Spatial Injustice and Symbolic Exclusion in Christian Surya's Bedtime Stories of Hong Kong's Helpers

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Abstract

In Hong Kong, foreign domestic workers often occupy the city's most marginalised spaces, such as kitchens, bathrooms, storage rooms, and animal cages. Bedtime Stories of Hong Kong's Helpers by Christian Surya (2024) uses visual storytelling to reveal these precarious living conditions, highlighting the exclusion of domestic workers from dignified urban spaces. This paper examines Bedtime Stories through the lenses of urban environmental justice, arguing that the marginalisation of foreign domestic workers is not only a labour or housing issue but also an environmental one. Their living conditions reflect how labour policy and classed domestic arrangements contribute to broader patterns of spatial and environmental injustice in the city.

By analysing the project's visual and narrative elements, the study traces how everyday household objects become symbols of exclusion and how these symbolic forms relate to broader spatial injustices shaped by urban housing crisis and labour domestic regulation.

Keywords: *environmental justice*; *spatial injustice*; *foreign domestic workers*; *visual storytelling*

Introduction

In Hong Kong, foreign domestic workers (FDWs) often live and sleep in some of the city's most hidden and marginal household spaces, such as kitchens, bathrooms, storage rooms, an animal cage, or cramped corners never intended for rest. *Bedtime Stories of Hong Kong's Helpers* (Christian Surya, 2024) is an interactive visual storytelling project by the *South China Morning Post* that extrapolates these sleeping spaces through minimal yet impactful illustrations paired with brief, poetic text. The story gives a nod to the classic children's book *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown (1947) in terms of structure, mirroring bedtime farewells to household objects like a

light, a red balloon, clocks, socks and mittens. Through this repetition and calm visual tone, Christian Surya highlights the quiet irony: domestic workers end their days by saying “goodnight” to the sanitary utilities and labour tools of other people’s homes instead of comforting and familiar items as used in Brown’s story. The irony contrasts with Brown’s comforting bedtime ritual reveals a stark inversion of rest and labour.

This paper examines Christian Surya’s *Bedtime Stories* to explore how these unusual sleeping spaces expose deeper patterns of spatial and environmental injustice. These sleeping spaces reduce rest to corners never intended for it, depriving workers of comfort, personal space, and the possibility of complete rest. In this sense, the exclusion of FDWs from bedrooms shows how spatial injustice intersects with environmental inequality within the everyday environment of the home. This exclusion is intensified by the fact that Hong Kong is consistently ranked among the most unaffordable housing markets in the world, where high property prices make spatial dignity unattainable for both employers and workers. Drawing on Edward Soja’s theory of spatial justice, this research argues that the inadequate and improvised rest areas of FDWs are more than signs of a housing crisis or labour regulation but manifestations of socially produced geographies of exclusion that reflect how Hong Kong’s labour governance fosters domestic spaces of inequality.

The conditions mentioned earlier are systematically reinforced by regulation and policy. Nicole Constable (2014) describes how migrant mothers and domestic workers inhabit “zones of social abandonment,” where legal ambiguity, stigma, and poor conditions intersect. Similarly, Dela Rosa (2019) argues that the city’s live-in policy, intended as protection, in fact legitimises the relegation of workers to marginal spaces like bathrooms and closets. Masuda (2019) compares Hong Kong and Singapore, showing how live-in rules perpetuate spatial hierarchies and deepen inequality. As scholars such as Parreñas (2001) and Lan (2006) have shown, domestic workers often face systemic inequalities tied to migration, gendered labour, and spatial exclusion across Asia. Soja’s (2009) analysis of spatial justice helps explain how these conditions are not incidental but produced through planning, policy, and economic pressure.

Building on this literature, this study turns to *Bedtime Stories* to show how the marginal corners and makeshift bedrooms assigned to FDWs, while confined to the household, are also signs of broader urban conditions. They reflect housing inequality, reinforce social hierarchies of labour, and expose the often invisible care work that sustains both family life and the wider city. It positions *Bedtime Stories* not only as a creative work but also as a cultural text that allows academic debates on domestic space, spatial justice, and environmental inequality.

