

## Micro Public Spaces Usage by Foreign Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: Reflection based on the perspective of spatial justice

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### Abstract

This study examines the use of micro public spaces by foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Hong Kong through the lens of spatial justice. Focusing on a detailed case study in Sham Shui Po, where FDWs' presence in public spaces has often been overlooked, the study introduces time and social relations as key dimensions, building on traditional spatial justice frameworks. A new evaluation framework is proposed, consisting of six dimensions: time, inclusivity, vitality and social interaction, openness and accessibility, management, and ownership and participation. Using a mixed-methods approach with field research, surveys, and interviews, the study investigates FDWs' use of public spaces across different times. Findings highlight tensions between passive participation and active expression, revealing disparities in spatial resource allocation and participation rights. While social interaction and inclusivity increase during holidays, these effects are temporary and self-organized by FDWs. The study identifies gaps in urban planning, such as FDWs' exclusion from decision-making processes and rigid management rules that hinder equitable space use. It advocates for more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and participatory urban governance to promote fairer distribution of public space resources and enhance social integration.

### Keywords

Spatial justice, micro public spaces, foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, inclusivity

## Introduction

With rapid urbanization, the creation of people-centered, open, inclusive, and equitable cities has become a central issue in global urban development. In recent years, the Chinese government has emphasized the provision of high-quality public goods and social equity through policies like the "Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area" (2019)<sup>1</sup> and the "Five-Year Action Plan on People-Centered New-Type Urbanization Strategy" (2024)<sup>2</sup>. These initiatives aim to improve citizens' happiness and ensure equal access to housing, employment, and public services for all social groups. However, rapid urban expansion and the influx of migrants have resulted in urban issues, such as unequal resource distribution and environmental pressure<sup>3</sup>, particularly in Hong Kong. Foreign domestic workers (FDWs), as a major foreign labor group, have long faced marginalization in Hong Kong<sup>4</sup>. Despite their contributions to the local economy, their participation in public spaces is often overlooked. During public holidays, FDWs gather in public spaces, engaging in social and recreational activities, which sometimes raises concerns among local residents about "excessive use" of public resources<sup>5</sup>, intensifying space allocation conflicts.

While existing research has analyzed public space from the perspectives of publicness and spatial justice, studies on FDWs' specific use of micro-public spaces—especially within the spatial justice framework—remain limited. This study takes Sham Shui Po as a case study

to examine FDWs' spatial practices in four representative micro-public spaces: Nam Cheong Street Sitting-Out Area (NC), Pei Ho Street Public Open Space (PH), Sycamore Street Rest Garden (SS), and Shek Kip Mei Street Rest Garden (SKM). These spaces were selected based on the significant presence of FDWs observed by the researcher.

Building on traditional spatial justice theory, this study introduces new dimensions—time and social interaction—expanding the framework to include six aspects: time, inclusivity, vitality and social interaction, openness and accessibility, management, ownership and participation, whose approach aligns more closely with FDWs' daily spatial practices. A mixed-methods approach, combining field research, surveys, and interviews, is used to analyze FDWs' spatial use. Quantitative data reveal general patterns, while qualitative data explore social interactions, cultural needs, and identity. This research not only fills a gap in the existing literature on the use of micro-public spaces by foreign labor groups and their relationship with spatial justice, but also highlights the potential of micro-public spaces in promoting social equity and inclusiveness, offering new theoretical insights and practical recommendations for urban space design and policy.

## 1. Spatial Practices of Foreign Domestic Workers in HK

Existing studies on the use of public spaces by foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Hong Kong primarily explore their spatial practices from the perspectives of institutional, culture, and social

practice. Koh (2009) observed in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur that due to the employment system's restriction of FDWs living with their employers, the use of public space by foreign female domestic workers is not merely a "temporary gathering" on weekends but a response to and a form of resistance against the deprivation of private space in daily life. This "temporary occupation" is often viewed by local residents as a disruption to traffic and order<sup>6</sup>. Yu (2009) further argued that the use of public space by Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong is largely driven by "intrinsic cultures," such as religion, language, and social customs. Their public space practices reflect the power of cultural reproduction and community building, rather than merely the fulfillment of survival needs<sup>7</sup>. Cheung et al. (2022), in their study of low-income residents in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong, found that public space is not only a place for everyday leisure but also a critical field where vulnerable groups maintain their quality of life and social relations. At the same time, it is a space that concentrates mechanisms of conflict and exclusion<sup>8</sup>.

In recent years, the works of Caterina Villani and Talamini have shifted focus to spatial agency and creative practices. In their studies during the pandemic, they examined high-density districts like Mong Kok and Central, revealing how public space has been institutionalized as an "exclusionary tool" in pandemic governance, further marginalizing the spatial needs of vulnerable groups (such as FDWs and low-income groups) and even rendering their "invisibility of vulnerability"<sup>9</sup>. Under Hong Kong's labor sys-

tem and urban spatial policies, FDWs lack private and semi-public spaces in their daily lives, and can only occupy spaces such as pedestrian bridges, parks, and mall peripheries on weekends. They transform these "transit spaces" or "consumption spaces" into "social, cultural, and support network spaces," thus reproducing urban space in pursuit of a sense of belonging<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, in their research on Chater Road in Central, Villani incorporated the concepts of "chromatic leisure" and "grey spaces" into the discourse of socio-political transformation, revealing how foreign women reclaim grey urban streets and exposed street infrastructure through self-organized activities such as dance and music, extending into color and bodily practices, breaking spatial constraints, and endowing public spaces with new meanings<sup>11</sup>.

