

## Catherine Tao

The rope is neatly draped over my climbing partner's lap as I habitually check over the knots and mechanisms that tether us to each other and the rock. My stomach is full of nerves and my brain is saturated with endorphins. We are currently 600 feet off the ground, hanging on the side of a cliff, with another 500 feet to ascend. At 12,000 feet of elevation, the air is nearly biting and the afternoon sun sings my skin. We've been awake since 3 am. This has become my weekly ritual during the summer months. As soon as my chalky hands touch the granite, the world goes quiet. I begin climbing. This is what I want above all else. This is home. How on Earth did I get here?



In early May of 2015, I stepped out of the Big House, electrified by the freedom that lay ahead of me and simultaneously clueless about what I was supposed to do with my diploma. Naturally, I put off making any decisions about jobs or careers by hiking the John Muir Trail with a fellow PitE alum. After the grueling 220 miles, there was no doubt in my mind as to what I would do. I wanted a lifestyle where mountains were a consistent hum in my life rather than a weekend getaway. It led me to move to a small dusty 4,000 person town, 170 miles away from the nearest Trader Joe's, and situated at the base of the relentless granitic peaks that I had just walked through.



Pre-graduation Catherine would be flabbergasted that by now, I still do not have a clue as to what career path I want. I have worked three jobs in the past two years and my resume is not the most coherent but has allowed me to afford the lifestyle I wanted: climbing and more climbing. It took me until now to realize the cliché yet profound truth that my worth and quality of life does not depend on my job, title, or income. I currently work as a Fisheries Interpreter at the California Department of Fish

and Wildlife and live in my car. I fall asleep in the bed I built for myself, with the trunk open, to the smell of sagebrush and pines. I am happier than I have ever been.

I have been fortunate enough to have found my passion and been able to immerse myself in it. This lifestyle gives me invaluable clarity and harvests bounds of ineffable elation. Climbing forces me to stretch the limits of what I am capable of and allows me the space and tools to continue to grow

through it. Right now, I am working towards the goal of organizing an all-female expedition to the remote valleys and peaks at the border of Tibet and China in the fall of 2018 to explore and establish new climbing routes. Regardless of the path that my passion will take me, whether it is climbing or becomes something else, I know I will always progress as long as I fuel myself with it. As long as I have passion, I am full.