Although previous studies have addressed foreign domestic workers through policy analysis, ethnography, and critical theory, few have examined how illustrated narratives like this one reveal the exclusion of workers from dignified rest, reframe everyday household objects as symbols of inequality, and connect household arrangements to

wider urban conditions. This paper addresses the illustrations from the visual storytelling of Christian Surya's *Bedtime Stories,* drawing attention to the lived inequalities within domestic spaces in Hong Kong, while also relating them to the environmental context of urban life.

Methodology

This study is grounded in Edward Soja's theory of spatial justice, which provides the primary framework for analysing *Bedtime Stories of Hong Kong's Helpers* (Christian Surya, 2024). The data consist of Christian Surya's storytelling project published by the South China Morning Post, accessed in April 2025. Soja's approach emphasises that space is not neutral but socially produced, and that questions of justice must be examined through the geographies that structure everyday life (Soja, 1996; Soja, 2010). His concepts of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace are used to analyse how the physical environments of foreign domestic workers, the ideological rationalisations of cramped housing, and the lived contradictions of labour and rest intersect to produce spatial injustice.

Barthes' semiotic theory is employed as a working method for image analysis, particularly his assertions on denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1977), particularly his assertions on denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1977). Barthes's semiotic approach is valuable in this context because it allows us to see how visual representations not only reflect reality but also naturalise inequalities. His notion of myth reveals how the meanings of everyday objects can obscure their ideological functions.

These tools are utilised to decode how everyday domestic objects acquire symbolic and ideological nuance, which are then interpreted through Soja's critical spatial lens. The combined method begins with Barthes for close visual analysis but is followed by Soja's spatial framework, allowing the study to move from visual analysis to a broader critique of how labour, housing crisis, and policy produce unjust geographies in Hong Kong.

Lastly, this study contributes to the broader discussion on environmental justice by exposing how environmental inequalities are inseparable from spatial exclusions and how the everyday environment of domestic life reflects wider urban conditions. Through the visual storytelling analysis of *Bedtime Stories*, the study demonstrates how the marginalised resting spaces of FDWs are not only symbolic and spatial injustices but also forms of environmental inequality embedded in Hong Kong's domestic and urban environments.

Results and Discussion

1. Functionality to Symbolism

Based on the live-in policy in Hong Kong, FDWs are required to reside in their employers' homes. As a result, sleeping arrangements often take place in kitchens, storage rooms, corridors, an animal cage or next to toilets and laundry areas, where space is carved out of functional or transitional zones. This is also due to the housing prices in the city, which make it unaffordable for most families to give their FDW a proper sleeping arrangement. The situation facing FDWs in Hong Kong is visualised in Christian Surya's *Bedtime Stories*, which also recontextualises everyday domestic objects surrounding the sleeping areas of foreign domestic workers through the repetitive "goodnight" refrain. This echoes the structure of Brown's classic children's book *Goodnight Moon*, but here the bedtime ritual unfolds in cramped, makeshift and functional spaces.

In Barthesian semiotics, the objects depicted in Christian Surya's illustrations, such as toilets, sinks, ironing boards, laundry, and storage boxes, denote ordinary household functions. Yet when paired with the repetitive "goodnight" refrain, echoing Brown's children's story, they acquire a symbolic dimension. Functional tools of domestic life are recontextualised as signs of exclusion from dignified spaces of rest, while also hinting at the loss of privacy, the inseparability of rest and labour, and the devaluation of the worker's body. The illustrated scenes reveal how each of these objects, though mundane in function, becomes a marker of spatial injustice through Christian Surya's ironic bedtime ritual.

One scene illustrates the exclusion of FDWs from dignified resting spaces by showing a toilet bowl as the object of a bedtime farewell. Instead of a bedroom, the worker's sleeping area is the bathroom, symbolically tied to a sanitary appliance, a place never intended for rest. This ironic farewell highlights how domestic workers are denied access to clean, private and proper spaces of comfort, relegated instead to the margins of the home. The toilet bowl, in Barthesian semiotics, can be inferred from a neutral object of sanitation into a sign of spatial exclusion, exposing how FDWs' rest is displaced to inappropriate and degrading areas of the household. These exclusions are not only symbolic but environmental, since they show how the most basic human need for rest is pushed to spaces of waste and sanitation.