These studies not only reveal the dual structural constraints of institutional control and social exclusion that foreign workers face in the use of public spaces in Hong Kong, but also highlight the agency of FDWs as spatially active subjects. Through creative spatial practices that engage both the body and space, they reproduce their own publicness in the urban space, thus seeking a sense of belonging and social recognition.

## 2. Spatial Justice in the Context of Public Space

### 2.1 Spatial Justice

Research on spatial justice initially emerged in the field of political philosophy, focusing primarily on the justice of the distribution of social resources such as wealth and opportunities.

In his seminal work *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls argued that the core of justice lies in providing an equitable social environment and ensuring that participants in this environment have fair opportunities to make choices<sup>12</sup>. In the 1960s and 1970s, urban issues became increasingly prominent in Western capitalist countries, with growing concerns over urban decay and class struggle. These social tensions led scholars to direct their studies on justice towards the spatial domain, which gave rise to the theory of "spatial justice." Among the key contributors to the theoretical foundation of spatial justice were Western Marxist scholars such as David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward W. Soja. In his *Social Justice and the City* (1973), David Harvey analyzed the roots of urban spatial inequities from the perspectives of geography and spatial production. Drawing on Brady Davis's concept of "territorial justice," he proposed the theory of "territorial redistribution," emphasizing the achievement of social justice through the equitable distribution of spatial resources<sup>13</sup>. Edward W. Soja further developed the theory of spatial justice in his work *Seeking Spatial Justice*, advocating for equitable spatial rights and opposing spatial segregation and unequal resource distribution<sup>14</sup>. Susan Feinstein introduced the concept of the "Just City," which argues that justice, democracy, and diversity should serve as the core principles for urban planning, providing theoretical support for urban development<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, Don Mitchell, in *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, pointed out that ensuring the "right to the city" is a crucial pathway to achieving

social justice, with the core of this right lying in the struggle for equal access to public space<sup>16</sup>. In China, research on spatial justice mainly focuses on theoretical aspects. For instance, Ren Ping argues that spatial production and resource distribution are the primary fields of struggle between capital's pursuit of profit, citizens' spatial rights, and government institutional design<sup>17</sup>. With the continued development of globalization and open economies, urban social structures and spatial patterns have become increasingly diversified. This change is not only reflected in the diversity of urban populations but is also profoundly influenced by domestic population mobility and the influx of international labor. Especially in cities like Hong Kong, which are densely built and have high population concentrations, the introduction of foreign labor has further intensified the pressure on urban resource distribution. In this context, how to ensure spatial justice and achieve social equity and harmony has become a key issue in urban planning research.

## 2.2 The Publicness of Public Space

In *The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy*, Don Mitchell redefines the concepts of "the public" and "public space," revealing their complex relationship with democracy. He argues that "the public" is a dynamic and evolving concept, continuously reshaped by changes in social, political, economic, and cultural environments, becoming more inclusive and diverse. This concept encompasses all groups actively engaging in social life and advocating for their

ized groups such as the homeless and foreign laborers. "Public space," according to Mitchell, is not merely a physical space but an essential venue for social interaction, dialogue, negotiation, and protest<sup>18</sup>. In his other work *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, Mitchell introduces the concept of "the right to the city," emphasizing the protection of public space rights is key to achieving social justice and democratic practices. He contends that public space, as a "space of justice," is shaped through social struggle and has the potential to achieve equity, voice demands, and promote democracy<sup>19</sup>. For an international metropolis like Hong Kong, public spaces hold significant importance for foreign labor groups, serving not only as places for expressing demands and advocating for rights but also as crucial spaces for promoting social integration and ensuring justice. To systematically evaluate the publicness of public space, Van Melik et al. (2007) proposed models of Secured Space and Themed Space from the perspective of spatial political economy, emphasizing the impact of perceived safety and urban recreation on public space<sup>20</sup>. In the same year, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) published *Spaceshaper: A User's Guide*, which outlined eight dimensions of public space quality, including maintenance, environment, design and appearance, community, you(users), access, use, and other people<sup>21</sup>. In 2010, Jeremy Nemeth and Stephen Schmidt introduced the Tri-Axial Model, focusing on the operational management of public spaces and covering three dimensions: uses/ users, ownership, and management<sup>22</sup>. That

same year, Georgiana Varna and Steve Tiesdell proposed the STAR Model, evaluating the publicness of public space across five dimensions: ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, and animation, using a five-point scale and presenting the results visually in a radar chart<sup>23</sup>. In 2014, Vikas Mehta introduced the PSI Model for public space quality, which encompasses five dimensions: meaningful activities, inclusiveness, pleasurability, safety, and comfort, emphasizing sociability as the fundamental function of public space<sup>24</sup>. Although these models vary in academic focus, when considering the gradients related to publicness, listed in descending order of strength, they are the Star Model, the Tri-Axial Model, the Themed/ Secured Space Model, the CABE Spaceshaper Model, and the PSI Model<sup>25</sup>.

