

Living on Mountains

Steep rocks, an elevation of 13,000 feet and an extremely low temperature—we humans cannot imagine living in an environment with these horrible features. However, living at precipitous heights, from Alaska to the U.S. Rocky Mountains, the mountain goats may name this dangerous environment as “home.” Mountain goats are born with superiorities: they have rough pads on the bottom of their two toes to provide the grip of a natural climbing shoe; they have distinctive beards and long, warm coats to protect them from cold temperatures and piercing mountain winds; their dazzling white coats provide good camouflage on the snowy heights. These outstanding advantages enable mountain goats to live far away from other animals and most humans, which means they are almost free from predators. The cost of this lifestyle is not only the risk of falling down from the mountain, but also their loneliness. When they climb up one mountain after another carefully, when they find their food between the harsh rocks, when they peer ahead but only find themselves—will they be a little envious of the animals that live under mountains?

I don't know mountain goats' thoughts, but to me, I envy cultures that enjoy recreation and arts under mountains. For traditional sports, people appreciate their spirit of seeking beyond humans' limits; for traditional dances like ballet and ballroom dancing, people regard them as high art and enjoy their elegance. Just as mountain goats, despite their name, don't belong to the family Capra (Capra includes all other goats), street dancers are expelled from the dance family according to most Chinese people's views. When it comes to dance, keywords such as elegance, performance and choreography will rush into people's brains. However, street dance is born with the characteristic of breaking those rules. Street dancers place creativity first and are not bound to specific rules.

Battle, which is an important part of street dance, shows the unique characteristics of street dance. Generally, two dancers stand face to face in a battle, and the DJ will play the song randomly for dancers to freestyle on their own. When music starts, the carnival starts. Passion saturates every cell of dancers and the turbulent waves of audiences' screams fire the air. In order to win, the dancers charge their body with power and deftness, leaving the whirlwind as they move. All dancers spare no effort to put themselves in every "strange" angle—stretching their arms to their back and crawling on the ground are just basic combo. After two dancers show their explanation of the music, the judges will judge whose performance is better based on their musicality, technique and even their ability of creating unprecedented moves to make audiences scream for them. I remember one of the battle winners even spun his head 180 degrees, looking scary but astonishing to all the audiences on the scene. It's difficult for people who do not dance to know which side wins over the other; even people who specialize in one category of street dance may not understand why winners win. For instance, I am a popping dancer (popping is one of the categories of street dance) and I cannot distinguish differences between house dancers. For me, their moves all look the same, only containing repeating, dizzying footsteps with their arms swinging disorganizedly, just how people who know little about street dance think of street dancers. Therefore, although street dance is born with the superiority of exceeding the limitation of people's imagination, the high standard of comprehending the street dance limits the street dancers' chances to perform it on stage or on TV. In other words, street dance lives on mountains lonelily.

Before I knew about mountain goats, my stereotype made me take it for granted that all goats live under mountains. People have stereotypes about street dance too. As a female popping dancer from China, I have to overcome two overlapped stereotypes. The first one is about my

gender. Popping is a male-dominated street dance category because it requires muscles to create the effect called “pop,” looking like a vibration. Sometimes poppers’ bodies look so flexible like they are made of water with legs and arms rippling and undulating like ocean waves; sometimes their movements look robotic with arms and legs bending in rigid straight lines, the hand suddenly jerking left and right. If traditional dancers can be compared to graceful swans, popping dancers must be metal, always hardening their body but also melting themselves. Many people consider popping lacking in beauty, especially for girls. I still remember when I was performing my popping choreography on Chinese New Year Gala, the air was filled with silence when I hit my body hard continuously to create an effect of electric shock. The wind I felt when I did back-slides grew piercing and I spared more effort than ever to keep control of my pointed body parts to “pop” on the stage. After I finished my performance, I heard somebody commenting with scornful voice, “What was she doing? It seemed like she had cramps, like a Parkinson patient.” These words washed down from my head to toe icily, dousing my excitement about getting the rare chance of performing on a stage. I agree with the point that popping relates little to femininity, but to me, dance is more than showing one’s charm. Instead, dance is a way of showing my mind---how I created those moves with innovation and how they reflect my control of my body. I can play with a ball that doesn’t exist and imitate a puppet or robot, but the stereotype of what girls should do impedes my dance being appreciated by others.

