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Re-imagining the refugee camp

Sovereignty and time-space formation along the Thailand-Burma borderland

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



Figure 1.1 New year celebration in the Mae La camp

Refugee camps are often depicted as temporary and isolated spaces. They are established in response to an emergency, segregating unwanted people from citizens (Gatrell, 2013). The intention is that refugees will stay in camps for a short period of time, supported by a host country, humanitarian organizations, or both. Surveys, however, show that since the early 1990s over fifteen million refugees around the world are now found to be in long-term¹ refugee settlements: an overwhelming number

¹The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018) defines a situation where at least 25,000 refugees have been in exile for five consecutive years or more as a 'protracted refugee situation'. This indicates the long period of time that refugees have stayed in the camp or in an urban area. More than 100,000 refugees from Burma have been displaced in the camp in Thailand for more than thirty years, so they classify as a protracted situation, for which I use the term 'long-term camp' to indicate the long period of time since the camp was established.

that makes up almost two-thirds of the world's refugee population (UNHCR, 2018). A considerable number of these long-term refugee camps have existed for more than twenty years, mostly in the Global South. Examples are the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Somalian refugee camps in Kenya, Afghani camps in Pakistan, Rohingya camps in Bangladesh, and (the topic of this dissertation) the Karen camps in Thailand.

The Mae La refugee camp along the Thailand-Burma border has existed for more than thirty years. Due to its geographical location, which neighbors Karen state in Burma, it hosts a majority of ethnic Karen refugees, who initially fled ethnic conflict between the Karen and the Burmese army in their state. However, eventually other ethnic groups from all over Burma found their way to the camp as well. Apart from seeking refuge, reasons for coming to the camp have also become much more diverse over time. The camp has grown from about 100 households in the 1980s to more than 40,000 camp inhabitants from the early 2000s until now. While the refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border received international attention in the direct aftermath of the destruction of the Karen headquarters in Karen state, which caused a considerable outflow of refugees, such attention naturally dwindled after a couple of years as the emergency subsided. Decades later these camps remain, but the international spotlight has moved on to new emergencies.

This study focuses on the nature of such (forgotten) long-term refugee camps, with Mae La as a case study. These are clearly not emergencies anymore. Given this, how can these camps exist for so long, and how should we understand these places? In refugee studies, the dominant narrative of refugee camps is one of a state of emergency, borrowing from Agamben's concept of 'states of exception' that depicts the diminishing of rights, which are superseded and rejected in the process of claiming the extension of power by a government. At the same time, refugee camps are conceptualized as anomalies to the 'nation-state' order, and therefore as temporary almost by definition. In this rather top-down view of camps, refugees tend to be seen as passive victims, stuck in an undesirable place, waiting for return or otherwise resettlement in a third country to continue with their lives.

This dissertation challenges this dominant narrative of refugees and refugee camps, arguing that it does not accurately describe the situation in long-term camps. It also challenges the unitary view of sovereignty associated with this narrative. Its aim is to conceptualize and document the spatial formation and transformation of the Mae La camp in multiple dimensions over the years, and demonstrate how refugees have used and shaped the camp space to fit their social world. It also aims

to explain how the camp, even though it is clearly still a refugee camp, is not isolated but has become a dynamic and urbanizing node of connection for people in the Thailand-Burma borderland. This analysis of Mae La thereby aspires to contribute to a better understanding and knowledge production, particularly of long-term camps.

MAIN CLAIM, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND ARGUMENT

The main claim of this dissertation is that the discourse of refugees as passive and waiting, and of the camp as an isolated and undesirable place, needs to be reconsidered for long-term refugee camps such as Mae La. My central research question revolves around why the Mae La camp has existed for so long and how this long-term condition influences spatial formation as well as the lives of the camp inhabitants. Sub-questions deriving from this research question are: (i) How is the Mae La camp organized? (ii) How do camp inhabitants perceive the camp, and how do they strategize to rearrange camp characteristics to fit their social world? (iii) How are camp inhabitants linked to the wider borderland society (including cross-border networks), and how do these contacts contribute to camp urbanization?

The argument builds on the observation that Mae La as a long-term camp is organized not only from the top down but also from the bottom up. While not diminishing in any way the reasons for coming to the camp in the first place—the background of suffering, abandoning homes, and fleeing war, conflict and violence—this thesis aims to show a different perspective, as long-term refugees move from victims to agents of their own life. Through time, as temporariness has become permanence, or at least a perceived transient permanence, refugees have been using knowledge and skills to adjust camp space and camp structures in, I argue, four dimensions. First, in the camp governance structure, where the camp committee negotiates and maneuvers among not one, but multiple sovereigns, to carve out and obtain a certain autonomy and self-governing system. In this process they have built a relationship of trust with the Thai government, which as *de jure* sovereign has handed partial sovereignty to the guest (refugee) to manage their own population. I refer to this special configuration as ‘guested sovereignty’.

