

Grassroots Archive Collection at CDRCSL

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Abstract

This article aims to introduce the value of grassroots archives at the Center for Data and Research on Contemporary Social Life (CDRCSL) at Fudan University for qualitative research in social sciences and humanities. This special collection includes written materials on various aspects of social life that are left outside the official archive system. We first introduce the types and features of the grassroots archives collection and then briefly review the values of these primary sources, illustrated by two examples. We conclude with brief discussion on some case studies based on the primary data from the CDRCSL collection and our reflection on the tension between the protection of subject privacy and preservation of historical truth.

Keywords

grassroots archive, historical truth, privacy protection

In addition to the more than 500,000 personal letters and diaries that are introduced in Zhang's article in this special issue, the Center for Data and Research on Contemporary Social Life (CDRCSL) at Fudan University has also collected a huge quantity of written materials on various aspects of social life at the grassroots level. Many of these are discarded archives of grassroots governments (e.g., administrative directives, meeting minutes, registration forms, and internal reports) that were rejected for preservation by the state archiving system for various reasons. The collection also includes files from local enterprises, rural collectives, and state agencies such as supply and marketing cooperatives (*gongxiaoshe*) and personal writings from government offices or work units such as confessions, autobiographies, and thought-reform reflections. Hereafter, we refer to all these materials within the CDRCSL collection as grassroots archives.

These archives serve as primary sources for research on the political, economic, and social experiences of the Chinese people at the grassroots level from the early 1950s to the 1990s. They are particularly valuable for social science research on the rise and fall of Maoist socialism. For example, documents produced in a food factory in the 1950s reveal some previously unknown details of the process of the Nationalization of Industry and Commerce campaign (*gongsi heyingshi*) in Shanghai, which can be used to inform new accounts of this political campaign from a bottom-up approach involving the perspectives of ordinary workers. Other examples include records from a coal mine in Jiangxi province and from a transportation company in Henan province, which cover grassroots daily management, technological changes, salaries and promotions, retirement and work replacement, and welfare policies during the Maoist

era. A number of insightful studies have explored the Chinese work-unit system as an all-encompassing institution that made the people dependant on the party-state (e.g., Walder, 1986), but little information was previously available about the nuts and bolts of everyday work-unit operation; these archives provide rich data for micro-sociological research. Similarly, documents from supply and marketing cooperatives in Jiangsu and Sichuan provinces provide rich sources to help clarify how key economic policies were implemented within the national planned economy, such as the infamous “scissors difference” between the pricing of industrial and agricultural goods.

In this article, we first introduce the types and features of the grassroots archives at CDRCSL and then briefly review the value of these primary sources using two main examples. We conclude with a brief discussion of some case studies based on the primary data from the CDRCSL collection and our reflections on the tension between the protection of subjects' privacy and the preservation of historical truth.

Types of Grassroots Archives at CDRCSL

In light of the 1992 Archival Laws of the People's Republic of China and conventional practices used in archiving management, we classify the CDRCSL collection of grassroots

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Table 1. Grassroots Archives at the CDRCSL.

Archive ownership	Original functions		Representative file genres
Category A: Grassroots government	Administrative communication	Top-down directives	Administrative directives, notices, memos, regulations, review comments
		Bottom-up reports	Investigation reports, work reports, meeting minutes, applications, statistics reports, planning reports
		Internal communications	Meeting documents, minutes, internal reports, work journals
	Personnel and political files	Personnel dossiers, promotion reviews, registration forms, petition letters, confessions	
	Affairs of everyday life	Benefits allocation charts, application forms, wage adjustment records, household registration changes, civil disputes handled by work units, introduction letters	
Category B: Enterprises and public service institutions	Administrative communication	Same as in A	
	Personnel and political files	Same as in A	
	Affairs of everyday life	Same as in A	
	Production and service	Enterprises	Production planning reports, budgets, inventories of purchases and sales, marketing documents
	Public service institutions		Internal newsletters, monthly reports, end of year reports, statistics of social activities
Category C: Village	Basic information	Population registration, farmland logs, crop yield briefs, village-level redistribution records, production brigade files	
	Production data	Work-points records, annual statistics of agricultural production, grain production and allocation, reports of rural industrial production	
	Accounting data	Master plans of annual redistribution and budgets, logs of cash flow, records of fixed assets, household records, household land contracts	
Category D: Family	Accounting records	Familial accounting books, lending/borrowing notes	
	Family documents	Contracts, agreements, genealogy, work journals	