Meanwhile, another scene, in which a sink with a toilet brush and a cupboard is paired with the same "goodnight" refrain, reveals the spatial inseparability of rest and domestic service. Cleaning tools occupy the sleeping areas, hence the worker's body remains symbolically tied to household labour even during rest. While the illustration and structure still allude to Brown's classic, it evokes a totally different symbol of rest. The soft and friendly illustration that has captured children's hearts failed to create the same nuance. Instead, stark irony emerges, and the sink, a functional object, transforms into a reminder that the boundary between bedroom and workspace has collapsed, leaving the worker without a space of her own to rest.

In another illustration, a makeshift bedroom composed of toilet appliances is accompanied by laundry hanging overhead, connoting a constant cycle of work. The presence of wet clothes shows that the space is never free from domestic labour. Rest and work merge entirely, making the worker's sleeping area a continual reminder of labour. An ironing board leaning against the wall illustrates a similar point. Denotatively, it is a tool for household chores. Connotatively, it compresses two incompatible functions, work and rest, into the same space. This arrangement demonstrates that complete rest is unachievable for FDWs.

In another frame, a fuller illustration shows an FDW sleeping surrounded by those household items, where stacked storage boxes tower over a thin sleeping mat, marking a sleeping area where rest is confined to the least valued and most hidden parts of the home. The scene shows that the arrangement, called *my little bedroom*, is not in fact a bedroom but is assigned as one for her. The image of an FDW curled on the thin mat under the hanged laundry fully illustrated. It fosters a connotation that implies storage as a symbolic hierarchy in which the worker's body is given less importance than or equal to household possessions. When read critically, the illustration presents the devaluation of the FDW's physical being because she is not assigned a space that allows her to pause and take a break, where the rest of the family within the household does. Instead, she is given a space laden with domestic working tools.

Barthes also explains how connotative meanings can crystallise into what he calls "myth": dominant cultural narratives that make social arrangements appear natural or inevitable (Barthes, 1977). In the context of Hong Kong, the cramped and unusual sleeping spaces of FDWs are often rationalised as an unavoidable consequence of expensive housing and the state's regulation. Christian Surya's *Bedtime Stories* challenges this myth by exposing how such arrangements are presented through the ironic structure of a children's bedtime story, thereby exposing their situation beyond just illustration and visual storytelling.

While Barthes' semiotics reveals how everyday objects such as toilets, sinks, an ironing board, laundry and storage boxes acquire connotative meanings of exclusion, inseparability, and hierarchy that crystallise into cultural myths, these symbolic findings alone cannot explain why such conditions persist. To move beyond the level of signification, Edward Soja's framework of spatial justice situates these illustrations within broader material and ideological geographies. In this way, the semiotic exclusions identified by Barthes become the evidence of Soja's *Firstspace* deprivation, *Secondspace* rationalisation, and *Thirdspace* contradiction. As Fraile-Marcos (2014) notes, representational spaces are where symbolic resistance can emerge. These are spaces that allow counter-discourses to challenge dominant spatial arrangements. In *Bedtime Stories*, these improvised sleeping areas are not just signs of marginalisation but become spaces where inequality is made visible and contested.

2. Symbolism to Spatial Injustice

Christian Surya's *Bedtime Stories* visualises the spatial marginalisation of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Hong Kong. Using Barthes' semiotics, everyday domestic objects such as sinks, toilets, wet laundry, an ironing board, and storage boxes first denote household function but gain connotative meaning through the repeated "goodnight" refrain. This transforms them into signs of deprivation masked as common practice. However, to move beyond symbolic reading and understand how such inequality is materially produced and ideologically justified, Soja's spatial theory becomes essential. His framework of *Firstspace* (material), *Secondspace* (ideological), and *Thirdspace* (lived contradiction) allows us to situate these illustrations within broader structures of housing policy, labour regulation, and urban exclusion (Soja, 1996).