Second, refugees’ agency is reflected in camp infrastructure. On the Thai government’s orders every house in the camp officially needed to be temporary, but over time the camp was connected to major infrastructure and refugees used their own money and labor to build concrete houses and community buildings. I argue that the long-term

nature of the camp has thereby transformed it into a productive space, where refugees are not simply waiting or feeling stuck, but rather live an active life, in which they work, study, and run their own businesses.

Thirdly, I show that spatial-cultural formation in the camp is significantly informed by ideas about the Karen homeland, which plays an important role in political and ethnic unity in the camp, forming the origin story of who the refugees are and fueling pride in their identity. Although the narrative of homeland is related to the physical homeland in Karen state, I argue it is not territorialized, but rather functions as a point of reference. This is unlike Palestinian refugees in Lebanon or Israel, for example, for whom their homeland is territorialized to the extent that they built a key in front of the refugee camp gate as a symbolic reminder to one day return and claim their homeland space. For the Karen in Mae La, the homeland idea is firmly planted in the collective memories of the Karen people but it has become portable and reproducible in the camp.

Fourthly and lastly, throughout the years, I argue that the camp has also become a place of opportunity. Apart from seeking refuge, people have come to the camp to seek education, work, religious, or romantic opportunities. Meanwhile, camp inhabitants themselves also go out of the camp to work on a regular basis, to visit family back in Karen state, or to attend festivals. Mobility along the Thailand-Burma borderland is therefore an integral part of refugees' lives. I argue that through this movement, these flows in and out of the camp, an urbanization has occurred, and the camp has become city-like. It is not isolated, but rather an important node of connection in the borderland. This current state of Mae La, therefore, benefits all actors involved: the Thai government (including local communities close to the camp and border towns), humanitarian organizations, camp inhabitants, as well as the Karen insurgent group (KNU).

THEORIZING REFUGEE CAMP

The refugee camp, as we know it, originated in Europe after World War I. It was the response to a huge influx of refugees after the collapse of empires and the resulting reconfiguration of Europe. As empires (Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian) gave way to nascent nation-states, minorities often became suspect and were targeted, re-located, or displaced (Gatrell, 2013). Those who could not return to their place of origin had to stay in a camp. It was meant to be a temporary space, which would exist only for a limited period. It therefore also served to separate citizens from non-citizens, with the assumption that the latter would eventually return to their place of origin.

The concept of the refugee camp came to the Global South through humanitarian organizations in response to disasters or wars in the form of humanitarian support, as a shelter set up for affected people. In Southeast Asia, the first refugee camps appeared during the Indochina war (Robinson, 1998). These camps were notable for being located in the middle of nowhere: on islands or in other faraway areas, clearly segregating the refugees from ordinary people. As these camps remained longer than anticipated, security aspects (containing the refugees) became increasingly important to the host state, leading to comparisons with prisons.

Academic debates on refugee camps have, as a result, been heavily influenced by Agamben's work on the camp as a state of exception where the power of the sovereign not only manifests itself in its monopoly on violence, but also the suspension of the rule of law and the denial of the refugees' political rights. In this situation, it reduces refugees to 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998; 2005). Examples of this bare life are the Palestinian refugees in the Gaza strip and the West Bank, and the Uighur refugees who were deported without due process from Thailand back to China by the Thai state.

The Agambenian view of refugee camps has, however, increasingly been criticized. Owens (2010) was one of the first to emphasize a political life of refugees beyond the 'bare life'. Peteet (2015) considered Agamben's concepts useful philosophically but argued that we need a new grounded theory from anthropology to 'tackle a messy ground'. Others have pointed out the complexities of sovereignties in the camp and the agency of refugees involved. Ramadan (2012) refers to an assemblage of people, institutions, organizations, and the relations between them, which produce values and practices in the camp. Still, he sees that condition of life in refugee camps are in limbo. Hanafi (2010), working on refugee camps in Lebanon, stressed the involvement of local authorities and a refugee committee in the camp, forming a tapestry of multiple sovereignties. McConnachie (2014) comes to a similar conclusion for a refugee camp on the Thailand-Burma border, but emphasizes the role of Karen insurgent groups and their relationship to the refugees in the camp in the form of giving protection. This work positions itself within the latter debates but emphasizes and more thoroughly examines refugee agency with regards to spatial formation and governance of the camp.

Agamben's ideas have also influenced scholars who look at spatial aspects of a refugee camp (Agier, 2011b; Turner, 2005; Diken, 2004; Augé, 1995). Augé classifies refugee camps as 'non-places'—spaces of transience where people do not actually live, which are meaningless, such as airports, hotels and shopping malls. These 'non-places' are juxtaposed with 'anthropological places' which are full of meaning. Agier (2002)

studied the urbanization of a refugee camp, arguing that the camp became more and more like a city, but still emphasized its exceptional state and consequential violence. In departing from the unitary focus on the state of exception in a political sense, this dissertation also takes a different approach to the spatial aspect, arguing that the camp is very much an anthropological place, building on De Certeau's (1984) place-making and tactics of everyday life to show how camp inhabitants make sense of, produce, and reproduce camp space as a place they want to live.