archives by first identifying the original owners, that is, either the producers of the documents or the keepers of individually produced documents. Four groups of owners are clearly recognized at this level: grassroots government, collective enterprises and public service institutions, rural collectives/village government, and family,¹ which are labeled as Owner Categories A, B, C, and D, respectively (see Table 1). We further classify the archives in accordance with their practical functions, for example, administrative communication, personnel management, local governance, or budgetary planning.

It is noteworthy that in China, grassroots governments include official administrative organs known as *jiguan* and government-sponsored institutions of public service known as *shiye danwei* (Brødsgaard, 2002), both of which produce a range of documents and files. Under normal circumstances, party organization and administrative organs at the level of township or above would have their files kept in the state archive system at a higher level of administrative authority. Usually, lower level files of government branching offices and public service institutions, such as trade unions, communist youth leagues, and civil affairs, are left out of the official archive system.

As shown in Table 1, Category A includes three functional subcategories of grassroots government archives. The first is communicative, which can be further divided in accordance to the direction of information flow. Some of them are top-down, others are bottom-up, and the remainder are internal documents circulated within the same level of government organs or even the same unit. The second type consists of personnel dossiers and political files regarding individuals' political standing and performance that are either reported by others or personal confessions. The third group of files is about affairs of everyday life such as benefits allocation, wage adjustments, or civil disputes handled within the work unit. Together, these files reveal the functioning of local governance.

Category B includes collective enterprises and public service institutions as archive owners/producers; these are structured and administered in the model of grassroots governments and thus produce documents related to administrative communication, personal management, and political control, similar to those produced by government organs. However, they also produce files that reflect their specialized functions, which are classified as the functional subcategory of "production and service" in Table 1. For example,

collective enterprises produce documents related to productivity and capital flows, and schools keep detailed records on student health conditions and learning progress.

Category C refers to rural collectives (mostly at the level of production brigade) during the collective era (1956–1983) and village administrative offices after decollectivization in 1983. Although many documents are available, these records tend to be fragmented and inconsistent. One exception is the village archives donated to the CDRCSL by Lianmin village, Zhejiang province: These include documents such as registration forms for land ownership, property confiscations from landlords, redistribution of land to peasants, internal reports on crop yields, village finances, grain production, labor points, and the income of peasant families.

Category D includes various documents produced and owned at the level of the family, including personal letters and family correspondence, genealogies, family histories, household budget and accounting books, private contracts and inter-household agreements, and work journals. It should be noted that work journals are written by cadres at various levels of bureaucracy and thus reflect their personal styles and perspectives as well as the more objective recording of their work activities. The documents in Category D tend to represent more family interests than the interests of individuals, and because their authors include grassroots cadres, workers, teachers, students, soldiers, businesspeople, and peasants, they offer rare glimpses into different aspects of political and social life.

Together, these grassroots archives constitute a neglected part of the Chinese archive system. Chinese state archives permanently store files related to state affairs at local and national levels. In contrast, the grassroots archives include collective- or individual-owned documents related to ordinary people; they are not stored in state archives because they are considered to lack political significance.² Within the scholarly community, these materials are usually referred to as “private-life documents” (Shen & Wu, 2017). They provide vivid accounts of the power structure, institutions, and historical evolution of grassroots society, and also offer insights into the life course, family structure, and interpersonal relationships of ordinary people.

Most grassroots archives from the Mao era remain inaccessible for several reasons. First, library science in China has not yet established an effective cataloging system for “gray literature,” and private documents and manuscripts have not been the targets of library-acquisition policies. Second, the official archive system is biased toward bureaucratic paperwork related to state affairs; most materials on the lives of ordinary people either were scattered or were destroyed. Third, many privately owned archival materials are thrown away or lost following the death of the owner or due to relocation or family accidents. Indeed, many of the documents in the CDRCSL collection were rescued from waste papers sold on the informal market.

