

Protection and management of industrial heritage in China. History, practice and meanings

Original

Protection and management of industrial heritage in China. History, practice and meanings / Cestaro, Giorgia. - (2022 May 24), pp. 1-366.

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2967858 since: 2022-06-16T10:06:31Z

Publisher:

Politecnico di Torino

Published

DOI:

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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades a process of speedy urbanization and deindustrialization of urban areas has interested China and “industrial heritage” has attracted much more attention by government, scholars and institutions. The industrial legacy is not regarded any more as a sign of recession, but it is now seen as resource to be reused and transformed into flexible spaces with the potential to enhance creative industry and new economies. As a consequence, the protection of industrial heritage in China is an important issue that is nurturing the contemporary national and international debate and, even more important, it represents a new goal for Chinese Government, being object of recent important regulations.

The research aims to reproduce the discourse on Industrial heritage in China in light of the new legal tools adopted by the country at the national level to the scope to identify, protect and manage its industrial legacy. Starting from 2016 China begun to promote specific regulations to set a standardized identification system to select, protect and manage the national industrial legacy. Recently, the efforts of the central state became an evident issue, since- before 2016- the national practice on industrial heritage were merely regulated by local states. Starting from the early 2000’s the Chinese local states begun to promulgate their own policies to protect and reuse discarded industrial areas; these experiences, intertwined with international practices, prepared the ground for what in 2018 became a standardized regulated system to identify, protect and reuse the national industrial heritage.

The study demonstrates the long process made by China in finding a common ground in defining its industrial heritage, from the very beginning of the issue. The understanding of the historical path made by the country in developing a legal and administrative regime for cultural heritage represented an essential premise to the research which allowed the thesis first to root the industrial heritage discourse within a wider legal, ideological and historical framework and secondly it gave the possibility to demonstrate in the evolution of the heritage' values the lens through which to watch and explain the formation of the field of industrial heritage protection.

This research offers an innovative research methodology which portrays the complexity of the Chinese industrial heritage contemporary phenomenon combining qualitative and quantitative approaches within a strong multidisciplinary framework, filling a scientific gap- within the international industrial heritage literature- on the Chinese practice which is here indagated through different scales. The study, in fact, not only portrays the contemporary *status quo* of the Chinese industrial heritage practice thanks to an updated census of all the 164 industrial heritage sites listed at national level, but it also offers a reading of the industrial “heritagization” experience adopting different perspectives which alternate the international and transnational lens to the local-state one, to the national level perspective. In this study, the Chinese industrial “heritagization” experience is indagated as a peculiar practice which originated from local-governments ‘experience- which often adopted international practices as models-, and which later evolved into a national standardized procedure, responding to the specificities and to the needs of the Chinese heritage and urban context. Considering the evolution of the Chinese practice and its development intertwined to transnational contacts and local experiences, the methodological approach adopted by this research makes use of different scales to read the evolution of the phenomenon, but, at the end of the research, the process is pictured by a national perspective. In fact, the quantitative analysis portrays the national Chinese industrial heritage in numbers, typologies, ages and geographies which act as parameters to measure

the heritage phenomenon in the attempt to suggest some directions to read the process. The thesis, in its complex, describes and documents an “heritagization” process which is happening now in China, it records a new phase of the heritage in China and fills a gap in the international industrial heritage literature with a case, the Chinese one, which- seen in a transnational perspective- could be used as new reference of industrial heritage practices.

Key words: Chinese cultural heritage; Chinese industrial heritage; heritagization process; heritage values; Chinese industrial culture.