Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Reinventing the concept of the state archival fond in China

Xiaomi An*, Hepu Deng and Bin Zhang

**Dr Xiaomi An** is a Professor of Records and Knowledge Management at the School of Information Resources Management, Renmin University of China (RUC). She is leader of the Knowledge Management Team at the Key Laboratory of Data Engineering and Knowledge Engineering, Ministry of Education (MOE) at RUC and leader of the International Research Front of the Electronic Records Management Team at the Electronic Records Management Research Centre, RUC. She obtained a PhD in 2001 from the University of Liverpool, UK. She was awarded a Program for New Century Excellent Talents in University, MOE, in 2008. She was a Fulbright Research Scholar of UCLA in the year 2012–13. She has been a committee member of ISO/TC46/SC11 from 2005 to the present. Professor An has chaired over 30 research projects. She has published over 190 academic papers, authored 16 books and won 21 achievement awards. She has been invited to present 28 invited talks at international conferences. She is chair of the Social Science Major Project: National Social Science Foundation of China Major Project 'Novel Mechanisms for the Integration of National Digital Archival Resources for Their Utilisation' (project number 13 & ZD 184, 2013 to 2017).

**Dr Hepu Deng** is a Professor in Information Systems at the School of Business Information Technology and Logistics, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. His research interests are in the areas of decision analysis, intelligent systems, digital business, knowledge management, electronic government, e-learning and their applications in business. The multi-disciplinary nature of his research and the emphasis on both theoretical and applied research are exemplified by numerous refereed publications in top refereed international journals listed in the Science Citation Index, Social Science Citation Index and Engineering Compendex Index, and at major refereed international conferences including the *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, *European Journal of Operational Research*, *Computers and Operations Research*, *International Journal of Approximate Reasoning*, *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics*, *Government Information Quarterly*, *Expert Systems with Applications*, *Computers and Mathematics with Applications*, *Fuzzy Information and Engineering*, *International Journal of E-Government Research*, *Journal of Systems and Information Technology* and *Management Research Review*.

**Bin Zhang** is Professor and Dean of the School of Information Resource Management of Renmin University of China. He is a member of the Archival Science Academic Committee of China, the deputy director of the Basic Theory of Archive Science Committee of the Archival Science Academic Committee of China and the vice-president of the Archival Science Academic Committee of Beijing. His main research interests include enterprise-oriented records and archive management, knowledge management, information resource management and archival education.

A 'fond' is the aggregation of records originating from the same source. Traditionally the concept of the state archival fond is usually referred to the aggregation of historical records with the state ownership.[1] Over the past 20 years, there is no general agreement

---

*Corresponding author. Email: anxiaomi@ruc.edu.cn

on what the concept of the state archival fond is about.[2] The purpose of this paper is to understand the evolution and development of the state archival fond in China and its impacts on archival administration and to reinvent the concept for the effective management of archives for their optimal utilisation in today's dynamic environment.

## Divided perspectives

The concept of the state archival fond was first introduced to China in the 1950s from the former Soviet Union[3] and then updated in the 1980s.[4] It is based on a planning economy within the socialist administration regime. There are three features in this stage of archives management including the state ownership of archives, a unified state jurisdiction on archives and a centralised state archival information system for accessing and utilising archives.

There are three divided perspectives on the concept of the state archival fond in the Chinese literature due to the presence of the social transition from a planning economy to a market economy and the digital transition in society from the paper world to the digital world:

(1) The state archival fond is treated as a physical construct. Based on this perspective, all the archives are state owned.[5] They are national assets which should be centrally controlled as an organic whole to protect the integrity of the state's assets.

(2) The state archival fond is considered to be a social construct. According to this perspective, all the archives should be placed under a unified leadership for their effective management at various levels to ensure the integrity and safety of archives and to facilitate their optimal use.[6] Such a consideration highlights the significance of the state jurisdiction for protecting the integrity of the state archives that have value to be preserved for the country and society.

(3) The state archival fond is viewed as an intellectual construct. According to this perspective, all the archives from the state have value to be preserved for the people and society. The emphasis of such a consideration is on the maintenance of the true history and the comprehensive memory of the state for their use.[7] This view of the state archival fond demonstrates the importance of integrating national archival resources for the provision of people-centric knowledge services to improve their utilisation.

