

Up and Tao*: Dialogue in the Stairwell

By Hung Liu

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Passerby #1: So you're the artist?

Hung Liu: Ya. So what do you think?

Passerby #1: Are you working all on your own? I mean, are you painting the whole stairwell by yourself?

HL: That's true

Passerby #2: So you have good life insurance?

HL: No. But my car does. I'll be very careful on the scaffolding and ladders.

Passersby #s

3, 4, & 5: Very nice. It's looking great. A good job – it looks aggressive.

HL: (Aggressive?)

Passerby #6: You'll be the person people are jealous of.

HL: (Answers) Thank you. Thanks. And thank you again. But, it's a lot of work. (I've been working like crazy, day and night; upstairs and downstairs, up the scaffolding and down. My back and neck are sore. My arm hurts. I just took some pills. But I can't stop working on my mural – nothing but my mural.) There's

a shrine (pointing) there. Didn't you notice it?

Passerby #7: What's that, the huge head of what kind of animal?

HL: A giant sheep's head, between the lamp and the floor. In ancient China, sheep meant fortune. Good fortune is what we pray for.

Passerby #8: Are you a Buddhist?

HL: I don't think so.

Passerby #8: Some other religion?

HL: I don't know – maybe sometimes, under certain conditions. After all, an atheist is often a pantheist under cover. (So I put the sheep's head on my wall, instead of Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, or some other God or Goddess.) Don't you think my sheep's head has some magic or power?

Passerby #9: What's your writing about? Does it have meaning?

HL: Of course there's meaning. I am using Confucius' famous discourse on "The Great Harmony." In Chinese it's Da Tong (Ta Tung), an ideal or perfect society. I'll give you the English translation of his words. (I have a dream. Human beings have a dream, for generations. They never give up the dream. It's a dream about heaven, paradise, Utopia. There has never been a Utopia in this world, but the dream of a better world, of a Great Harmony, is going on and on and on.)

Passerby #10: But a lot of events in this world are just the reverse.

HL: That's why I put my sheep shrine here, between the two floors. You can see it immediately from either the top or bottom

of the stairwell, from both doors. The stairwell is a symbol for life: people enter from several points, some going up, others down. But in Chinese philosophy and art, ascending and descending do not mean heaven and hell. They are parts of an infinite cycle, the transformation of potential energy. There are always crises in the world; we are beset with them. But we never give up trying to find our way – we keep using, penetrating, transferring, and losing time and space. In other words, we keep trying to communicate. Communication rises above time (past, present, future) and space (sky, earth, ocean). My images are symbols for discourse. You can read them as you go up and down the stairwell.