Volunteer Wen Hsien holds up a sign offering free acupuncture on the last day of a free health care clinic set up by Remote Area Medical in Inglewood, California. // Jae C. Hong/AP

The 'Barefoot Doctors' Serving America's Cities

MARY WANG MAY 22, 2018

Since it took root in the U.S. during the Gold Rush, Chinese medicine has served marginalized communities, from immigrants to Black Panthers to sex workers.

According to acupuncturist and herbalist Julia Bennett, her interest in the practice started when she was a child in 1950s North Carolina, where a knowledge of herbs was of vital importance in her community. "I grew up during Jim Crow and the height of segregation. We didn't have access to doctors and hospitals," she explained. "We were third people, so we *had* to use herbs."

These days, Bennett lives in Brooklyn and is a founding member of Third Root, a community health center in the Ditmas Park neighborhood. The center's mission is to provide healthcare with an orientation towards social justice, offering acupuncture, yoga, therapeutic massage, and herbal medicine on a sliding payment scale. "Acupuncture has become a moneymaker," Bennett says, "So we want to make sure that everything we do is accessible and affordable to all people."

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While the price of an acupuncture session in cities like New York and San Francisco can reach hundreds of dollars, Chinese medicine in the Unites States historically has been used to provide care for communities who were denied access to mainstream health services. When Chinese immigrants to the United States arrived en masse during the mid-19th century Gold Rush, their medicine was mostly used to serve Chinese populations. The immigrants had brought herbs with them, and systemic racism confined them to local Chinatowns—even for medicine.

"Buying medicine was like doing groceries," said Donna Mah, an acupuncturist and the guest curator of "Chinese Medicine in the US: Converging Ideas, People, and Practices," an exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America, running April 26-September 9. "You can go to any Chinatown and there's always an herbal dispensary."

The use of Chinese medicine expanded in the 1970s, when the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, and other activist groups started looking for an inexpensive way to provide health care for their members and to poor neighborhoods. According to Tolbert Small, who was the Panther's medical advisor and physician, the poor and people of color were intentionally underserved by the United States government. "They have the worst statistics and mortality rates, which is still the case today," he says. "These communities started providing free clinics for themselves since our government wasn't interested."

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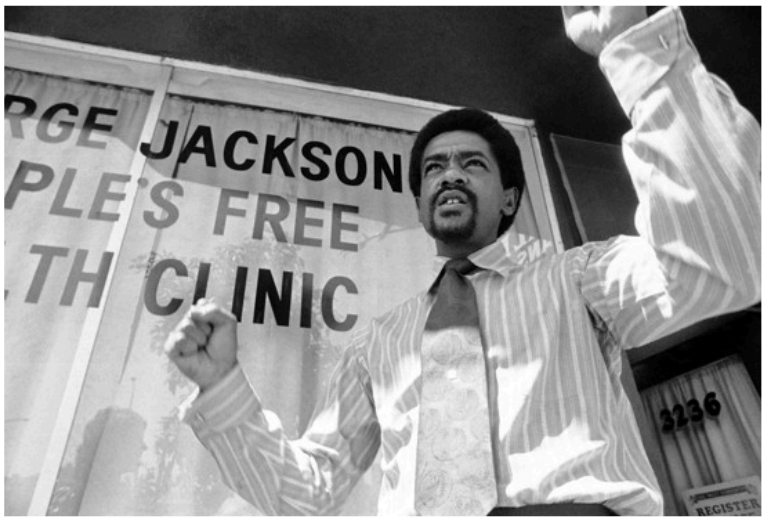
The Panthers’ activism was partially inspired by the Communist model in China, and, when Chairman Mao Zedong invited a delegation of the group—including Small—to tour the country in 1972, they witnessed a model of healthcare they were eager to implement back home. The Chinese government used “barefoot doctors”—healthcare providers trained in basic acupuncture and herbal medicine—to serve its growing population. Contrary to academically-trained doctors—the few of whom were mostly concentrated in big cities—these providers served their communities without the need of many resources or extensive training. On top of that, their roots in folk expertise blurred the boundaries between laypeople and the educated elite.