The three perspectives above hold different views on the purposes of the aggregation of records, the provenances of archives and the way they should be used for achieving these purposes. These views have significant impacts on why, what and how archival work and administration should be in China.

## Challenging issues

The concept of the state archival fond is facing the following challenges:

(1) Limitations of the physical construct. Since the 1990s, there has been a shift from a unitary state ownership to public, corporate, private and public–private multiple ownerships while China is moving to a market economy. As a result, maintaining the integrity of the total archives of the state faces numerous

challenges owing to the diversity of archival ownerships and the adoption of disparate approaches to recordkeeping and archiving.[8]

(2) Weakness of the social construct. The supervision and the provision of services with respect to the jurisdiction right of archival authorities are ineffective compared with those from private sectors in this time of social transition. A variety of non-state-owned archives that have national significance and societal value for preserving are under inappropriate management. There is a lack of adequate strategies and policies for a systematic disposal, appraisal and acquisition of these valuable archives. This imperils the integrity of the memory and the true history of the state.[9]

(3) Lack of supporting systems for the intellectual construct. With more and more business and people's social lives being online in the digital era of the twenty-first century, there are diverse ways of integrating archival resources for their optimal utilisation.[10] There is, however, a lack of national cyber-infrastructure to connect people, processes and technologies for recordkeeping and archiving. This threatens information accessibility and integrity as well as the digital continuity of the nation now and in to the future.

These challenging issues show that the traditional view of the state archival fond is no longer adaptable to its physical, social and intellectual transformation in today's dynamic environment. There is a demand for the development of new constructs for better understanding the concept of the state archival fond in the future.

## New constructs

To maintain the integrity of the memory and the true history of the state while effectively adapting to current dynamic changes, this paper suggests a broad perspective on the state archival fond. Based on this broad perspective, the state archival fond can be seen as both a social construct of recordkeeping and archiving management at the national level[11] and an intellectual construct of archival cyber-infrastructure that is to be nationally networked.[12] Such new constructs have the following advantages over the traditional ones:

(1) People-centric. The concept highlights the value of archives to the country and society. The value to the public and the views of the public about what they regard as valuable are appreciated. The value of archives as the evidence, memories, identities, knowledge, history and cultural heritage of the people and society is recognised.

(2) Pluralist thinking. The concept respects the diversity of provenances of archives. It recognises the use of different ways for aggregating records and integrating archival resources for their optimal utilisation. Furthermore, such a consideration appreciates the diversity of archival holdings and their pluralist value for the many uses of state-owned and non-state-owned archives.

(3) Participatory governance mechanisms. The concept is in conformity with the Archives Law of the People's Republic of China for the archival jurisdiction in a market economy. It fully considers the administrative rights, disposition rights and access rights of different types of archival ownerships and the role of citizens and all types of corporate bodies and their obligations to protect the integrity of memories and the true history of the state as well as their rights to

access the archives as information consumers.

(4) A national service framework. The conceptual construct provides a strategic point of view and a holistic approach to identify the relationships between various types of archives for linking archives with their contexts of creation and their contemporary use, including archives created before and after 1949, state owned and non-state owned.

(5) A risk-based knowledge management strategy. The new construct promotes effective knowledge management practices in managing archival resources rather than physically controlling the archival entity. This represents a shift from the focus on administrative control to the provision of public-oriented knowledge services to increase the overall proficiency in safeguarding national knowledge assets and promoting risk avoidance of black holes in memories and discontinuity in histories. Such a strategy consists of (a) the rearrangement of knowledge management in collaboration to protect the value of archival resources as knowledge assets of a state, (b) the re-engineering of knowledge management activities in communication to increase the value of sharing archival resources as knowledge assets in a society, and (c) the development of knowledge management artefacts in connectivity to increase the value of archival resources as knowledge assets for the public.

(6) Complex adaptive systems. The new construct respects the complexity and the uncertainty of aggregating various records across time, space and contexts. The integration of archival resources for their optimal utilisation is dynamic. This involves networks of interactions between different types of stakeholders, and their relationships are always dynamic. This shows that the design of a cyber-infrastructure to connect people, processes and technologies of recordkeeping and archival management is nonlinear. It should be adaptive and self-organise while corresponding to the optimal utilisation of archives.