The CDRCSL collection is one small segment of the vast—but previously overlooked and unarchived—materials related to grassroots social life. These documents can serve as rich and diverse primary sources for social scientists working in many different disciplines. We hope that this discussion will draw more scholarly attention to this valuable source of data so that more efforts will be made to salvage as much as possible before it is too late.

New Voices From Below

Grassroots archives have scholarly value in at least three ways. First, as primary sources, they complement the formal archives preserved by the Chinese state and in some ways can fill in missing information. Many grassroots documents are produced and owned by lower level government agencies and therefore share features with archives preserved at state archives; it is becoming more difficult to access state archives, so the supplementary function of grassroots archives is becoming even more important. Second, grassroots documents contain rich details about actual social practices and everyday life, providing primary data on social life in its original (i.e., non-edited or raw) conditions. In some cases, they reveal a different kind of reality that has either escaped from or been obscured in state archives, so they can open new horizons for scholarly research and lead to theoretical innovations. Third, grassroots documents contain vivid descriptions of the personal histories of ordinary people, including moral dilemmas, psychological conditions, and emotional conflicts.

In short, like major archeological discoveries that have altered the existing historiography of the past, the collection and analysis of grassroots archives may significantly challenge the status quo in the field of China studies and shed new light on understandings of social life, particularly during the Maoist era, in multiple ways. For example, this kind of archive can allow scholars to hear voices from the lower rungs of the society, and perhaps for the first time, allow scholars to access a large number of first-person testimonies about the interactive relations between citizens, the work-unit system, local governments, and the party-state.

One good example is the registration/application forms of the Wuhu Labor Union (hereafter, the Union). These documents are widely used by grassroots government offices, public service institutions, collective enterprises, and state-sponsored mass organizations, but have not drawn much scholarly attention. Once they were sorted and examined systematically at the CDRCSL collection, their unique value became obvious. The CDRCSL collected nearly 2,200 membership registers (in 87 volumes) covering 19 major industry sectors during the years 1949–1960. Applicants were required to fill out the membership registration form with detailed personal information, including name, gender, education, place of origin, marital status,

income, and occupation, along with information about social relationships (i.e., members of the extended family group and close relatives), a biographic narrative since childhood, and detailed description of their entire employment history. Most of the files were for young or middle-aged workers, but some older workers had started their careers as early as the 1920s, with the oldest one dating back to 1894. The broad time range of these membership registers provides a view of work life in the Wuhu region before and after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In addition to the membership registers, this set of documents includes 467 volumes of administrative records and documents received by the Wuhu Union from higher level government offices. Together, these materials offer rich data about daily operations and policy implementations of the Wuhu Union, and about work and life experiences among union workers during the time of socialist transformation in China.

One informative example involves female workers in a cigarette factory.³ During the early 1950s, the Chinese party-state actively mobilized women to join the labor force to further the political agenda of women's liberation and meet the practical needs of industrial development. Due to its labor-intensive nature, the cigarette industry recruited many female workers, most of whom shared their personal stories when they filled out the union membership forms. An overwhelming majority of them enthusiastically embraced employment and union membership as an opportunity to break away from an unhappy marriage arranged by their parents or from the oppressive patriarchal power within an extended family. When asked to describe their life experience since childhood and previous job history, many women went into detail in their narratives, many of which included recollections of gender-based discrimination when they were growing up, domestic violence and exploitation in arranged marriages, and their determination to change their life trajectories whenever possible.

For example, Yang Shengying was forced to enter into a marriage arranged by her father at the age of 19. She wrote, "I married a frivolous businessman whom I didn't know. After the marriage, I was depressed because my ex-husband led a befuddled life and indulged himself in sensual pleasures."⁴ After her divorce, Yang tried to live independently and went to work at the Xinhua Tobacco Factory as an accountant.