The existing research on spatial justice is largely concentrated on the macro-theoretical level, with insufficient detailed analysis of specific



Figure 1. Spatial Justice Framework for Foreign Domestic Workers in Public Spaces

cases, particularly regarding the use of micro-public spaces by marginalized urban groups. As an international metropolis, Hong Kong's public spaces have complex social, cultural, and economic attributes, many of which are privately managed and exhibit a 'pseudo-public' nature. Traditional frameworks for spatial justice are inadequate in comprehensively revealing the issues of equity within these spaces. To this end, based on the characteristics of this study and integrating existing evaluation models, this paper summarizes and proposes a public space evaluation framework that encompasses six dimensions: time, inclusivity, vitality and social interaction, openness and accessibility, management, ownership and participation. In contrast to traditional static analyses, this model introduces the time dimension, exploring the different patterns of public space usage between holidays and working days to reveal the profound impact of temporal dynamics on the inclusivity and equity of public spaces. The inclusivity dimension assesses whether the space respects and meets the multicultural needs of diverse groups. While the vitality and social interaction dimension focuses on whether the space provides varied activities and promotes interaction between groups to enhance their sense of belonging and identity. The openness and accessibility dimension examines the equity of resource distribution. In addition, the management dimension evaluates the inclusiveness of space operation rules and the balance between order and flexibility. Lastly, the ownership and participation dimension analyzes the participation rights of foreign labor groups in spatial

planning and rule-making from a procedural justice perspective, highlighting their position and role in spatial justice. By addressing these six dimensions, this paper aims to comprehensively analyze the use of micro-public spaces by foreign labor groups and identify shortcomings in urban planning related to social inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, with the goal of fostering more equitable and inclusive urban spaces.

### 3. Study Area and Data Sources

#### 3.1 Research Subjects

The foreign labor group in Hong Kong primarily refers to foreign domestic workers (FDWs), who make up approximately 3% of the city's population, with the vast majority being female and originating from the Philippines and Indonesia. FDWs engage in household labor such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for the elderly and children, typically having only Sundays off, with limited opportunities for socializing with family and friends<sup>26</sup>. During public holidays, they often gather in urban public spaces, participating in social activities such as picnicking and dancing to relieve work stress and maintain emotional connections. Although this group has a history of over fifty years in Hong Kong, they face "spatial disadvantage" due to limited housing conditions and "status disadvantage" due to special visa policies, leading to their long-standing marginalization in society<sup>27</sup>.

#### 3.2 Case Studies

This study selects Sham Shui Po as the research area, primarily because it is highly representa-



tive of the spatial practices of foreign domestic workers (FDWs). According to the 2021 Population Census, Sham Shui Po District has one of the highest concentrations of Indonesian and Filipino populations in Hong Kong<sup>28</sup>, making it a major hub for migrant labor. The district is also characterized by a large number of South Asian-owned shops, and an increasing number of businesses specifically catering to Indonesian FDWs have clustered in the area. These provide migrant workers with familiar cultural atmospheres and everyday resources<sup>29</sup>. Previous studies further highlight that in Hong Kong's high-density urban context, public spaces are often extensively occupied by FDWs on weekends for leisure, socialization, and collective activities, generating distinct patterns of spatial use. Collectively, these factors demonstrate not only the heavy reliance of FDWs on public spaces but also the appropriateness of Sham Shui Po as a research site.

Preliminary observations and fieldwork in Sham Shui Po revealed that FDWs were highly active in several small-scale public spaces, most notably the Nam Cheong Street Sitting-Out Area. To ensure the broader applicability of the research findings, the study used this site as the core and extended the investigation to neighboring pocket parks. The north and south endpoints of Nam Cheong Street Sitting-Out Area were taken as reference axes. Considering its linear layout and the natural boundaries formed by its terminal nodes, a contiguous block was delineated, enclosed by major urban roads: Yen Chow Street to the west, Maple Street to the east, and Tung Chau Street and Tai Po Road to the south. A sys-

tematic survey was then conducted of all pocket parks within this boundary. Ultimately, only parks that were observed to be frequently used by FDWs during the study period were included in the sample. These consist of: the linear pocket park located in the center of Nam Cheong Street, known as Nam Cheong Street Sitting-Out Area (NC)<sup>①</sup>; Pei Ho Street Public Open Space (PH) beside high-end residential buildings on Pei Ho Street; Sycamore Street Rest Garden (SS) near industrial buildings; and the Shek Kip Mei Street Rest Garden (SKM), located near a residential area with a high concentration of South Asian ethnic groups.

### 3.3 Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative analysis, to systematically explore the use of micro-public spaces by FDWs and the expression of spatial justice within these spaces. Specifically, It primarily uses field research, direct observation, surveys, and interviews to systematically explore the use of micro-public spaces by foreign labor groups and their manifestation of spatial justice. The research design is based on the spatial justice framework for foreign labor public spaces (Figure 1) covering six dimensions: time, vitality and social interaction, inclusivity, accessibility and openness, management, and ownership and participation, with a total of 18 questions. The survey is divided into three sections: respondents' personal background information, elements of publicness in public spaces, and behaviour patterns. The study selected four representative public

