just be conflicts for survival but wars of destruction.

Can mobilizing all human wisdom and virtue lead humanity down a self-preserving road? Hurricane Katrina's devastation of four southern states in late August 2005—will it at the very least prompt Americans to reflect on their consumption habits?