The last contribution of this work is temporal. More often than not, refugees are considered to be wasted lives (Bauman, 2004) living in extended arrangements, as victims that are stuck in-between, liminal, waiting, praying to have a miracle happen to their life, or pushing time to pass (Khosravi, 2014; Missbach, 2014; Hyndman and Giles, 2011). The consequence is that the time period that refugees actually spend inside the camp is often taken for granted, and therefore under-researched. The point of departure in this dissertation is that, at least for long-term camps such as Mae La, this supposed temporariness of camps no longer holds and common notions of in-between, liminal lives of refugees, and being stuck in transition should be interrogated and re-evaluated. Accordingly, I agree with Brooten (2004) that it is necessary to go beyond the stereotype of refugees as simple and unsophisticated, and instead understand that they often play a key role in making decisions for their own future. The focus of anthropological inquiry, then, should be on the happenings, interactions, and lived-experiences of this extended time in the camp. As the camp thereby becomes normalized, due to its long-term nature and the camp's development over the years, I will also relate this to debates about urbanization of refugee camps, comparing the camp to a city (Sanyal, 2014; Agier, 2002; De Montclose and Kagwanja, 2000) in order to contrast with other literature framing the camp as stasis, with nothing changing over time.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF ETHNIC CONFLICT AND REFUGEES FROM BURMA

Conflicts between the Burmese military junta and ethnic groups have resulted in cross-border flows of refugees and asylum seekers seeking refuge in Thailand for more than three decades. This enduring conflict started shortly after Burma obtained its independence from British colonial power in 1948. Prior to formal independence, the so-called Panglong agreement, which provided for a certain degree of autonomy for the ethnic groups in the to-be-established Union of Burma, was signed in 1947. This agreement was signed by General Aung San, the nationalist leader from the Bamar

ethnic group (who also acted as the leader of the interim government), and leaders from the ethnic groups of the Shan, Chin and Kachin. There were other ethnic groups, however, which did not participate in the Panglong agreement; the Karen were one of these groups.

When General Aung San was assassinated only six months after independence, the Panglong treaty became essentially void, as it was no longer adhered to by the new government. The ethnic minorities, as a consequence, also no longer felt bound to a unified Burma, and ethnic conflicts increased considerably throughout the next decade. When the military deemed the threat of disintegration of the newly independent nation a real possibility, a military coup by General Ne Win in 1962 put the country under military rule, which would last until 2011. This set into motion a long-standing process of 'Burmanization'—the promotion and practice of the idea of 'one nation, one ethnicity', which encapsulated Ne Win's aim for a single state with total sovereignty. The idea of 'Burmanization' and the ideology that went along with it was promoted widely in school curricula and history textbooks (National Health and Education Committee, 2002). However, this idea was again not shared by everyone. Many ethnic groups wanted the right to self-determination. Yet, the Burmese government did not agree and essentially forced a Burman identity on them, for example, as reflected in the household registration and passport of other ethnicities indicating Bamar/ Burmese as their national identity, not their own ethnicity. This led to political conflicts between the various ethnic groups and the Burman state.

At the same time, a pro-democracy movement run by students, scholars, and activists protested the military government in 1988. As the government, at that time renamed as State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), cracked down on the protests many students sought political asylum in Thailand, which was the first major exodus of Burmese refugees to Thai side (Loescher & Milner, 2006). In 1990 the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won the national election, but the SLORC government declared the election void. It started to persecute NLD members and put Suu Kyi under house arrest, which was only recently lifted in in 2012. The conflict intensified when the State Peace and Development Council (the same political body as the SLORC) articulated the strategy of the "four cuts" (food, funds, intelligence, and popular support) in order to destroy the powers of the other ethnic leaders. During this time, there were reports on human rights violations, rapes, murders, forced recruitment of child soldiers, forced relocations, and political imprisonment all over the country.

Ethnic conflict has since characterized the areas where ethnic minorities reside, with waves of fighting interspersed with fragile and temporary peace agreements. The protracted fighting all over Burma pushed ethnic minorities to cross the border into Thailand and neighboring countries, while engaging in sporadic armed rebellion and counter-insurgency for over half a century. Political instability, much fighting, and land taken by the military, accompanied by a very weak economy caused hundreds of thousands of people to leave Burma and pursue a better life in Thailand as migrant workers, displaced persons, asylum seekers, or refugees.

The Karen had been aligned with the British colonizer, which had hinted at the possibility of an independent Karen state during the same time that Burma became independent from Britain. The Karen then started to fight back and asserted their own independence from Burma (Lang, 2002). The Karen National Union (predominantly Christians) were leaders of this independence movement, which developed the idea of Karen ethno-nationalism, and a pan-Karen identity (Rajah, 2002; Kuroiwa and Verkuyten, 2008). The Karen National Union (KNU) has been acting like a government of the Karen nation while the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) functions as its military branch.