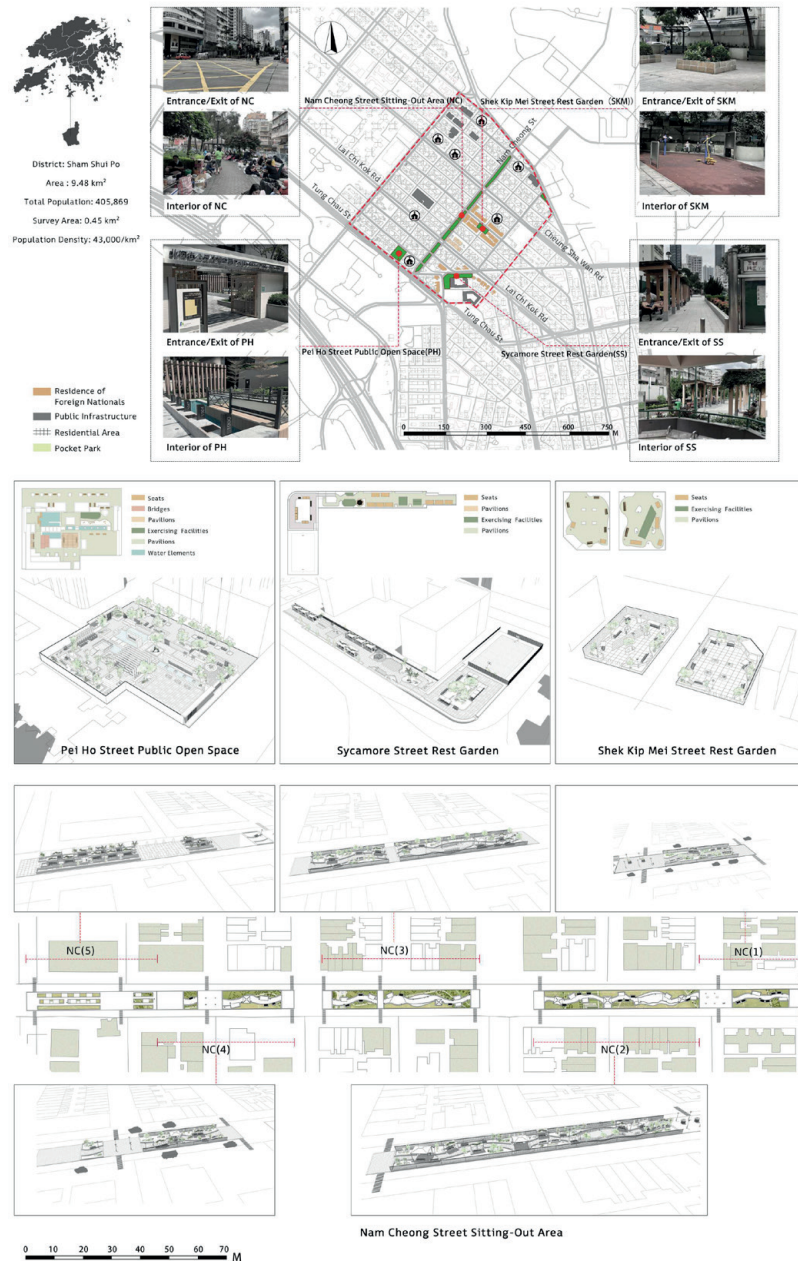


Figure 2. Location and Overview of Micro Public Spaces NC, PH, SS, and SKM



space sites with high FDW concentrations and diverse management models—NC, PH, SS, and SKM—and distributed questionnaires through random sampling during both weekdays and holidays, ensuring high representativeness and temporal and spatial comparability of the data, and quantifying FDWs' behaviors and perceptions of public space use at different times. Data collection took place from June to July 2022, with field observations conducted over four weeks. The observation periods covered three time slots: 8:00–10:00 AM, 12:00–2:00 PM, and 7:00–9:00 PM. After collecting the questionnaires, the data were rigorously checked for completeness and consistency, with erroneous or inconsistent data removed. A total of 80 surveys were distributed, with 37 valid responses returned<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 FDWs in different public spaces, each interview lasting from 30 seconds to 3 minutes. The interviews focused on reasons for selecting public spaces, daily activities, social interactions, evaluations

of facilities and management, and personal sense of belonging. After organizing and thematically coding the interview recordings, the results supplemented and validated the quantitative data. During the survey distribution and interviews, dynamic changes in space usage were also recorded.

All quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software, calculating means, standard deviations, and other measures. Qualitative data were organized using thematic analysis, and triangulation was employed to enhance the reliability of the data. The entire research process adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent from respondents and privacy protection. By cross-validating the survey and interview data from multiple perspectives, this study not only presents an objective evaluation of FDWs' use of micro-public spaces at different times, but also reveals the spatial justice issues underlying these practices, providing a solid empirical foundation for further discussions on urban governance and social inclusion.

Micro Public Space	Abbreviation	Area	Peak Number of FDWs	Opening Hours
Nam Cheong Street Sitting-Out Area	NC(1)	427m <sup>2</sup>	63	7am-11pm
	NC(2)	981m <sup>2</sup>	271	
	NC(3)	944m <sup>2</sup>	91	
	NC(4)	897m <sup>2</sup>	21	
	NC(5)	616m <sup>2</sup>	31	
Pei Ho Street Public Open Space	PH	814m <sup>2</sup>	8	6am-10pm
Sycamore Street Rest Garden	SS	1327m <sup>2</sup>	6	24h
Shek Kip Mei Street Rest Garden	SKM	742m <sup>2</sup>	5	24h

Table 1. Overview of Micro Public Spaces NC, PH, SS, and SKM

3.4 Summary of Survey and Interview Data<sup>③</sup> 4. Results

	Survey Factors	Factor 1: Time	
		Workday Average	Holiday Average
	Factor 2: Vitality & Socializing		
Q1	In this space, I can freely do what I like.	2.8	4.2
Q2	I visit this space frequently.	4.6	4
Q3	I often stay in this space for more than an hour.	1.6	4.2
Q4	I engage in various social activities in this space.	2.8	4
	Factor 3: Inclusivity		
Q5	The infrastructure in this space is sufficient to meet my activity needs.	3.6	3
Q6	I enjoy being in this public space and am very satisfied with it.	3.4	4.2
	Factor 4: Openness & Accessibility		
Q7	It is convenient and easy for me to reach this space.	4.6	4
Q8	I usually walk to this space.	4.8	4.6
Q9	Walking to this space is an enjoyable experience.	3	3.6
	Factor 5: Management		
Q10	The environment in this space is good, and I don't see any untidy or dirty conditions.	4.4	3.4
Q11	Other users of this space are also well-mannered.	4	3.6
Q12	The infrastructure of this space is well-maintained and in good condition.	3.2	3
Q13	I never worry about my personal safety when using this space.	3.6	3.8
Q14	I am always welcomed when I arrive at this space, no matter the time.	4.2	4.6
Q15	When using this space, I do not feel constrained by overly strict management.	3.6	4
	Factor 6: Ownership & Participation		
Q16	I have participated in the planning and design of public spaces in this area.	1.6	1.4
Q17	I am familiar with and knowledgeable about the public spaces in this area.	2.2	2
Q18	I do not feel out of place when using this space.	3.2	4.6