Chinese audiences often fail to appreciate street dancers compared with Westerners. Since street dance puts an emphasis on freedom and expressing oneself, many dancers show their personality by dying their hair or tattooing, which are regarded in China as a spirit of rebellion. Chinese culture pays attention to unification and following the rules. For example, the Chinese folk dance, a traditional art of Chinese culture, requires extremely hard techniques like spinning

with your arms holding one leg to your face. Unlike street dancers, who are encouraged to show their unique personal styles regardless of their techniques, Chinese folk dancers must learn all Chinese folk techniques for many years before showing themselves to the public for they have to fit the dance group. Chinese folk dancers are trained with strict rules: many dancers' teachers will beat them with a pointer if their techniques don't meet the requirement. The Chinese folk dance reflects the sobriety of "Chinese minds" and the standard of art in Chinese culture. As a result, Chinese always stick to a stereotype that street dancers don't behave well and the "disorganized" and unrestrained street dance cannot be called art. This stereotype killed many young Chinese people's interest in street dance as well as made street dance more inaccessible. As an underground culture, how can street dance change people's stereotypes and be an art that people can appreciate and enjoy? How can people accept other minority cultures in China?

Despite threats from outsiders, the insiders also destroy themselves. Mountain goats live on the mountains, avoiding most predators, but they cannot escape the threats from the mountain lions, their few "companions." Struggling on mountains is cruel enough for mountain goats, but they have to fight against the animal that shares the same environment with them. It's a war between insiders.

Mountain lions exist in street dance. They look down on other street dancers, disrespect other categories of street dance other than their own. Many break dancers place themselves higher than other street dancers because of the difficulty of their moves such as spinning a one-handed handstand; many dancers who focus on battles disdain those who only make choreographies instead of attending battles. Competing for limited audience resources, these mountain lions are eager to stand out from all categories of street dance. They label themselves as the only original and true street dance, even if all categories of street dance have their own

particular charm. These mountain lions are reluctant to cooperate with mountain goats, making the whole culture more vulnerable and decentralized.

Winning battles leads to more battles. In order to survive on the mountains, mountain lions hunt the mountain goats. However, they never imagine that if one day, they completely win this battle—mountain goats are preyed upon almost to extinction—they will have to go down from the mountain for survival, which means they have to face more battles. So too, champions of street dance have to descend the mountain and join the public of mainstream dance with their one species of dance. All street dancers like to win battles: it's the proof of your ability; it's the royal road to the fame hall; it's even directly related to dancers' income. One troubling phenomena exists among street dancers that ultimately makes them unprepared for mainstream life under the mountain: many of them only attend practice sessions of their own category of street dance, during which the style of the dance music remains the same, catering to the battles of this specific dance category. Honing their dance skills in one certain kind of battle music enhances their possibility to win the battles of this category of street dance. However, these street dancers, who immerse themselves in only one kind of music all the time, dull their ability of dancing to different kinds of music. It's ridiculous that the world champion of popping may not be able to dance with the songs without beats. When the champions of the battles walk down the mountain for their popularity, they disappoint the public, which expects these street dancers to compete with all kinds of music and with traditional dancers, because they stick to the strong-beat battle music too much so that they cannot handle the music like light music. On the contrary, the traditional dancers win this battle against street dancers so easily. To win battles, street dancers have to practice with the battle songs all along; after winning battles and earning attention of the public, street dancers have to face more battles with all kinds of music and competitors, in which

they always lose. Prejudice of Chinese consumers of traditional forms of dance, gender stereotypes, as well as limited forms of music during their training doom street dancers under the mountains. As a resident on the mountain, I feel lonely when I peer ahead but only find street dancers who keep battling like me. Therefore, the life below the mountain seems attractive to me. However, when I gaze down, I start to wonder whether I truly want to win the battle and get the chance to live under mountain if all that awaits me below is defeat among traditional dancers. How can street dancers jump out of this circulation below the mountain? How can street dancers live like mountain goats by developing tough and versatile routines and thick skins to protect them from piercing audiences and stereotypes?

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