

forum

The Forum is a place for Journal readers to express their feelings on any topic they think is important to Extension. Don't make it longer than one double-spaced page. Send to: Jerry Parsons, editor, 310 Poe Hall, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 27607.

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A Message from the Past? As most county agents can tell you from their experiences, "there's hardly any new idea that someone hasn't thought of or done before!"

Compare the Cooperative Extension Service to what H. S. Galt calls "social education" in his book *History of Chinese Educational Institutions*.*

Three government officials were placed in counties (yes, they were really called "counties") of provinces within the Empire. Their purpose, according to ancient record was to "educate the people without gathering them into classes or schools for formal teaching."

These rural educational officials were appointed by the emperors and the local populace. The stipend included rolls of silk from the emperor and local commodities from the people.

The primary official was "san lao—a man of education and ability of fifty years of age or older." His purpose was to advise and guide the rural communities in improving the customs of the people. The "san lao" performed roles similar to a community development agent in a fashion unique to that culture and time (that is: educating the people to how they can improve their quality of life, through Confucianism).

In time, a second official was appointed to the counties' social education programs. This official was called "hsiao"—virtue education officer. His responsibility was to instill family and brotherhood type virtues among the people. This appointment seems to indicate both an increased audience and a trend toward specialization in the "san-lao" role. Very probably one official was to work with adults and one was to work with youth.

In time, a third official began to appear in the various county "social education" programs. He was called "li t'ien," which literally means "strength in the field." According to Galt, this is practically all we know about this officer. It's

*Howard S. Galt, *A History of Chinese Educational Institutions* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1951).

supposed that the person who bore this title was responsible for encouraging the virtue of industry in agriculture.

No specific reason is recorded for the demise of the institutions. However, there was a set of debilitating trends and problems that were characteristic of all pre-20th century Chinese governments.

A look at three of the problems in terms of possible parallels to the Cooperative Extension Service may shed some light on areas today that could be the issues of tomorrow for our organization.

The first problem is unique to the Chin Dynasty of ancient China. It involved a decay in the relationship between the educational officials and the government. This relationship was typified by an increasing aloofness on the part of the emperor that eventually transformed into an open hostility toward the educators, and an adoption of a radical anti-educational stance by the emperor.

Inferring from our predecessor's experience, some questions we might well ask ourselves are: Do we know our political power base? Do we keep it informed? Are there areas where we've relied on for the security of our years of existence as an institution? The Chinese system was over 1500 years old (1122 BC to 220 AD) when it eclipsed.

Since we're part of a democratic society, in contrast to the autocratic society of ancient China, there are some interpolated questions we should ask ourselves. Have we effectively sought new audiences (for example, the rural poor) and sincerely tried to give them the knowledge that would politically empower them so they can effectively support the institutions they favor? Have we committed ourselves to the task of broadening our base of support among the people who would most benefit from what we have to offer or are we captive to one small, but powerful, special interest group?

The second problem was the increasing paperwork required of local officials. We need to ask ourselves: Has my paperwork increased or decreased over the last 10 years? Is my filling out of forms and reports supplementing my effectiveness or hindering it? What's my attitude toward paperwork? Is it a necessary evil or a trend that's depreciating the quality and quantity of service Extension can offer? Remember, for our predecessors this literally became a "life-and-death" issue. If present trends continue, what manner of issue will it be for our organization 10 years from now?

The third problem of our ancient mentors concerned an increasing elevation in status of administrative government officials until they were far removed in social stature and contact from the people. Do one's top administrators sustain realistic lines of communication with local people or do they rely on "whatever bubbles up to the top"? Does one's state

have a systematic long-range plan for the Extension Service based on the wants of the people and understood by those people or does one's state administration seem to be "running around putting out brush fires"?

These questions and others raised by the ancient Chinese model provide many fertile possibilities for future research in Extension.