



A Geopolitical Semiotic Analysis of the Evolution of Spatial Strategies of the Chinese Embassy in the UK Since 1877

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Abstract

This paper uses geopolitical semiotics as a theoretical framework to systematically sort out the evolution of the spatial strategy of the Chinese Embassy in the UK since 1877. Starting from the two dimensions of spatial topology and architectural symbols, the paper analyzes the changing laws of embassy site selection, architectural style and symbolic practice in the three stages of humiliation in the late Qing Dynasty, sovereignty reconstruction after the founding of the People's Republic of China, and contemporary strategic game. The study shows that the Chinese embassy space has been dependent on Western-centrism, but has also continuously broken through traditional constraints to achieve the reconstruction of the national image and the transformation of diplomatic discourse. The analysis shows that the transformation of diplomatic space has promoted the rebuilding of the national image and significantly enhanced the country's soft power, with good results and high performance.

Keywords: Architectural semiosis, Diplomatic power, Geopolitical semiotics, Sovereignty reconstruction, Spatial topology

1. Introduction

The last Qing dynasty saw China's engagement with the modern global order reconfigured in radical ways. The Opium Wars and the imposition of the unequal treaties such as the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) and the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) compelled the Qing Empire into the Westphalian order in diplomacy (Suzuki, 2015, p. 18). China opened the first permanent legation in London in 1877 in compliance with the terms of the Treaty of Chefoo, abandoning the tributary order in imperial diplomacy for centuries (Biggerstaff, 1936, p. 1). The legation office in 49 Portland Square was a rented townhouse in the Georgian architectural style with Corinthian pilasters (Rawcliffe, 2025, p. 5).

It was not just an office for the conduct of consular business but a materialization of China's subaltern presence within the colonial order. The siting of the legation just 800 metres away from the British Parliament and 300 metres away from the headquarters of The Times was a calculated siting in the midst of loci of power in the Victorian era and a demonstration of the Qing officials' negotiation with Western-predominant spatial politics on unsteady terms.

Nevertheless, the spatial orientation of the embassies extended beyond issues of functionality. Political palimpsests themselves carried architectural form, geographical proximity to foci of power, and legal status writing competing ideologies. Qing embassies carried on Rococo interiors in the form of performative compromise with the colonial "civilizing mission" and in fact, they lacked specialist visa or culture sections to show the deficiencies in the institution. These spatial choices raise underlying questions: How do foreign embassies invoke political approach, diplomatic power, and political signs?

Diplomatic architecture research has long perceived embassies as geopolitical symbols. Kaplan and Herb (2011, p. 190) describe embassies as "territorial enclaves" communicating national identity abroad, while Höglund and Burnett (2019, p. 3) investigate Nordic embassies during the Cold War period as tools for disseminating "soft power". However, the majority of these works have focused on Western or postcolonial countries and left China's diplomatic realm to be extensively mined. (Yang, 1991, p. 38) It was well-documented Bureaucratic reforms but failed to recognize spatial practices in Chinese historiography. Zhang (1998, p. 84) illuminates single actors such as Guo Songtao but neglects to address collective actors in the spatial context. Wang (2015, p. 2) suggests the strategic value of coastal legations but fails to theorize spatial politics. Above all, however, no book systematically examines how Chinese diplomacy approached and ultimately upset Western-centric epistemologies of space.

The Canadian Embassy in Tokyo reveals how hybrid architectural styles mediated a "dual identity" of modernization and cultural distinctness (Anderson, 1986, p. 12). Similarly, the Prussian Consulate in Jerusalem employed Moorish Revival designs to assert Islamic civilizational parity (Rosen, 2018, p. 128). In contrast, Chinese embassies were initially attached to foreign buildings and lacked comprehensiveness, reflecting a more profound anxiety about civilizational hierarchies. The absence of a cohesive framework to analyze these spatial strategies—across physical, institutional, and cultural dimensions—leaves unresolved how China's diplomatic spaces transitioned from colonial mimicry to postcolonial reinvention. Therefore, this study will answer the following question: How does the 150-year history of displacement from Portland Street to the Royal Mint represent China's breakthrough and reconstruction of its spatial cognition of "Western-centrism"?

2. Theoretical Framework

The geopolitical semiotic analysis (Zelyanskaya et al., 2017, p. 238) presupposes that diplomatic areas are multilayered sign systems in which physical proximity, building layout, and legality come together to inscribe power relations. The approach goes beyond most diplomatic studies in that it does not simply view embassies as service structures but, instead, as embodied texts encoding and challenging geopolitical ideologies. At the nexus of spatial topology and architectural symbolism, China's London embassy project from 1877 to the current era demonstrates an active interaction between material practices and symbolic contestations.