This influenced the network of People’s Free Medical Clinics the Panthers were setting up in American cities—including Oakland, where Small helped lead the efforts after completing his medical residency at Alameda County Medical Center. Following the Chinese model, the volunteer-led clinics provided free medical care and trained members in basic healthcare techniques that didn't require much previous knowledge. In China, Small had witnessed surgeries where acupuncture was used as a complement—including a patient who, with the help of acupuncture, kept talking throughout his eye operation. Back home, Small organized sessions where activists could come together to practice. “Barefoot doctors learned by practicing on

themselves," he said. "When I got back, I used a book called Basic Acupuncture Techniques and did all the points on myself."

Activists also were turning to acupuncture for relief on the East Coast. In the South Bronx, the Young Lords worked to reform the dilapidated Lincoln Hospital—which had become known as the "butcher shop of the South Bronx" by some—to better serve the neighborhood's mostly black and Puerto Rican residents. Together with the Panthers, fellow activists, and acupuncturist Mutulu Shakur, the group established the the Lincoln Detox Center, where an ear-based technique was introduced to help battle addiction. Shakur would go on to cofound the Black Acupuncture Advisory Association of North America and the Harlem Institute of Acupuncture, where he continued to train community-minded acupuncturists until he was arrested in 1986 and subsequently convicted for his role in the 1981 Brink's robbery.



Bobby Seale in front of the Panthers free clinic in Berkeley on Sept. 8, 1972. (RWK/AP)

Though the clinic was evicted in 1978, the staff moved to a nearby location and continued providing care. That's also where Bennett, in the early 1980s, was introduced to acupuncture. The crack epidemic had started devastating the surrounding area and other inner cities neighborhoods, and addicts were neglected by the government at best and incarcerated at worst. "It was amazing to walk into the space and see all these people in lounge chairs, relaxed and calm, with needles in their ears." For Bennett, the current state of health and addiction care in New York is still lacking. "There are drop-in centers where people can get their methadone, but the goal is never about cleaning people up."

The legacy of community acupuncture continues to serve cities today. Though government persecution forced most of the People's Clinics to close—and the Panthers to disband—Small now works at the San Francisco and Oakland sites of the Native American Health Center, which provides community healthcare for Native and other underserved populations. Established during the same period as the Panthers' clinics, it is part of a network of community health centers holding fort in a gentrifying city—one of its neighborhoods was recently named the "hottest" real estate market in the US.

"I used to do house calls in West Oakland, and people used to call that the ghetto," Small said. "For my patient there now, all their neighbors are white." For him, this makes it particularly essential that Oakland's community-style health centers continue to operate.

Though its previous locations closed, the Lincoln Detox Center, also known as the Lincoln Recovery Center, now operates at a new Bronx address. Bennett still treats addicts who come to Third Root for support, and continues to train others in National Acupuncture Detoxification Association protocol, the acupuncture detox method that came out of the Lincoln legacy. According to the organization's estimates, this technique of auricular acupuncture is used in over 2000 clinics worldwide (including locations in all American states).

The need for these alternative practices became even more important when the Trump administration tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act last year, sending many of Bennett's patients into a scare for losing their healthcare. "As they shared their testimonies with us, we realized that our sliding-scale services have been a saving grace for so many people," she said. Community-style practices have been growing in Brooklyn and Harlem, where they continue to treat the poor, most of whom are of color. "People just can't afford healthcare anymore," Bennett continued, "so the need for community practices is at an all-time high."

Mah said she has witnessed an increase in community acupuncture practices in the city, including efforts like that of the New York Harm Reduction Educators, an organization dedicated to support those who engage in drugs or sex work, partially through free acupuncture sessions in East Harlem. "Many who are called to this mode of healing have a sensitivity to the impact they can have on the least served," Mah said.

Acupuncture and herbal medicine with roots in Chinese culture might still be thought of as "alternative" care, yet for more than a century, it has been one of the few accessible options for marginalized communities in the United States.

About the Author

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