Zhang Hengxia was a few years older than Yang and had experienced more ups and downs, but she was similarly determined to find her independence through paid employment outside the household economy:

After marriage, I worked as a homemaker. When I reached the age of 24, I was determined to work outside the home. Without letting my husband know, I went to work at the Yizhong Tobacco Factory to pack cigarettes. After one year, the factory

closed down. Then, I worked at the Sino-American Tobacco Factory packing cigarettes for four months. Next, a woman named Chen Siniang fired me. She always oppressed workers like us. Later, I worked as a homemaker until the PLA arrived in Wuhu in 1949. Then I went to work in the Xinsheng Tobacco Factory for another year. But the factory closed again. When I was 31, I carried dirt on a shoulder pole to earn a living. Then the Mingxing Tobacco Factory opened. The Union introduced me to pack cigarettes at Mingxing.⁵

Yang and Zhang's personal stories are by no means special: The Wuhu union membership registers contain hundreds of similar personal narratives. The self-determination, enthusiasm, and emotions observed in these documents forces the reader to be aware of the agency of these women and rethink the role of individual female workers in the 1950s. Most leading scholars on women's participation in industrial production during this period have focused on the party-state's political agenda and mobilizing power, possibly because they have been limited by the historical data they could access through official channels (Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983). One exception is Rofel (1999), who focused specifically on individual female factory workers during the early post-liberation period and concluded that their politically engaged behavior was a kind of "identity performance." By exploring the firsthand accounts of female workers, it is possible to extend on this kind of research. The trade union registration forms reveal how the narratives of individual women challenge traditional interpretations by foregrounding ordinary female workers as active job-seekers rather than as passive participants in a top-down gender revolution in the revolutionary state.

Grassroots archives can also shed new light on governance. These archives include bottom-up reports of local conditions, public opinions, and government actions—documents that are generally considered too low-ranking to be preserved in state archives and have consequently escaped scholarly attention. In their various forms (see the second functional group in Category A in Table 1), these documents can reveal how local operators of grassroots government worked to reassure their superiors and the party-state about their loyalty and devotion on one hand, and to justify their local actions when carrying out state policies on the other hand. One good example is an investigation report on attempted group suicide among young women in Huichang county, Jiangxi province.

Six young women tried to drown themselves in the river on June 28, 1984, and another group of eight young women did the same on July 10 of the same year. These were unprecedented events in the region, and the local government carried out a month-long investigation. Members of the investigation team visited the two villages where the incidents occurred, interviewing the surviving 13 young women, their parents, and other family members, and met

with village cadres as well as ordinary villagers. A formal report was submitted to the Communist Party Committee of Ganzhou Prefecture on August 12, 1984, in which the investigation team first described the incidents, the life histories of the young women and their families, local conditions, and the ways local cadres handle the incidents. The authors of the report next provided a detailed analysis of the causes of the incidents and ended the report with policy suggestions.

On a surface level, the report offered an official account from local government, attributing the incidents to individual incapacity of the young women and influence from the outside world:

The subjective cause of these young women to commit suicide is their lack of education and ignorance. All fourteen women had never visited the county seat, and movie watching is their only way to be connected with the outside world. Their lack of education hindered their ability to distinguish the movie stories from reality. After watching the fairy tale movies, they believed the afterlife is like in paradise. When seeing urban youth in movies dressed fashionably, having romantic love, playing in parks, dining in restaurants, they related their own life experience of hard labor from dawn to dusk and of arranged marriage. They deeply regret their bad fate and imagined “to finish this life earlier and reincarnate as a city person next time.” They often discussed how to die. (Investigation report, p. 23)⁶

However, the descriptive details included in the report also reveal emerging trends of major social change in the early 1980s and the disconnect between government narratives and the lived experiences of rural people. One of the immediate outcomes of dismantling rural collectives was household farming, which increased agricultural productivity but also brought back patriarchal power in multiple ways. Before they were able to seek temporary jobs in cities from the late 1980s onward, young women fell victim to the early stages of rural economic reform. They were required to work for their fathers and brothers in household farming, with very little power to make their own life choices. The Huichang tragedies, unfortunately, were by no means isolated or accidental. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the suicide rate in China was more than double that in the United States, and women, young people, and the elderly were most likely to take their own lives. Domestic injustice is considered to be the main reason for this unusually high rate of suicide (Wu, 2009). The descriptive details included in the investigation report help reveal how the suicide attempts in Huichang may have been a radical form of resistance and protest.