2.1 Spatial Topology

Spatial topology theory, derived from the concept of "folded space"(Deleuze & Strauss, 1991, p. 230), rearranges the urban landscape into a dynamic force field of power, where proximity to centers of power determines diplomatic influence. In Victorian London, the Qing embassy was located at 49 Portland Square, 2 miles from the Palace of Westminster. This spatial distance reflected the colonial position of the time, where proximity to Parliament was synonymous with proximity to imperial decision-making. However, this

proximity came at a cost. By being located at the epicenter of British media politics (the offices of *The Times* were just across the street), the Qing embassy inadvertently reaffirmed Eurocentric spatial hierarchies, relegating non-Western states to supplicants rather than equals. In the 21st century, the new Embassy will be located 3 miles east of Westminster, near the former Royal Mint, and less than a mile from the City of London. The strategic migration from the political terrain of Portland to the capitalist landscape of the Docklands fits with what Sassen (2011, p. 575) has called the “global urban power geometry”, where financial centers replace traditional political centers in the purview of transnational power.

2.2 Architectural Semiosis

If spatial topology describes the "place" of diplomacy, then architectural semiotics reveals the "how" of diplomatic material expression. Barthes and Lavers (2000, p. 410)'s myth-making theory explains how embassy design naturalizes ideological claims through aesthetic norms. No. 49 Portland Street was built in 1785 and designed by British architects Adam Brothers. It is a typical Adam style in the 18th century. As early as 1879, Zeng Jize, a famous Chinese diplomat, served as the second Chinese ambassador to the UK. He selected and rented No. 49 Portland Street and ordered cheap furniture. Its preserved Rococo interior - gilded mirrors and Louis XV chairs - is a defensive imitation, trying to cover up civilization anxiety through gorgeous assimilation. This is in sharp contrast to the embassy rebuilt in 1983: the national emblem is located directly above the embassy gate, some of the lighting in the venue is decorated with lanterns, and the walls are mostly decorated with Chinese paintings. These are not just decorative choices, but also symbolic, promoting Chinese culture in the shell of the colonial era. The new building was designed by Beijing Architectural Design Institute and constructed by Wates Construction Company of the UK.

The facade of the new building along Portland Street basically remains the same, except that the original two doors were changed to one door, and the appearance is more beautiful than that of the original building. The new building is a reinforced concrete cast-in-place frame structure with brick walls. The outer wall is a double-layer brick wall with an insulation layer in the middle. It covers an area of 830 square meters and a building area of 6,000 square meters. As the first diplomatic mission abroad in Chinese history, the Chinese Embassy in the UK has collected and preserved cultural relics of different ages in its more than 120 years of history, including calligraphy works by famous artists such as Qi Baishi, Xu Beihong, Wu Changshuo, Ren Bonian, Fu Baoshi, Shi Lu, and Pan Tianshou, totaling nearly 300 pieces.

3. Historical Evolution

3.1 The Period of Humiliation (1877-1911)

Under the Chefoo Convention (1876), the Qing dynasty was forced to rent a Georgian townhouse at 49 Portland Square. In 1877, the Qing government established its first permanent legation in London, marking China's forced entry into a Western-dominated diplomatic order. It was close to Westminster (2 miles). This spatial arrangement reflected Qing China's subordinate position in the colonial hierarchy, in which physical proximity to the center of imperial power was considered a *sine qua non* for diplomatic legitimacy.

The architectural choices for the legation exposed the difficulty of negotiating identity between the two sides. The exterior (such as Corinthian columns and sash windows) mimicked Georgian neoclassicism, and the interior retained Rococo-style decoration, including gilded mirrors and Louis XV-style furniture. This hybrid aesthetics was less a

conscious synthesis than a performative concession to Victorian notions of “civilized architecture” (Guo, 1981, p. 38).

Functionally, the legation served as a surveillance outpost. Staff translated British newspapers, monitored parliamentary debates, and compiled reports on industrial technology. However, the absence of a dedicated visa office or cultural facilities exposed institutional weaknesses. As Zeng Jize said in 1885: “Our legations are like beggars’ huts in a palace, tolerated but never respected” (Zeng, 2013, p. 99). This humiliation reached its peak in 1901 with the signing of the Boxer Protocol, which expanded the foreign legation area in Beijing while restricting China’s diplomatic activities abroad.