Interview Questions	Location of Interview	Main Points
Q20 Do you frequently visit this public space?	PH	I visit rarely, sometimes less than once a month.
	NC	I pass by every day, but just walk through. The place I visit most often is the church, at least once a week.
	NC	I don't usually go except on weekends.
	SKM	I don't visit often.
	SS	I take my children there twice a week.
Q21 What do you usually do in this public space?	NC	I rest for 10 minutes while buying groceries in the morning, and on weekends I picnic here with friends, usually staying all day.
	PH	I don't have time during the week, but I enjoy sitting here and chatting with friends on weekends.
	SS	Stay with my children
Q22 What is your favorite public space in Hong Kong?	NC	I usually go to the prayer room; the atmosphere there is freer.
	PH	I prefer the prayer room over the park. My favorite park is Kowloon Park because it has a mosque and a better environment.
	NC	My favorite is Shabin (church)
	SS	My favorite is Kowloon Park and Masjid (prayer room).
Q23 Do you enjoy socializing with others in this public space?	PH	I wait for friends here, but I don't talk to others.
	SKM	I rarely initiate conversation with others.
Q24 Are you satisfied with this public space?	NC	satisfied; I like spending weekends here.
	PH	somewhat satisfied.
	SS SKM	It's okay, no strong feelings either way.

Table 2. Analysis of Survey Results

4.1 Flexible Meaning of Public Space

Through the surveys and interviews, the study found that foreign domestic workers' (FDWs) definitions of public space differ significantly from the traditional concept of public space (see Table 2). Traditional public spaces are generally understood as open urban spaces accessible to all .However, influenced by their cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and the social norms of their home countries, FDWs tend to view spaces with specific access conditions as "public spaces," particularly those that provide emotional support and opportunities for social interaction. For instance, many FDWs mentioned religious sites such as churches and prayer rooms when asked about the public spaces they visit most frequently (Q20). Therefore, this study categorizes public space into two types: "solid public spaces" and "void public spaces." Solid public spaces refer to traditional open and public recreational spaces, while void public spaces are those with specific access conditions, typically linked to religious beliefs.

The research found that solid public spaces do not play a central role in the daily lives of FDWs (Q17, Q18). Compared to parks or squares, FDWs place greater importance on void public spaces that reflect their identity and beliefs and are more inclined to use these spaces (Q22). Interview results suggest that FDWs rarely visit solid public spaces actively (Q20) and seldom interact with other groups in these spaces (Q23). This phenomenon shows a certain discrepancy from the survey results regarding the frequency

of visits to solid public spaces (Q2). The findings suggest that FDWs' use of solid spaces is largely passive rather than active participation.

## 4.2 Vitality and Social Interaction

Based on the results of the surveys and field research, foreign laborers' activities in solid public spaces exhibit significant temporal variations. On weekdays, activities primarily consist of short static rest and commuting, with limited content and brief durations (Q3 weekdays: 1.6). In contrast, the duration and variety of activities increase significantly on holidays, often includ-

ing dynamic social activities such as dancing and picnicking (Q3 holidays: 4.2). This difference is mainly due to the fact that FDWs only have Sundays off (Q1 weekdays: 2.8, holidays: 4.2). For instance, in NC, the number of foreign laborers using the space on weekdays is less than 10, with activities mainly consisting of short rest or personal activities (morning:  $\leq 10$  minutes, afternoon:  $\leq 30$  minutes). However, on holidays, the number of users increases to over 200, and the activities become more diverse, including picnics, dancing, and live streaming, with the activities typically lasting the en-

