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In the West, perceptions of kung fu are reflected by our pop culture. Generations of kids who grew up watching Bruce Lee movies have gone on to create art that uses kung fu as a touchstone – from rapper Kendrick Lamar, who styled the tour and videos supporting his 2017 album “Damn” around the ancient martial art, to a series of box-office-smashing movies about a gifted animated panda.

In the East, specifically in China, kung fu is a national symbol viewed with reverence and seriousness. As The New Yorker’s Evan Osnos wrote, a film like “Kung Fu Panda” “could only be made by a foreigner because Chinese filmmakers would never try to play with such solemn subjects” as kung fu or pandas. The idea of flipping kung fu conventions on their head at all, never mind creating something that portrays it as zany and cartoonish, is outlandish and disrespectful.

“Actually,” said Jigme Konchok Lhamo, “kung fu is not for fighting or causing pain; it is for self-defense. It was the same for Shaolin monks. They would stay in retreats alone in the mountains, where there were robbers and thieves, so it was just to protect themselves. The Bodhidharma taught kung fu to monks for self-defense, not fighting or violation.”

This is how Konchok shoots down the common misconceptions about kung fu. She is a nun from the Himalayan Drukpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Here, the traditionally patriarchal makeup of Buddhist orders of monks and nuns has been subverted, and it is these young women who have taken the lead.

A part of the mission they have taken upon themselves includes going into communities – so far, in the towns surrounding their monastery in Nepal, as well as parts of the northern Indian region of Ladakh – to teach women and girls how to defend themselves using the mythologized techniques of kung fu.

Being branded as ass-kicking kung fu nuns is an eye-catching and unusual headline. But when I spoke to Konchok and her fellow Drukpa nun Jigme Wangchuk Lhamo – at Trust Conference, the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s annual human rights and anti-trafficking seminar in London – it was the dedicated and inspiring humanitarian work they do in the region that they eruditely and excitedly want to discuss and impress upon.

“We traveled a long distance to bring a message to young girls,” said Wangchuk, who along with Konchok took part in an onstage panel at the conference. “They can be as strong and as powerful as a man, if you give them what they want and what they need, if

you give them a chance.”

Konchok called it an opportunity.

“Girls maybe wouldn’t have believed before that they could do that,” she said. “That’s how kung fu came in. You always hear about Shaolin monks, right? But what about kung fu nuns? That’s a huge thing!”

They both had a fizzing energy – finishing each other’s sentences and always united in what they believe. Multiple times during our conversation, they spoke in spontaneous unison. Sometimes it was hard to keep up, but their passion for their service pulled me through.

“After learning kung fu, we became more confident. We were physically and mentally strong, and it even helps us with our meditation in our spiritual lives,” Konchok said. “Just because we practice and teach kung fu doesn’t mean we don’t follow our spiritual path too. We do each and every thing side by side.”

“We have been learning to play drums and to perform the dragon dance – all the things that girls were prohibited from doing in the early days of our order. So it’s not just kung fu. We have been doing all the things that society says girls and women can’t do, and that’s in terms of our Buddhist nunnery life also.”

The Buddhist lineage the two young women belong to wasn’t always as forward-thinking and unconventional as it now seems. In 2008, the Gyalwang Drukpa, the leader of the Drukpa line, began reforms that brought the order’s nuns to the forefront and started their new tradition of dispersing thoughts that prioritize the fight for women’s equality and empowerment.

“People think that nuns should stay inside a nunnery, serving monks, washing their clothes, acting like a waiter or something,” Konchok said. “They say we have to be peaceful, always meditating, (they begin to talk as one) in retreat, praying, chanting, sitting, doing nothing. We have a higher level of thinking here.”

“In our lineage, our monks have always supported us and shown us respect. We are equal.”

It was this alternative attitude that inspired Wangchuk to dedicate her life to the order.

“When I was small, my thoughts were really big,” she said. “I hated when people said girls can’t do anything. I loved helping and serving others, and from very early on, I knew I wanted to do this for my whole life. I had heard about what the Gyalwang Drukpa was doing from my uncle, who was a monk within the order, and he said, ‘I have the perfect place for you; you can find your dream there.’