3.2 The Period of Sovereignty Reconstruction (1949-2000)

In 1950, the government of the People's Republic of China established diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom and continued to use 49 Portland Square as an embassy. In 1972, the diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom were upgraded to the ambassadorial level. The original embassy building was in disrepair and overloaded. The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom proposed a reconstruction plan to the British government. The landlord and the British government unanimously agreed upon the reconstruction plan. However, the British government required the Chinese government to demolish only the interior and not the exterior walls during the reconstruction. After negotiations, the British government agreed that the Chinese government would destroy all the buildings and rebuild them. Still, the exterior walls must be restored to their original appearance during the reconstruction.

The architectural style also reflects traditional Chinese culture. The gate of the new embassy is hung with the national emblem of the People's Republic of China, and the conference rooms are hung with revolutionary murals depicting the Long March and traditional ink landscape paintings. As revealed in a 1973 Foreign Ministry directive, these designs are intended to "show Chinese culture while occupying imperialist infrastructure." Then the space continued to expand: between 1954 and 1985, China acquired six adjacent properties to form a 2.4-acre compound. The British government's concerns about this "creeping annexation" grew, and MI5 was monitoring the embassy's suspected intelligence activities (2007, p. 466).

In 1973, the Chinese Embassy in the UK established the Education Department to promote student exchanges; in 1985, the Science and Technology Department was established to coordinate joint ventures such as the Sino-British satellite project. In order to improve the embassy's "too Westernized" situation, red lanterns were used instead of chandeliers for interior lighting decoration. These contradictions reflect both the rejection and acceptance of colonial spatial logic.

3.3 The Period of Strategic Game (2000-Present)

In 2018, the Chinese Embassy in the UK wanted to move to the former Royal Mint in East London, reflecting China’s shift from rule-follower to rule-maker in diplomacy. This spatial shift has sparked geopolitical friction. The Mint is built on the site of a 14th-century Cistercian monastery and a cemetery from the Black Death. From the 16th to the early 18th century, it was a supply station for the Royal Navy. This magnificent complex of more than 33 acres will be Europe's most significant diplomatic outpost. The land is close to the Tower of London and is located in the shadow of the skyscrapers of the City of London. The handing of such a well-located plot to Beijing has sparked strong opposition from nearby residents, China hawks in the British Parliament, and Hong Kong democracy advocates who

have settled in the UK. Some people say that China will use the new embassy to monitor dissidents and ordinary British people because long strategic fiber optic cables are buried under the financial district close to the embassy. Others claim that the new embassy is located on a busy road near the Tower Bridge in London, which will make it more difficult for people to gather outside the embassy for protests, such as protesting the Chinese government's suppression of democratic demonstrations in Hong Kong or the persecution of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. As a result, in 2022, Tower Hamlets District Council refused to approve the project.

4. Discussion

The development of the Chinese Embassy in the UK not only reflects the continuous changes in China's diplomatic space, but also reveals the inherent interactive relationship between the evolution of the international power structure and the transformation of domestic political discourse. In the late Qing Dynasty, facing the decisive intervention of Western powers and the oppression of unequal treaties, China had to enter the modern international system by imitation and compromise. At that time, although the embassy in the UK adopted a Western architectural style, it was inherently anxious about its own identity and reluctant to give up traditional etiquette. The thinking mode of "learning from the foreigners in order to gain command of them" made the Qing Dynasty diplomacy appear in a contradictory state of seeking Western recognition and trying to maintain traditional dignity in space. Its architectural form and site selection strategy revealed a sense of inferiority about its status and dependence on and passive acceptance of the Western-centered power structure. It was during this historical stage that China, by renting an embassy in the heart of London, not only hoped to use the geographical proximity to symbolize the core of Western power, but also tried to blur cultural differences through exterior decoration and interior furnishings in order to obtain a more equal diplomatic status.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, China's diplomatic concepts and practices gradually changed. With the evolution of political discourse and the reshaping of the domestic political system, the design and operation of embassy space have also begun to change from a single imitation to an autonomous and creative direction. During the Cold War, facing the confrontation of the bipolar structure, the Chinese embassy incorporated more symbols reflecting socialist characteristics into its design, such as red stars and revolutionary patterns, which was not only a declaration of domestic political ideas, but also a symbolic resistance to the challenge of the Western-dominated international order. At this time, the spatial function of the embassy is no longer limited to the simple handling of consular affairs. Still, it has gradually evolved into an important platform for displaying the national image, spreading political ideas, and conducting cultural dialogue. Through the careful design of the building's exterior, internal space layout and symbol system, the Chinese Embassy has constructed a micro-national image full of political implications in a limited geographical space, allowing Western observers to intuitively feel China's confidence and changes in politics, culture and even ideology.