The critical turning point was an internal split inside the Karen National Union. The Buddhist Karen formed their own group as they felt marginalized because only Christian politicians and soldiers held high positions but no Buddhists. The new group, led by a Buddhist monk named U Thuzana, was named Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and declared their separation from the KNU. Later this group changed its name to Democratic Karen Benevolent Army. The DKBA aligned with the Burmese military government and helped the Burmese attack the Christian Karen. In 1994, DKBA attacked the headquarters of the Karen National Union known as Manerplaw and the KNLA military garrison in Kawmoora. The operation was successful. The DKBA, in return, received a plot of land from the military government which U Thuzana claimed as a war-free and protected area. This fighting between the two Karen groups led to more than 100,000 refugees crossing the border to the Thai side.

Furthermore, the DKBA attacked refugee camps along the border several times and threatened refugees that if they did not return to Karen state or to the area under DKBA protection, they would be killed. They launched heavy cross-border raids on to the Thai side in the beginning of 1995. They not only attacked the Karen camps, but also the Thai villages nearby leading to widespread devastation. This forced the Thai government to intervene and become involved in the establishment of the formal refugee camps, which consolidated those small temporary shelters into nine refugee camps.

CAMP TRANSFORMATION THROUGH TIME

The transformation of refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border began with a group of seasonal refugees, who became settlers on the Thai side of the border. Bowles (1998) and Trichot (2005) point out that the first group of Karen refugees entered Thailand as temporary self-settlers. These seasonal refugees set up temporary shelters in local Thai villages near the border; they were relatively self-reliant and dependent on the hospitality of their next of kin or relatives. When fighting paused during the rainy season, these refugees returned to their houses on the Karen (Burmese) side. However, as fighting between Karen insurgency groups and the Burmese military intensified, refugees were forced to stay longer in Thailand. There were approximately 30 temporary shelters along the Thailand-Burma border as can be seen in figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2 Small shelters along the border,
Source the Camp Committee report 1989

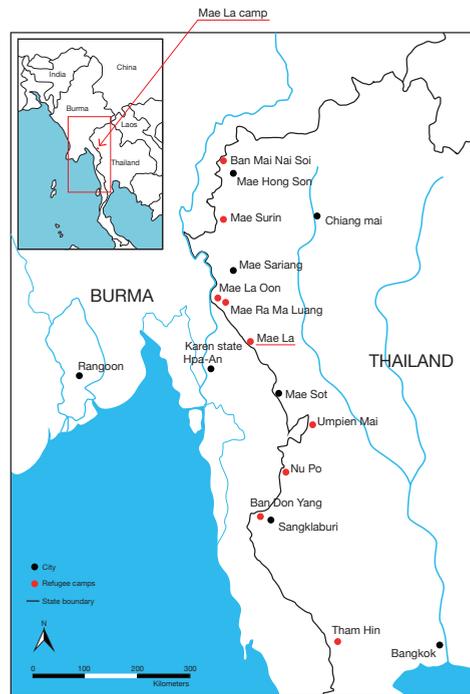


Figure 1.3 Nine refugee camps after
consolidation in 1995

In 1995, these small and dispersed shelters began to consolidate in response to Thai government policy (Muntarbhorn, 1992). Two events spurred the Thai government's decision to consolidate camps. The first was an unforeseen influx of refugees linked

to the fall of the Karen headquarters (Manerplaw) in 1994. Second, the cross-border raids caused a vast devastation to the temporary shelters as well as nearby local Thai villages, of which *Baan Huay Ka Lok* and *Blae kaw* (later became Mae La camp) were the hardest hit. These cross-border raids overstepped Thai sovereign power and the Thai government finally intervened to secure the border and ordered the consolidation of approximately 30 small shelters (Bowles, 1998). This consolidation resulted in nine refugee camps along the border as can be seen in Figure 1.3. Six refugee camps are populated mainly by Karen refugees; the other three camps in Mae Hong Son host mostly Karenni refugees.

The Border Consortium, which was formerly a network of Christian churches, has been providing food, shelter, and other social services to refugees from when they first fled from Burma until now. After the formal camps were established, other humanitarian organizations, such as International Rescue Committee and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees came to the camps and refugees were no longer permitted to leave the camp to find food or to earn a living in villages or forest land nearby.

Mae La was the first formal camp that was established after consolidation. But the camp itself actually hosted Karen refugees long before. Thousands of refugees from *Huay Ka Lok* village and five other small shelters nearby were moved to stay in the Mae La camp. Mae La is the official name given by the Thai government, which is the same name as the nearby Thai village. But among Karen refugees, the camp bears the name of the original temporary settlement before consolidation: *Blae Kaw*, meaning 'field of kapok trees' as the area used to grow large numbers of kapok trees, and the fluffy kapok seeds are widely used among local people as stuffing for pillows.

Physical structures built inside all the camps could use only materials that were suitable for 'temporary conditions' of living, so no durable structures were allowed. The idea was that refugees stay in camps for emergency relief for short periods of time, and that camp structures should reflect that (an interview with a former camp commander). On the other hand, Dudley (2010) suggests that the material used for building refugees' houses reflected the Karen/Karenni tradition of swidden agriculture, which moves tribes and populations from one place to another in search for arable land. From what I gather, temporary conditions were just reflected in the house, because refugees themselves thought that they wanted to stay in the Thai side for only a short time. When the conflict ended, they wanted to return to their house/land in Burma. So when they fled, they just used materials available in that area to build houses which can help protect them against the sun and wind for a short time, utilizing their experience

building temporary houses in swidden agriculture.