“I found this place, and I knew it was where



These Buddhist martial artists do more than kicks and somersaults

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I wanted to be. It meant the opportunity to do anything I wanted – to learn kung fu, to help and give support to other girls, and to help us discover and take heed of our own power.”

In the historically gendered hierarchy of the religious establishment, achieving what the Drukpa nuns have is especially radical. They are now even entrusted with the secrets to the most esoteric form of meditation, something that was only previously available to male members of the order.

This is even more apparent as we live through #MeToo and Time’s Up, movements in the Western world where women are beginning to be listened to when speaking out about experiences of systemic harassment, male privilege and sexual abuse that seem to have infected all walks of life.

By speaking out and teaching kung fu, Wangchuk, Konchok and their community of fellow nuns are encouraging women and girls in marginalized sections of their region to start making change in their own way.

“This world says ‘ladies first,’ but this phrase is useless if it isn’t applied in real life. There is nothing first in this world for ladies,”

Wangchuk said. “It’s often said that our kung fu workshops

empower women. And you say this about street papers too – they empower homeless people. But actually, what we are doing is not giving people power but allowing them to discover their own power. We all have our own power. We just need the support and the love to find it.”

Behind the kung fu classes that made them famous, the Drukpa nuns do less publicized, but far more extraordinary, work in the communities surrounding their monastery home. This includes an eco *pad yatna* (walking pilgrimage) to remote villages, collecting plastics and other non-biodegradable waste to educate communities about protecting the environment. In the wake of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, they rode bicycles in high altitude through the Himalayas to help with the relief effort, clearing rubble and helping deliver aid to people in places that even the world’s largest organizations couldn’t reach. At the same time, they advocated against the spike in slavery, human trafficking and sexual assault that sprung up in the aftermath.

Not only did this make a real, visible difference, but it also showed their detractors what 700 Buddhist women could achieve together.

“After the earthquake, we heard that girls were being sold because their families believed that they weren’t capable of doing anything to help rebuild,” Konchok said.

“But we have been doing so much work,

and doing it ourselves. We told these people: ‘Look, we are girls, and we can do it, so why can’t yours? We are from the same place, the same culture; why are you pushing your girls back? You should have faith in your daughters and encourage them. Why don’t you give them a chance?’ This especially shocked us because we are nuns, but we are also sisters and daughters too.”

Now that they and their fellow nuns are achieving international recognition for their work, they hope that they can inspire a similar change in the wider world. But, of course, being confined to their humble surroundings, they are taking their movement one step at a time.

“If we leave an impact on one person and that person impacts on another, eventually we will begin to see people change their way of thinking, until it spreads throughout whole communities,” Konchok said. “Here (at Trust Conference), we have met all these people

who support us and what we do.

That makes it seem like a bigger change is coming. We may only effect that change in a small part of the world, but it is still a change.”

At Trust Conference, Wangchuk and Konchok wowed the crowd with their high kicks

and somersaults on stage. But more impressively, the young women roused the audience with wisdom beyond their years and an idealism that perhaps the older, more experienced attendees had since replaced with cynicism.

They talked about the importance of not only supporting women from an early age, but also better educating boys so that they grow up to respect women. They summarized a vision of equality about which they spoke so enthusiastically to me earlier that day.

“Most boys are told that they have all the power in the house, and girls are told to sit silently,” Konchok said. “But the problem is that’s what has been passed down to them by parents. I want parents to teach their daughters to be strong, to defend themselves. It’s not compulsory that you need to know kung fu or to fight. It’s more the mentality they have to change.”

Wangchuk agreed: “We’re not saying that men can’t change. We can – we have to – change their thinking. But it’s up to parents, too. Don’t warn your daughter not to go out; warn your sons to behave well and treat women with respect.”

“Until we are all equal, as long as we push one part of society down, no matter whether that be women or some other demographic, we will never achieve peace.”

Courtesy of INSP.ngo



Nuns deliver aid as part of their humanitarian work.