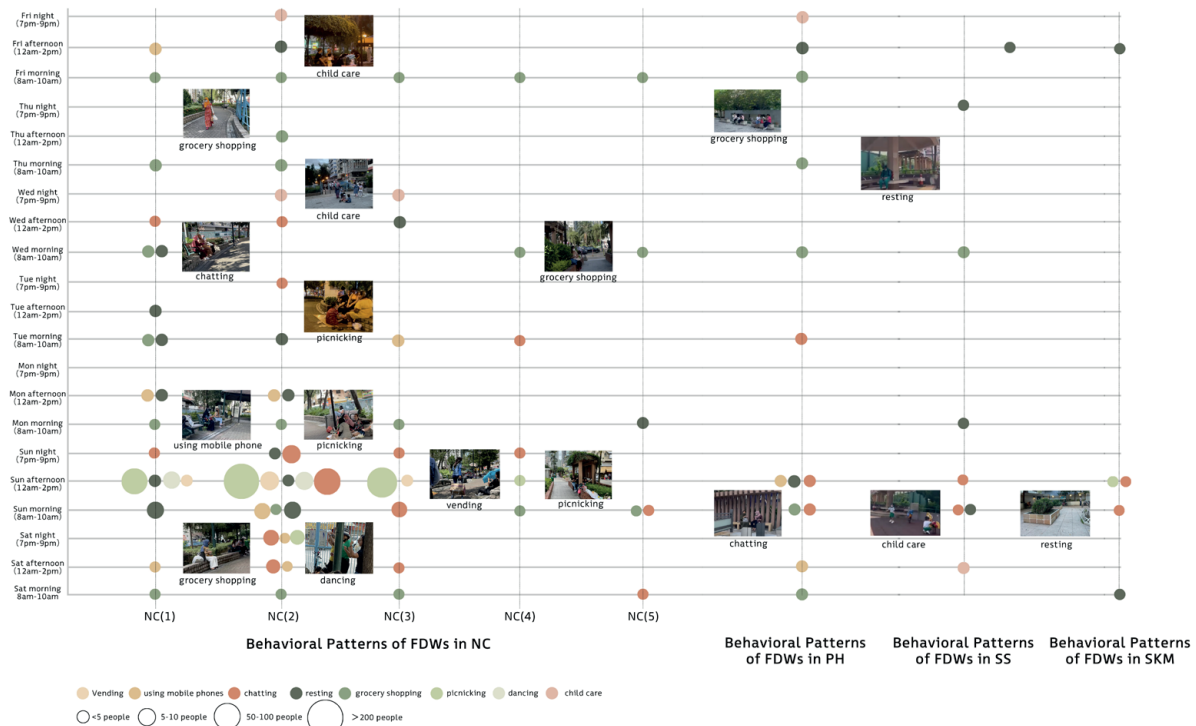


Figure 3. Behavioral Patterns of FDWs in Solid Public Spaces<sup>4</sup>

tire day. PH, SS, and SKM show similar trends, where the number, duration, and diversity of activities on holidays are significantly higher than on weekdays. This suggests that the activity patterns of FDWs are influenced by time and social structure, with notable differences in their public space usage during different time periods.

The research also reveals the limitations of micro-public spaces in fostering interaction and integration between different groups. On weekdays, the primary users of public spaces are local residents, whose activities are diverse, including resting, reading, playing chess, and exercising. In contrast, FDWs mainly engage in brief passage and static resting. On holidays, however, the activities of FDWs become more diversified, while local residents' activities become more monotonous. Despite the higher level of social activity among foreign laborers on holidays (Weekdays: 2.8, Holidays: 4), these interactions are primarily confined within the foreign laborer group, with limited joint participation or cross-group communication between local residents and foreign laborers during the same time period. This differentiated usage pattern reflects the shortcomings of current public space designs in promoting social inclusivity and enhancing a sense of belonging and identity.

4.3 Inclusivity

Providing adequate infrastructure is also a crucial manifestation of spatial justice. Currently, most public space facilities are managed by the government, but the designs tend to be standardized, lacking local characteristics and

cultural expression. The configuration of facilities (such as vegetation, seating, and sports equipment) is homogenized and fails to meet the needs of FDWs (Weekdays: 3.6, Holidays: 3). For instance, sports facilities are not suitable for foreign laborers wearing long skirts, seating and shading facilities are insufficient for holiday picnics, and there is a lack of religious activity spaces (Table 3). These issues reflect the failure of public space design to adequately consider the cultural background and diverse needs of foreign laborers. Additionally, the usage rules for solid public spaces are presented only in English and Chinese, lacking multilingual signage. In a context where linguistic diversity is a significant factor, this may limit non-local language users—such as foreign laborers—from fully understanding the rules and accessing the space effectively.

Infrastructure	NC					PH	SS	SKM
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)			
vegetation Variety	2	3	4	6	6	9	9	3
Seats	10	17	11	9	11	24	26	13
Sculptures	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Exercising Facilities	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2
Water Elements	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Pavilions	0	3	1	1	0	2	1	0
Childrens' playing facilities	0	3	3	0	0	0	4	0
Bridges	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Waterfalls	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Lighting	10	13	14	10	6	28	18	7
Basketball Court	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

Table 3. Comparison of Infrastructure in Public Spaces

4.4 Openness and Accessibility

According to the survey results, the accessibility of the four solid public spaces is generally high (Q7), with most FDWs preferring to walk from the subway stations to these spaces (Q8). Although 86% of respondents recognized the accessibility of the public spaces, the walking experience to spaces other than PH was relatively poor (Q9). Specifically, NC is located in the middle of the road, with narrow sidewalks around it, requiring pedestrians to navigate through crowded areas and complex traffic. SS lacks shelter facilities, making it difficult to walk in rainy or sunny weather, and nearby factories and obstacles further increase walking difficulties. SKM has the best accessibility but is used the least by FDWs. Interviews indicate that some foreign workers prefer female-dominated spaces, while SKM is predominantly used by men. PH offers a better walking experience, benefiting from surrounding greenery and resting areas in the nearby upscale residential area, but the number of foreign workers using it is relatively low.

The seemingly subpar walking experience is not merely a result of poor street quality or the lack of comfortable resting areas, but rather reflects a deeper issue of unequal spatial resource distribution. The layout and design of spaces should

provide equal opportunities for use and space experience. However, the surrounding upscale residential areas of PH, where residents typically have higher economic means and social status, are able to occupy more high-quality public space resources, resulting in better infrastructure and walking experiences than other public spaces. In contrast, areas like SKM, NC, and SS, which are predominantly inhabited by elderly residents and South Asian communities, particularly FDWs, are socioeconomically disadvantaged groups with limited access to resources, facing greater risks of spatial deprivation. This unequal distribution of spatial resources not only limits the spatial freedom of foreign workers but also exacerbates their challenges in social integration and identity recognition.