During the early period of the camp's establishment, the Karen refugees formed the camp's major population, with a small number of other ethnicities. Today, although the Karen are still the majority population, the camp is quite ethnically and religiously diverse. Even though most conflicts between the Burmese and ethnic groups have decreased (exceptions to this being the continued conflict with the Kachin, Shan and Muslims) there are still inflows of new arrivals to the camps to seek opportunity and a better life in Thailand (the camp ethnic population information can be seen in Table 1, Annex 1).

Meanwhile, in 2012 many humanitarian organizations withdrew from the camp because they saw that the refugee situation in Thailand was no longer an emergency, or they moved to work inside Burma as the political situation became more friendly than before. In 2014, there was a military coup in Thailand which led to more restrictive camp regulations. There was even a rumor that the camp would close, and in 2015 the UNHCR collected biometric data from the refugees from all nine camps, in order to get a precise registration of refugees.

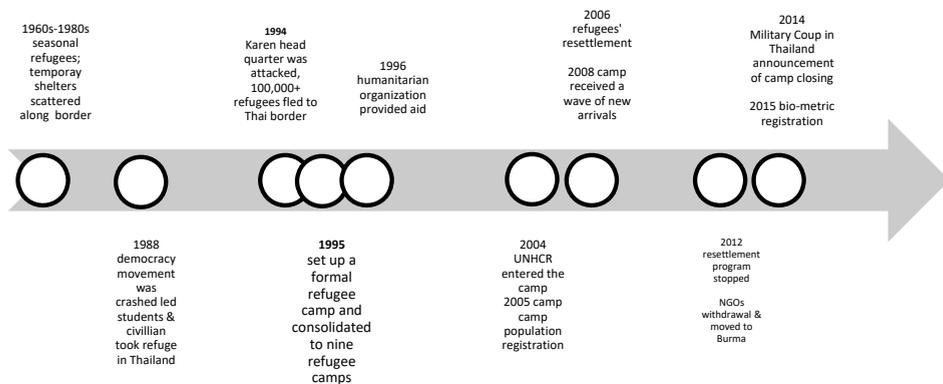


Figure 1.4 Timeline of Karen refugees and refugee camps along the border

RESEARCH SETTING

Located near national highway 105², the Mae La camp is easily observed from the road due to its sheer size. The camp is approximately 60 kilometers from the Mae Sot border town and around 100 kilometers from Hpa-An, the capital city of the Karen state of Burma. The camp is nine kilometers from the border between Thailand and Burma. Since Mae La is located near the national highway which makes it easy to reach by car, the camp has attracted resources from humanitarian organizations and attention from the international community. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian agencies are concentrated in the Mae Sot area. Compared to other refugee camps, Mae La is the largest and is considered to be the 'capital' of the refugee camps, due to its size, population density and its facilities.

The camp covers an area of 184 hectares and is home to approximately 40,000 – 50,000 camp residents. Thousands of one-and-a-half story houses built with bamboo and Gurjun tree leaves stand back-to-back in an area that is nine kilometers long. Some are located on the small hills others are in the valleys. At the top of three high hills sits a Buddhist temple that can be seen from afar. There are two main camp gates manned with security guards as well as several smaller gates. Looking at it from the outside, though, one cannot imagine the lives of those who live inside. To visit the camp, one is officially required to ask for permission from the Thai government. In contrast to and notwithstanding its considerable size, the Mae La camp is little known among people who are not working on refugee camps: it is kind of "off the map." On the other hand, Mae La is well known among refugees, migrant workers from Burma, and humanitarian agencies. Each year, there are new arrivals of refugees and migrant workers, as shown in Annex 1. Apart from reasons of refuge, many new arrivals come to the camp for other reasons as well: a good education, work, religious study, romantic relationships, among others.

The majority of the camp population is ethnic Karen due to the close geographic distance to Karen state in Burma, but there are other ethnicities who made the long cross-border journey to stay in the camp as well, such as Burman, Kachin, Naga, Chin, Zomi, Lahu and others. The camp population also professes a variety of religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and local religions. More than half of the camp population are long-term residents. Some of them came to the camp in the early 1980s and have lived there continuously until now; the rest are new arrivals as

² The road was built to connect two border towns: Mae Sot in Tak province and Mae Sarieng in Mae Hong Son province. During the Cold War, some parts of the road were controlled by local armed groups and thieves.

mentioned earlier (see the details of the camp demographic information in Annex 1). Camp inhabitants who arrived in the camp before 2005 were registered and received the UNHCR refugee status which entitles them to resettlement in third countries, while those who came after 2005 received the 'new arrival' status and are thereby not entitled to the resettlement program unless they have relatives in the camp who can help them to migrate to third countries under family reunion policies.