In this way, investigation reports serve as valuable sources of information regarding grassroots governance and social life. Most of these reports were generated when local governments had to rapidly deal with unexpected

problems, such as the aftermath of natural disasters, serious incidents, or large-scale social conflict. They were written for the eyes of superiors and were not supposed to be circulated widely, much less be made public. The nature of this kind of document requires detailed and accurate description of local conditions, public opinions, and the social problems in question. As a result, these documents often present a slightly—or even significantly—different reality from conventional accounts offered by the government and the media.

Grassroots Archives for Qualitative Research

As the CDRCSL was building its collection of grassroots documents, most of which arrived as piles of unsorted and dirty papers, it developed the capacity to sort, classify, and catalog the materials into usable archives. In 2016, the CDRCSL and the Library of Fudan University jointly established the Contemporary Chinese Social Life Database. Part of the collection has been scanned into PDF format and made available to scholars through an online database. The CDRCSL recently published two sets of grassroots archives: *Work Journals of Zhou Shengkeng, 1961-1982* (L. Zhang et al., 2018) and *Personal Letters Between Lu Qingsheng and Jiang Zhenyuan, 1961-1986* (L. Zhang & Yan, 2018).

A number of scholars have recently used these grassroots archives to conduct research on social life in the Maoist era from new perspectives. For example, Zhang examined the discarded cadre dossiers from a local government in Jiangsu province, including written reflections of cadres, reports of cadre training, periodical self-reviews of cadres, and evaluations of cadres by upper level party organization. She argued that by organizing cadres using standard and routine thought-reform activities ranging from manual labor to self-criticism meetings, the party-state successfully instilled the superiority of the party organization into the minds of cadres. She concluded that the party-state built the foundation of its ideological hegemony and organizational dominance by documenting these activities in well-designed written files: These practices led to a new and powerful model of cadre management featuring devotion and loyalty to party organization (J. Zhang, 2017).

Another example is Chang Chris's (2019) recent research on the power of personnel dossiers in particular and bureaucratic documentation in general. Unlike Zhang, who was trying to uncover patterns in state behavior and models of governance, Chang focused specifically on the personnel dossier of a factory worker named Lin Zhongshu, who had a series of misdeeds ranging from a lack of self-discipline and petty theft, to an extra-marital affair and a troubled relationship with his work unit for more than a decade. By 1978, Lin's work unit wanted to expel him from the factory workforce, and in addition to the regular personnel dossier,

the work unit had submitted to the upper level authority more than 200 pages of documented evidence of Lin's misbehaviours and offenses, including accusations, investigation reports, Lin's confessions, and love letters between Lin and his illicit lover. These archival materials enabled Chang to reveal exactly how personnel dossiers functioned as forms of social control during the Maoist era. Importantly, Chang found that Lin was required to revise his self-statement again and again in accordance with the requests of his handler until the document evolved from a laundry list of misdeeds to an elaborate confession that met bureaucratic expectations. Without the preservation of all versions of Lin's self-statements in his file, it would be extremely difficult to have access to this kind of detail about the control and power involved in confession writing.

A third example is a study on job-search patterns among workers in the 1950s by the first author of the present article and his collaborator, who employed a mixed-method approach to examine the registration forms of the Wuhu Worker Union (Li & Tian, 2020). These registration forms contain detailed information about applicants' personal history, previous employments, and social relations, and the authors were able to conduct quantitative and qualitative analyses of nearly 2,200 registration forms. Based on the findings of their quantitative analysis, they established a model that reflects how the ongoing socialist transformation affected different social groups in terms of job search and employment history. They also selected 140 short biographies, which contained the details of each applicant's job search and complete employment history, and used qualitative methods to explore how each individual landed in their particular job. This mixed-method study revealed that in most cases, workers have shifted from finding work through personal connections to obtaining employment through an institutionalized channel of government introduction/recommendation.