Public Space	Accessibility	Walking Experience	User Type
NC	High	Crowded streets, busy traffic, lack of comfortable resting areas	Foreign domestic workers or nearby residents
PH	Fairly high	Good walking experience, well-greened surroundings, comfortable resting areas	Mostly nearby residents, occasionally foreign domestic workers
SS	Fair	No shelter on walking paths, weather-sensitive, poor experience	Primarily nearby residents, with a small number of foreign domestic workers
SKM	High	Good accessibility, but primarily used by men, limited foreign domestic worker social activities	Almost no foreign domestic workers

Table 4. Accessibility of Solid Public Spaces



Figure 4. Walking Experience in Solid Public Spaces



## 4.5 Management

The survey results indicate that the cleanliness of the four public spaces ranks from highest to lowest as PH, SS, SKM, and NC, with cleanliness generally lower on public holidays than on weekdays (Q10). Regarding user behavior norms, PH scores slightly higher, but the overall difference is not significant (Q11). In terms of infrastructure maintenance, PH is better equipped and well-maintained, while the other three spaces have fewer facilities, and some are unavailable due to maintenance, resulting in lower scores (Q12). The overall night-time safety is moderate (Q13), but NC and SKM perform poorly. NC sometimes experiences alcohol consumption and vagrancy activities at night, and there are frequent littering issues; SKM, due to insufficient lighting and a predominance of male users, creates psychological discomfort and safety concerns for female foreign domestic workers. In terms of regulations, NC has stricter management of random activities than the other three spaces. For example, it posts usage

guidelines with eight prohibitive rules, including prohibiting littering, skateboarding, cycling, and walking dogs—referred to as "unwelcome behaviors." In contrast, PH, SKM, and SS have relatively lenient rules, listing only 5-6 prohibited behaviors, with similar content. PH's usage guidelines are only posted at the entrance, whereas the other spaces repeatedly display the rules in multiple areas, clearly specifying which behaviors are "not allowed." Although these regulations impose potential restrictions on some of the weekend activities of FDWs (e.g., noise, sitting or lying on seats), the survey found that they often choose to ignore these prohibitions and were not intervened by security personnel. Therefore, the rules have a limited impact on overall usage and social interactions.

From a theoretical standpoint, "management" is a crucial dimension in evaluating the fairness of public space. Its core lies in determining whether the management rules limit users' freedom to access and use the space, and whether such rules exclude specific groups. While the



Figure 5. Public Space Usage Rules (a)NC (b)SKM (c)SS (d)PH

prohibitive rules in NC and other public spaces are intended to maintain order, they lack public participation and cultural sensitivity. For instance, most rules do not consider the unique needs of FDWs, such as managing noise levels during social gatherings or the flexible use of seating, particularly during holidays. This one-dimensional approach to rule-making fails to address the actual needs of the FDWs in public spaces, which may result in their activity space being implicitly constrained, further exacerbating their marginalization.

#### 4.6 Ownership and Participation

The research findings indicate that the ownership of the four public spaces belongs to the government or public institutions, with the right of use open to the general public. However, survey results show that FDWs have not participated in the planning or expression of needs for these public spaces (Q16), and they lack knowledge about the names and numbers of such spaces (Q17). This reflects that although the separation of ownership and use rights provides a foundation for shared access, information asymmetry and the lack of participatory rights limit FDWs' actual use of space resources. The low usage rates among FDWs (Q20) stem partly from cultural differences, work schedule constraints, and the neglect of their needs in spatial design. Additionally, the absence of consultation with FDWs during the planning process has led to a disconnect between space design and actual needs, further exacerbating spatial inequality.

Nevertheless, the survey data indicates that the inclusivity score during weekends is sig-

nificantly higher than on weekdays (Q18). This observation suggests that foreign workers create a "temporary inclusivity" within public spaces through dense social interactions on weekends, though such inclusivity is time-bound. On weekdays, inclusivity declines markedly, and foreign workers' experiences become more isolated, highlighting temporal disparities in space usage. From the standpoint of spatial justice, the absence of participatory mechanisms undermines procedural justice. The latent demand of FDWs for participation in public space planning and management (with 90% expressing a desire to be involved) emphasizes the need for diversified participatory processes to bridge information asymmetry and enhance cultural sensitivity. This approach would not only strengthen the foreign workers' sense of belonging but also more broadly contribute to the realization of justice and inclusivity in public space design and usage.

### 5. Findings

Existing studies generally emphasize the ambivalent role of public spaces in the daily lives of foreign domestic workers (FDWs), revealing that they are not merely passive recipients of spatial constraints but active agents in these spaces. Through collective occupation and creative use of public spaces, FDWs reshape the urban fabric at the micro level and create alternative social spaces that counter the state's regulatory intentions. However, previous research has largely focused on large public spaces in Hong Kong's central areas, such as Victoria Park and Central, or on the temporary appropriation of transi-

tional spaces like pedestrian bridges in Mong Kok or Charter Road. Moreover, these studies mostly concentrate on weekend scenarios, with insufficient attention paid to everyday micro-public spaces at the community level. To address this gap, this study examines pocket parks in Sham Shui Po, revealing the regularities and dynamic differences in FDWs' spatial practices in daily community spaces, thereby expanding the scope and perspective of existing research. The study finds that FDWs exhibit regular and diverse usage patterns in Sham Shui Po's pocket parks (NC, PH, SS, SKM), with dynamic differences between weekdays and weekends.

Furthermore, using the framework of spatial justice, this study uncovers multiple imbalances faced by FDWs when using micro-public spaces. Their spatial practices include both passive adaptation and active expression, reflecting deficiencies in distributive, social, and procedural justice. In terms of distributive justice, the dimension of "openness and accessibility" reveals that high-quality public spaces are predominantly concentrated in wealthier areas, while FDWs are confined to marginal spaces with limited facilities and poorer environmental conditions. In terms of social justice, the "vitality and social interaction" dimension shows higher levels of social participation and activity during holidays, while the "inclusivity" dimension is temporary and limited to the FDW community, constrained by their reliance on internal networks. In terms of procedural justice, the "management" and "ownership and participation" dimensions expose clear flaws: existing rules mainly focus on restricting "undesirable

behaviors," with minimal support and guidance for positive actions. Additionally, FDWs and other marginalized groups are systematically excluded from rule-making and enforcement processes. While public spaces are formally open to all, the absence of FDWs in the planning and rule-making process reflects that their needs are insufficiently addressed, thus exacerbating spatial inequities in urban space distribution. Finally, the "time" dimension intersects and modulates the other dimensions, significantly shaping FDWs' usage patterns and the social meaning of these spaces.