In the early period after camp establishment, living conditions were limited. Nowadays, refugee residents have access to 24 hours of electricity and reasonably good mobile phone signal coverage. Schools, hospitals, markets, temples, and churches have been built inside the camp. A concrete road passes through the camp and the camp is accessible by car throughout the year. Public transportation, usually in the form of a minibus, runs every day from 05.00 to 20.00.

The camp has 12 gates, and each gate is guarded by the Volunteer Defense Corps (*Or Sor*). Figure 1.5 provides a sketch of the three popular camp gates. The first gate is close to the camp commander's office. Humanitarian workers and visitors that received permission from the Thai government have to use this gate for official entry into the camp. The second sketch shows the market gate, which is the biggest one. This gate is for refugees who get permission from the camp commander to go outside the camp and return. They have to show the permit letter to the Volunteer Defense Corps staff. There is an open market in the camp and local Thai people who live in villages nearby visit here to buy fresh food. They ask for permission from the staff for a brief entry and visit the camp market. The last picture shows a camp gate in zone B. It is used for camp logistics when humanitarian organizations have to deliver food and shelters, the big trucks enter through this gate. Next to this gate is the camp warehouse. Before 2014, the camp security was not that strict. Refugees were able to walk around the highway road to go from zone A to zone C, and there were motorcycle taxis shuttling people between different parts of the camp. But the service was stopped on the order of the central Thai government. Moreover, the camp barbed wire was reinforced to indicate the camp territory. Along the AH 105 road, border patrol police and military checkpoints are set up to check and control flows of refugees and (undocumented) migrant workers traveling along the border.

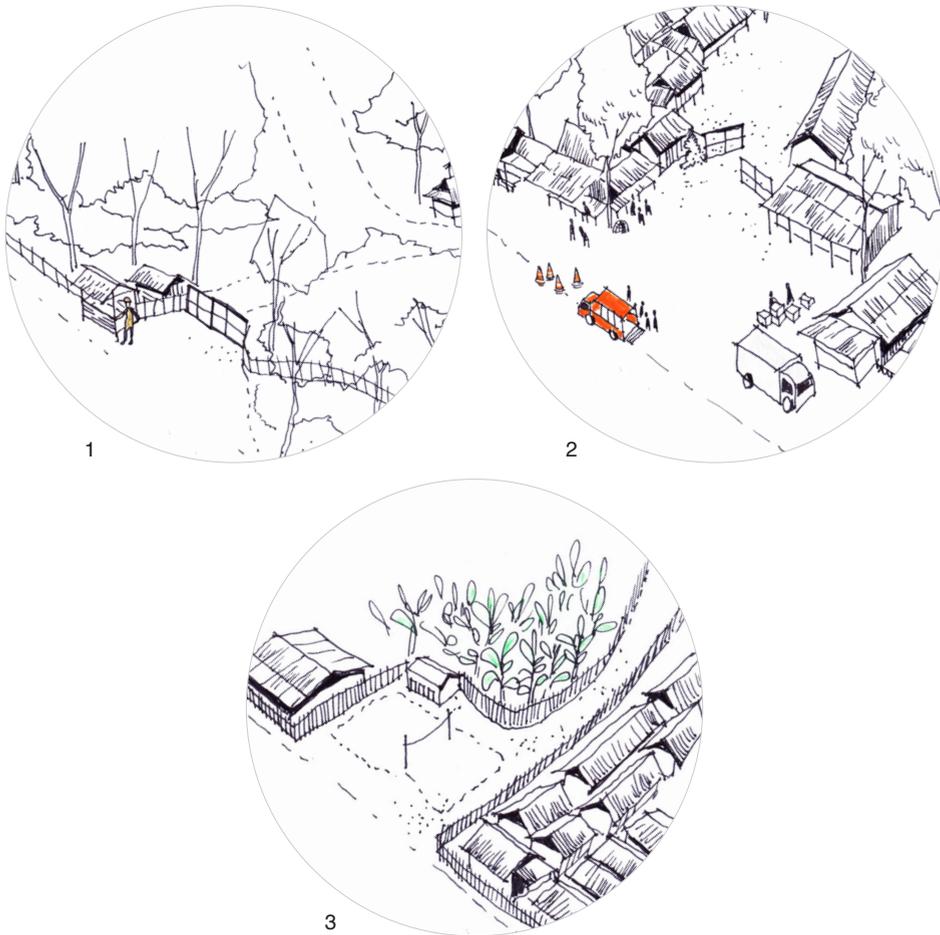


Figure 1.5 Three camp gates.

1: Access point with official guards supervising people going in and out.

2: Access point connecting to main street inside the camp where small shops align.