This study argues that the traditional concept of the state archival fond is no longer adaptable to the twenty-first century. Reinventing the concept of the state archival fond is therefore fundamental to the shift and divergence in the archival discourse that influence the why, what and how principles of archival management. The proposed new concept provides a participatory recordkeeping and archiving performance assessment framework for reducing the risk in ensuring the integrity of memories and the true history of the state. It provides a functional requirement for building a cyber-infrastructure for the provision of people-centric knowledge services through recordkeeping and archiving management.

## Acknowledgements

## Endnotes

1.  J Cheng and Z He, 'Reflections on Theories of Fonds', *Archival Science Bulletin*, no. 1, 2005, pp. 17–19; M Wang, 'On Concept of State Archival Fonds', *China Archives*, no. 1, 2003, pp. 45–6.

2.  J Zhang, 'On Principles of Archival Fonds and Their Theoretical Meanings: Perspectives From the Logicism and Historicism', *Archival Work*, no. 6, 1992, pp. 32–5; Y Yang, 'On Concept of State Archival Fonds: Discussions With Mr Cheng Yongbin and Yang Liren', *Beijing Archives*, no. 5, 2000, pp. 16–18; Wang; S Zhai and X Huang, 'On Concept of State Archival Fonds', *China Archives*, no. 5, 2006, pp. 21–3; Z Yi, 'Review of Studies on State Archival Fonds', *Hubei Archives*, no. 8, 2010, pp. 10–11.
3.  Y Ji, 'The *Rule of Soviet Union State Archival Fond*s and the *Guiding Principles of Soviet Union Central Archives* Approved by the Soviet Union Ministers' Council', *Archival Work*, no. 9, 1959, pp. 4–7; X Su, 'New Rule of Soviet State Archival Fonds and the Missions of Soviet Union Archival Agencies', *Archival Work*, no. 9, 1959, pp. 8–10.
4.  Y Han, 'The *Rule of Soviet Union State Archival Fonds* and the *Rule of Archives Administration* Approved by the Soviet Union Ministers' Council', *Archival Science Bulletin*, no. 4, 1981, pp. 73–81.
5.  Wang; Cheng and He.
6.  Y Cheng, 'On Problems of Theories of Archival Fonds', *Archival Science Studies*, no. 4, 1988, pp. 26–9; Y Cheng, 'Reflections on Theories of Archival Fonds', *Archival Science Bulletin*, no. 4, 1990, pp. 16–19; Y Cheng, 'Reflections on Theories of Archival Fonds and the Problems in Applications', *Beijing Archives*, no. 2, 1993, pp. 16–20; Y Cheng and L Yang, 'On Structure of State Archival Fonds', *Beijing Archives*, no. 11, 1999, pp. 12–13.
7.  Zhang; C Huang, 'The State Archival Fonds and the Reform of Archival Administration: Discussions With Mr Wang Maoyao', *Beijing Archives*, no. 3, 1999, pp. 16–18; C Huang, 'On Ideas of Construction of State Archival Resources and Innovation of the Regime', *Archival Science Bulletin*, no. 2, 2004, pp. 76–9; Y Hu, 'Reflections of Archival Fonds: Discussions With Mr Wang Maoyao', *Beijing Archives*, no. 8, 2000, pp. 18–20; H Fu and H Feng, 'Studies of Construction of State Archival Resources', *Archival Science Bulletin*, no. 5, 2005, pp. 41–3; Yi.
8.  Zhang; Yan; Yi.
9.  Zhang; Yan; Yi.
10.  Z Dai, 'On Concept of Integration of State Archival Resources and the Operation Systems', *Archival Science Bulletin*, no. 2, 2003, pp. 4–7; Huang, 'On Ideas of Construction'; Fu and Feng; Z Chen and Y Liang, 'Review of Studies on Construction of State Archival Resources', *Sichuan Archives*, no. 6, 2010, pp. 28–31; Y Pan, 'On Concept of State Archival Resources and Its Components', *Beijing Archives*, no. 1, 2011, pp. 17–20.
11.  Huang, 'On Ideas of Construction' and 'The State Archival Fonds'; Yang; Dai; Zhai and Huang.
12.  Zhang; D Guo, 'On Control Systems of State Archival Fonds', *Beijing Archives*, no. 9, 2004, pp. 22–3; Fu and Feng; B Tan and X Wang, 'On Control System for Integration and Sharing of State Archival Resources', *Archival Science Study*, no. 4, 2006, pp. 17–22.