These findings were only possible due to the availability of the documents contained in the grassroots archives, which allowed Li and Tian to shed light on the long-debated role of personal ties in job searches in post-Mao China. Some scholars argue that marketization brings about a less intimate form of resource allocation as the invisible hands of the market, instead of the patron–client pattern in the work-unit system during the Maoist era (Guthrie, 1998). Others argue that marketization increases the uncertainty of the job-search process and stimulates more intensive use of personal relationships than under Maoist socialism (Bian, 2019). The grassroots archives of the Wuhu Workers Union reveal that the socialist state during the early stage of socialist transformation was as impersonal as the post-socialist markets. Therefore, post-market assumptions need to take into consideration the equally impersonal nature of the state.

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that grassroots archives can be of great value to scholars, but how to

study these materials from below is a new challenge that needs to be addressed in continuing efforts among the scholarly community. Specifically, we are referring to the ethical challenge of privacy protection. The main value of grassroots archives is their unique authenticity: They capture the details of everyday life experience, social relations, and emotions of ordinary people. Use of such sources inevitably involves the issue of privacy and intellectual property rights of the original owners of these materials. Within the social sciences, the common protocol for privacy protection is desensitization of some key information, such as protecting personal names, place names, and positions using pseudonyms. However, from the perspective of scholars seeking to discover and preserve historical truth, this protocol becomes problematic: The falsification of names, times, and places might distort historical facts and imperil the historical or sociological significance of the findings.

For example, with regard to the study of job-search histories among Wuhu workers (Li & Tian, 2020), the editor of a sociological journal asked the authors to replace the names of workers with pseudonyms, even though the research in this particular article exposed few personal details of workers with the exception of their names. The authors faced a dilemma when analyzing the following self-statement by a tobacco shop employee named Liang Yongshou:

In 1941, due to the difficulties of living at home, I could not continue my studies. Thanks to Zha Guobin, an apprentice at the Zha Yuantai Tobacco Store. I completed an internship in 1944 and have continued to work as a clerk to this day.⁷

The Zha family of Jing county owned the tobacco store and has been a major player in the local tobacco business since the late 19th century. As a Zha clan member, Zha Guobin used kinship ties to help his friend Liang, who had no previous experience in the trade, to secure a job at the largest tobacco store in Wuhu during the turbulent years of the Japanese occupation. In this case, if the true personal names are altered following the research protocol, it becomes impossible to discern the role played by close ties in this particular job search. Here, the central research question involved shifts in job-search channels from personal ties in the 1940s to impersonalized institutions in the 1950s, and the use of pseudonyms would obviously obscure otherwise clear evidence.

This example may appear trivial at first glance, but on a deeper level, it reveals the different expectations of preserving truths about social life in historical and sociological research. The diverse and personal features of grassroots archives, therefore, not only call for more interdisciplinary collaboration from different perspectives, but also call for more case-sensitive protocols for privacy protections—beyond the simple use of pseudonyms—to bridge the gap between humanities and social sciences.

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Notes

1. We are aware that the family is a private owner of archives, and we group it together with the other three as a convenient way to introduce the CDRCSL collection in this short article.
2. The Archival Laws of the People's Republic of China enacted in 1992 stipulates that individually owned archives refer to the records of private affairs originating with private enterprises, institutions, and individual citizens, which are obtained by legal means such as donations, inheritance, or paid solicitation before the law (State Council, 1992). As Chinese official libraries and archives seldom collected and curated individually owned archives, most extant individually owned archives are not found in state archives and libraries.
3. Quotes from the materials that appear here were originally organized in catalogs, marked with catalog number, year, and name. We have preserved these codes. For example, 1951-096-shop clerks union membership registers (7b) refers to the number 096 catalog compiled in 1951, which was for shop clerks whose surnames had seven strokes, the second volume.
4. Registration Forms for Grassroots Cadres, No. 029-1952.
5. See Note 4.
6. 《关于会昌县高排乡两起女青年集体投河自杀事件的调查报告》, 20180810上海、赣州JPG\江西省赣州市\森林铁路处\SA20180000782N 党群类 17\1984\
7. The Wuhu Trade Union sources, refer to Statistics on Scale weighing, lettering printing, fragrant candle mounting, sewing, No. 156-1951.

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