3: Access point with informal character, where the border between the camp and the outside seems to be less strict.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork

Information and data in this study are based on my ethnographic fieldwork from 2009 to 2019. The longest consecutive fieldwork period was from August 2014 to May 2015. For a three-month period during that time I stayed at a college inside the camp; during the rest of that period I was in Mae Sot town and traveled back and forth to the camp

with a car owned by a humanitarian organization. Although Mae La camp was my main research setting, I visited all nine refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma borderland, Internal Displaced Person camps inside Burma, as well as villages along the border both on the Thai and Karen side. My first visit to the refugee camps was back in 2009 when I conducted the research project 'Sustainable Solution for Displaced Persons along Thailand-Burma Borderland'. With such longitudinal (10-year) period of visiting the Mae La camp, I was able to observe the dynamics and camp transformation in multiple dimensions, such as infrastructure, regulation, and mobility.

My fieldwork in 2014 occurred in a special situation and condition, which had both benefits and drawbacks. There had just been a military coup in Thailand in May 2014 where the whole country was governed under emergency laws. At the border between Thailand and Burma and Thailand and Cambodia, the military sent back undocumented migrant workers to their neighboring countries. At all nine refugee camps the military took control over the camps for a short time before returning power to Ministry of Interior. Just as the country as a whole was under emergency law, the camps were also under what could be considered a form of emergency law. Every refugee camp had to conduct a headcount; the barbed wire was reinforced and extended, separating camp territory from the local Thai community. Refugees were not allowed to leave the camp as they did before. Foreign teachers who worked as volunteer teachers in any of the camps had to leave as well as migrant workers, relatives of refugees, and those who did not belong to the camp. I asked official permission from the Thai government to do research during this period, but unfortunately, the government did not give me permission, citing reasons of security and also claiming that because there was already so much research on refugees, I could use those sources and documents.

At that time I was already in Mae Sot, however, so I started to contact some staff working with a humanitarian organization just to see what I could do, but at that time the Thai government was strictly limiting the access and mobility of humanitarian staff as well, so the humanitarian organization could not allow me to use their vehicle to go to the camp. Pia Vogler (2007) described the messiness of the process of dealing with the Thai government to get access to a Karenni refugee camp in Mae Hong Son, as 'a jungle of bureaucracy'. I did not experience this, however. While I was not granted access, the bureaucratic process was clear and straightforward. During this tumultuous time (which actually lasted for 6 months), the camp was governed as state of exception. The benefit was that I was able to observe the interaction between each sovereign power quite clearly, as I will describe in more detail in chapter 2.

My entry into the camp was eventually successful with the help from my refugee friend who works with one of the humanitarian organizations in Mae Sot. The college in the Mae La camp that he graduated from lacked English teachers since two foreign teachers left the camp due to the regulation mentioned above. The college director looked for a new teacher, so I volunteered myself. Since I am Thai and I look similar to the refugee people, it was easier for me to blend in and stay in the camp.

I stayed at the college guesthouse, taught the subject of English to students and also helped with some administrative work. More than fifty percent of students at the college are not from the camp. Some of them traveled from other camps, from Karen state, and other ethnic states in Burma. They came to the college to seek an opportunity for college education. Most came to college individually, while a few came with their friends or through religious networks. Usually, the students who are in the third and last year speak English very well, while the freshmen speak limited English. A few of them could speak broken Thai since their parents took them along when they migrated to work in Thailand. Students are the first groups I talked to and from which I came to understand about the mobility and connection that the camp college has in this borderland.

I started my research around the college area. Next to the college are teacher houses, refugee houses, a Buddhist temple, a Dawah Mosque, a Baptist church, and the camp hospital. I made a visit to all religious places and almost all refugee houses around the college. The camp is divided into three zones, zone A, B, and C. My research covered all of zone C and some parts of zone B and A. Zone C is the oldest, biggest zone and acts as the center of much of the camp activity. This area contains the administrative offices for humanitarian organizations—including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—the Thai government, and the camp committee. Along the camp main road there are hundreds of retail shops and grocery stores, open and closed markets, tea shops, etc. I went often to have breakfast at a Karen noodle café and coffee at a tea shop where I observed the daily life activities of camp inhabitants. I also participated in all festivals and ceremonies, and accompanied refugees when they crossed the border back to Burma. During the nine months of my fieldwork, I talked with approximately one hundred camp inhabitants of different ages, ethnicities, and genders; I talked with new arrivals and long stayers. However, the information that is presented in this dissertation mostly represents Karen stories because the camp was developed from a Karen settlement and for that reason the history and institution of the camp are predominantly Karen. I was able to develop a close relationship and have long conversations with around thirty-five people.

The languages that I used to conduct my research were English and Thai. Apart from that I relied on my interpreter translating from English to Burmese or Karen. I was able to read basic Burmese and communicate in broken Burmese. The majority of camp inhabitants are Karen and use Karen language in writing and speaking, but they change to Burmese if the other person cannot communicate in Karen. The camp committee used both Karen and Burmese to make announcements on the camp wired radio. Formal written announcements, however, are distributed in Thai, English, Burmese, and Karen. Based on my fieldwork experience, the educated camp inhabitants speak English well, but only few of them speak Thai. Refugees who went to work outside of the camp in Thailand and return to stay in the camp can speak Thai.