With the accelerating process of globalization and the profound adjustment of the international power structure, international relations in the 21st century have gradually shown a multipolar trend, and the spatial strategy of Chinese embassies abroad has also ushered in new opportunities and challenges. Taking London as an example, in recent years, the renovation of the Chinese Embassy in the UK and the planned relocation to the Old Royal Mint not only reflect the strategic reconstruction idea from the traditional political center to the modern financial and economic center in terms of geography, but also symbolically

reflect China's ambition to reconstruct the global governance model and international discourse power, and reflect China's determination to get rid of historical baggage and reshape its international image and discourse power in the new era.

In the late Qing Dynasty, China adopted a strategy of "learning" and "imitation" when facing Western powers, trying to make up for its backwardness by learning from Western advanced technology and management experience. In the new era, with the continuous improvement of its comprehensive economic, political and cultural strength, China is no longer satisfied with simple imitation. Still, through innovation and independent design, it builds a diplomatic space with Chinese characteristics and international competitiveness. This transformation is not only reflected in the architectural style and spatial layout, but also reflects the fundamental changes in the country's ideology and strategic thinking at a deeper level. Through the comparison and reflection of historical embassy buildings, it can be seen that in the process of China's continuous adaptation to the changes in the international environment, its diplomatic space practice is not only a transcendence of the past humiliating history, but also a concrete manifestation of the re-imagination of the future global governance pattern.

Facing the interpretation and questioning of its new building design by Western media and politicians, although it has not yet succeeded, China's proposal for a new building project at the Royal Mint is showing the world a new diplomatic image that emphasizes both national sovereignty and transnational cooperation. Behind this model is China's profound insight into the changes in the global governance system and its strategic deployment for the reconstruction of the international political and economic order. As some scholars have pointed out, the rebuilding of diplomatic space is a critical way to find national characteristics and autonomy in the wave of globalization, and this concept has been vividly reflected in the design and operation of the Chinese embassy.

Over the past 150 years, Chinese embassies have undergone a transition from a "leasehold" system to a "sovereign" system. This process is not merely a physical shift, but also an iteration of cognitive frameworks. In the late Qing Dynasty, recognition was gained through "geographical proximity," identity was reshaped through "symbolic confrontation" during the Cold War, and in the 21st century, power structures are being manipulated through the "logic of capital." Notably, China's spatial strategy has consistently been accompanied by discursive self-renewal: from "To learn from the West to defeat the West" to "independent and peaceful diplomacy" and finally to "a community with a shared future for mankind," spatial practices and narrative evolution have mutually reinforced each other, forming an upward spiral. This cycle reveals that diplomatic space is not a passive carrier of national image, but rather an active symbol of national identity and global power relations.

5. Conclusion

The development history of the Chinese Embassy in the UK demonstrates the historic transformation of China's diplomatic space strategy from passive adaptation to active shaping. This is not only an important epitome of China's diplomatic modernization, but also provides rich theoretical and empirical references for global diplomatic space practice. In the late Qing Dynasty, due to the decisive intervention of Western powers and the restrictions of unequal treaties, China could only adopt a strategy of imitation and compromise in diplomatic space, which actually deeply exposed the weak position of the Qing government in international politics. As a special political symbol, the geographical location and architectural style of the embassy building are forced to cater to and rely on the Western power structure, reflecting the helplessness and struggle of traditional Chinese diplomacy in the face of the modern international order.

Theoretically speaking, this study proposes an analytical framework with geopolitical semiotics as the core through a detailed investigation of the architecture of the Chinese Embassy in the UK and its spatial strategy, revealing the inherent connection between the dual attributes of the embassy as a material and symbol in the diplomatic space. Through the comprehensive analysis of the three dimensions of Spatial Topology and Architectural Semiosis, it can be seen that China's diplomatic space not only carries historical memory and cultural identity, but also realizes self-reconstruction and transformation in the continuous adaptation to changes in the international environment. It is this multi-level and multi-dimensional spatial strategy that enables China to move from the periphery to the center in international relations, and from a follower to a rule maker.

In addition, this study also reflects the complexity of the interaction between domestic political discourse and international power structure. The political concept represented by "learn from the foreigners in order to gain command of them" in the late Qing Dynasty was not only a helpless response to external pressure at the time, but also planted the seeds of independent innovation later. In the context of the new era, the concept of "diplomacy with great power characteristics" has not only promoted the all-round upgrade of diplomatic space strategy, but also prompted China to participate in competition and cooperation in the global governance system with a more active attitude. The transformation process of embassy space is a vivid portrayal of the transformation of this concept into concrete practice. Its historical trajectory not only shows China's wisdom in constantly adjusting and adapting to changes in the international order, but also indicates that spatial politics will play an increasingly important role in future international relations.

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