Thus, the contributions of this study are as follows: first, it expands the research scope from large public spaces in central areas to community pocket parks, providing a more comprehensive understanding of FDWs' spatial practices at the scale of daily life; Second, it introduces the "time" dimension, comparing dynamic differences between weekdays and weekends, and revealing the fluidity and multi-layered nature of publicness; Third, it constructs a spatial justice framework for foreign domestic workers and conducts cross-case comparisons across multiple parks, overcoming the qualitative and single-case limitations of previous studies; Fourth, it deepens the theoretical understanding of the relationship between marginalized groups and public space from the perspective of spatial justice. Through these innovations, this study not only fills gaps in the existing literature but also provides new perspectives and empirical evidence for the expansion of public space theory and the practice of micro-public space governance.

## 6. Conclusions

This study examines the use of micro public spaces by foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Hong Kong through a case study of four specific locations: Nam Cheong Street Sitting-Out Area (NC), Pei Ho Street Public Open Space (PH), Sycamore Street Rest Garden (SS), and Shek Kip Mei Street Rest Garden (SKM). By analyzing FDWs' interactions with these spaces across six key dimensions—time, inclusivity, vitality and social interaction, openness and accessibility, management, and ownership and participation—the research assesses the publicness of these spaces and identifies the social, cultural, and spatial barriers FDWs face. The study introduces a novel evaluation framework incorporating time and social relations as essential dimensions, enriching traditional spatial justice theories. It highlights spatial inequalities where FDWs predominantly rely on marginal spaces with inadequate facilities, limiting their spatial freedom and reinforcing social segregation. While inclusivity increases during holidays, this effect is temporary and driven by self-organized activities, not space design, which undermines its sustainability. Rigid management practices primarily focus on prohibitive measures, failing to adapt to FDWs' diverse needs, especially during peak times like holidays. FDWs are systematically excluded from decision-making, deepening their alienation. Despite these shortcomings, the study demonstrates that these spaces still foster social interaction and community-building, showing their potential to promote spatial justice, even if they do not fully meet the needs of all groups.

While this study provides valuable insights into the use of micro public spaces by foreign domestic workers (FDWs), it has several limitations. Firstly, the research is confined to specific areas in Hong Kong, particularly Sham Shui Po, which may not fully capture the spatial usage patterns of FDWs in other regions or countries. Secondly, the study focuses predominantly on FDWs' experiences without comparing them to those of other social groups, such as local residents, which would offer a more comprehensive understanding of public space usage. Additionally, FDWs are a heterogeneous group with variations in nationality, culture, and gender, which could introduce biases in the survey responses, especially due to language and cultural barriers. The relatively small sample size also limits the ability to generalize the findings. Future research could expand the scope to include FDWs in other regions or countries to provide a broader perspective on micro public space usage. A comparative study between FDWs and other social groups would further enrich the understanding of public space dynamics and highlight shared challenges and opportunities for improving inclusivity across social divides. Moreover, future studies could explore how urban policies influence the accessibility and inclusivity of public spaces for marginalized groups, focusing on their implementation, impact on space planning, and the role of participatory governance in promoting spatial justice.

Urban space allocation should prioritize the participation of marginalized groups, not just high-income residents. Future public space

planning and management should focus on enhancing inclusivity and transparency through diverse participatory mechanisms, such as on-line surveys, community dialogues, and digital platforms, along with publicly sharing proposals and feedback. These measures will ensure broad participation in rule-making processes, fostering a stronger sense of belonging. Rules should also be flexible, adapting dynamically to different time periods and group needs. For instance, management should adjust for variations in space usage during workdays and holidays to maintain "temporary inclusivity" and promote intergroup interactions. An inclusive community management committee, comprising government representatives, FDWs, local residents, and urban planners, should be established. This multi-stakeholder approach will help balance the needs of different groups in space management. Additionally, improving cultural adaptability and diversity—such as by creating spaces for religious activities, female-friendly facilities, and family gathering areas—can address the varied needs of FDWs. Organizing cultural and festive events will further encourage cross-cultural interactions and foster mutual understanding among FDWs, local residents, and visitors. Finally, providing targeted skill training for FDWs will enable them to engage meaningfully with public spaces and participate in urban decision-making, promoting social integration and a greater sense of community.

## Notes

All charts and figures not explicitly cited are either photographed or created by the author.

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1. The NC is located between the two carriage-ways of Nam Cheong Street, serving as a park in the middle of the road. It consists of six narrow, elongated gardens, featuring a unique design. During the author's field research, the NC (6) was under maintenance and access was prohibited. Therefore, the data collected during the research only pertains to the NC (1), (2), (3), (4), and (5).

2. The response rate was low due to language barriers and privacy concerns among some foreign laborers.

3. Due to the limited sample size, the data does not exhibit significant bias in its distribution, with each factor being roughly balanced. Therefore, the average values are used to represent the data. A score of 1 represents 'strongly disagree,' and a score of 5 represents 'strongly agree.'

4. The photos shown in the figure were all taken by the author and have been blurred to protect individual privacy.



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