Soja's *Firstspace* refers to measurable, physical arrangements (Soja, 1996). In *Bedtime Stories*, cramped bathrooms, corridors, and laundry corners serve as sleeping areas for FDWs, demonstrating how the home's area arrangements denied them private rest. These are not neutral spaces but spatial indicators of hierarchy. Barthes would argue that these illustrations transform domestic appliances into symbols of domestic labour. Soja extends this reading by positioning these arrangements as evidence of systemic injustice, where the spatial design of homes reflects the undervaluing of foreign domestic labour. The home, presented as intimate and nurturing, becomes a mechanism of control and containment for live-in workers, where the employers assign the sleeping arrangements for them based on their socio-economic status in housing.

Secondspace, for Soja (1996), is the ideological frame that legitimises spatial injustice. In Hong Kong, the live-in policy and the city's unaffordable housing market are invoked to normalise substandard living arrangements for FDWs. Employers claim they have no alternative, framing the use of kitchens or toilets as sleeping quarters as unavoidable. This rationale constitutes a dominant spatial imaginary that makes exploitation common, acceptable practices. As Barthes suggests, this logic functions as myth. It depoliticises inequality by presenting it as common sense. Secondspace in this context masks exploitation by naturalising it within economic and legal discourse. The illustrations do more than depict a lack of space. They invite viewers to experience the contradiction between comfort and discomfort, between bedtime rituals and labour realities, between migrant body and household utilities. This dissonance opens up what Soja calls *Thirdspace*.

Soja's *Thirdspace* (1996) captures the lived tension between material deprivation and ideological justification. Christian Surya's ironic goodnight phrases expose the emotional violence of assigning rest to spaces of labour and hygiene. The bedtime ritual, borrowed from *Goodnight Moon*, collides with the reality of makeshift beds beside laundry, sink and toilets. This contradiction reveals *Thirdspace*, where the lived experiences of domestic workers expose the gap between everyday realities and the dominant ideologies that justify their marginalisation. Christian Surya's illustrations do not merely represent injustice; they disrupt it by creating a space of critical awareness. Through visual critical visual storytelling, they expose how labour, regulation, and

domesticity merge to deny FDWs basic spatial dignity.

By linking Barthes' visual myth with Soja's spatial theory, *Bedtime Stories* reveals how injustice is embedded in both the arrangements and practices of domestic space within the home. Christian Surya's work confronts not only the physical marginalisation of FDWs but also the regulatory and economic frameworks that make such arrangements seem acceptable. Soja's concept of spatial justice insists that any ethical urban future must dismantle both unjust geographies and the ideologies that support them. In Hong Kong, this means rethinking the legal obligation to live-in and the social acceptance of assigning workers to subhuman spaces. Christian Surya's *Thirdspace* invites recognition of injustice not as abstract, but as present in the intimate routines of domestic life. Finally, Soja's framework demonstrates how the marginalised sleeping spaces of Hong Kong's domestic workers are not simply symbolic or unfortunate, but socially produced geographies of injustice that demand structural transformation.

Conclusion

Christian Surya's *Bedtime Stories of Hong Kong's Helpers* reveals how the most hidden corners of the home become markers of inequality. Through Barthes' semiotics, household objects such as toilets, sinks, an iron board, and storage boxes transform into symbols of exclusion, the collapse of the work-rest distinction, and the devaluation of FDWs' bodies. Meanwhile, Soja's spatial justice framework situates these symbolic meanings within the material and ideological conditions of Hong Kong's housing crisis and live-in policy. The analysis demonstrates that the marginalisation of foreign domestic workers is not incidental but socially produced, legitimised by labour policy and housing price crisis in the city that presents inadequate living arrangements as unavoidable.

When read critically, these exclusions are not only spatial but also environmental. A basic human need, rest, is relegated to spaces of sanitation, waste and labour, unjustly arranging the domestic spaces and reinforcing inequality. By linking symbolic, spatial, and environmental perspectives, this study positions Christian Surys' *Bedtime Stories* as a cultural text that challenges accepted myths of necessity and common practices, and questions domestic space arrangement, justice, and environmental inequality. In doing so, it probes the question of where individuals' rest is not just personal or spatial, but within the context of FDWs, it's deeply political and environmental.

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