My interpreters helped me to connect to the people in their networks. During my fieldwork I worked with three interpreters: Saw Win, Deborah and Dan (pseudonyms). Each interpreter connected me with different groups of people. For example, Deborah linked me with the camp committee, the senior advisory board and other Karen camp-based organizations, since she herself worked with the Karen Student Network Group. Saw Win connected me with one of his good friends, the owner of a grocery shop and tea shop, and also informed me about the shadier side of camp life such as gambling, shark loans, and prostitution. Dan is from Nagaland in Burma; he took me to talk with camp inhabitants of different ethnicities (Lahu, Kachin, Chin) to learn about their culture and identities. He also helped me meet some of the Muslim community leaders and entrepreneurs.

Still, a limitation in my fieldwork is that I gained little information on Muslim refugees, their network, community, and ethnic relations. They were an economically powerful group in the camp; they were able to set up a big grocery store and manufacturing shop with help from the Muslim brotherhood in Mae Sot that gave loans to refugees. However, their political power is limited since the camp is governed by the Karen. The Muslim situation in the camp also reflects the general political situation in Burma. Muslims face racial and religious discrimination, which makes them feel subordinated and effectively silences them in the camp. They were relatively open with me and willing to talk about most topics, except for political issues, both about the camp politics and Burmese politics in general.

Methods

My research is grounded in ethnography with participant observation as the main method, and some secondary methods borrowed from spatial and visual studies.

Walking interview and 'go-along'

Walking is 'an elementary form of the experience of the city' (De Certeau, 1984). In order to acquire knowledge of and understand the Mae La camp geography, I borrowed the method of the walking interview from urban geography. As Massey (2005) stated, places are a collection of stories, and this method claims to obtain a better and more situated understanding of an individual's relationship and experiences with places they live (Jones, et al., 2008). Moreover, the walking interview helps to locate an informant's social network, how an informant thinks about their neighborhood, and gives a sense of connection between the route and the informant themselves (Lee & Ingold, 2008). This method is often used to obtain and map quantitative data about the place of research, but qualitatively I found it quite useful, too.

A related method, the 'go-along', uses walking with informants in a different way, namely to accompany informants as they go about their daily lives, with the assumption that a richer understanding of their lives can be obtained by seeing them and talking with them in different situations than by simply sitting down for an interview in one particular setting (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003). Whereas the walking interview as described by Evans and Jones 'engages to a greater extent with features in the area under study than with the autobiographical narrative of interviewees' (Evans & Jones, 2011: 856), in the go along method it is the other way around: the area under study, the place, is secondary. Since my research question considers place and people to be intricately intertwined, I have borrowed from both methods to help me understand how camp inhabitants perceive, build, rebuild, and rearrange camp space to fit their social world as well as their personal experiences and connection with the camp.

These methods, first, help the researcher to become familiar with the setting, gaining knowledge about the community's physical development, infrastructure improvement, and community setting. The Mae La camp has grown organically from approximately 100 households to more than 40,000 camp dwellings. Roads and streets do not have a name and there are no signs of direction. But this is not a problem for camp inhabitants. I learnt from them later that they navigate their ways by recognizing the houses at the corner, particular trees, or religious buildings.

I conducted a walking interview with my interpreter first. We walked from zone C to zone A via the same routes until I was able to remember and understand how the roads work. While walking, I also informally interviewed him about a neighborhood around his house and how the camp changed during the time he has lived there.

Conducting walking interviews with participants from different neighborhoods, I gained an understanding of the camp's historical and infrastructural development, as well as stories about their neighborhoods. For example, I observed a transformation from temporariness to permanence through infrastructure improvement, which came out during the walking interviews (more details on this will be given in chapter 3). Moreover, the neighborhoods in the camp are formed and tied by ethnicity and religion. Although houses in the camp are assigned to camp inhabitants by the camp committee; the camp inhabitants tend to ask to stay close to the people they know or that are of the same ethnicity. For example, the Muslim people prefer to stay around zone C close to the Dawah mosque. The Kachin people tend to build their houses and neighborhoods in zone A. They use the Kachin church for a community gathering place. On Sunday, they pray and have lunch together as well as have a Kachin language class to teach young Kachin people.

Second, walking reveals a geography of power in the camp through the paths that participants choose to take or avoid. Participants tend to avoid passing close to the camp gates. The camp gates are guarded by the Thai security, especially the route towards the main gate that cuts in front of the camp commander office. This gate is regularly used by humanitarian organizations. Each organization is required to report numbers of staff going in and out every day, but refugees commonly use another gate to go in and out of the camp. The location of refugee committee offices, section leader offices, the Karen camp-based organization, or the religious leader are set up further inside the camp, in their neighborhood. Refugees usually pass this building multiple times a day. This clearly shows a geography of power where the Thai government is situated at the edge of the camp, exercising the gaze of power and surveillance; the refugee camp committee is located at the center and represents refugee power.

Third, the walking interview is useful for studying flows and mobility. Although the approach was created for studying space, I found that it worked well to follow and map flows and mobility of refugees along the borderland. Participants shared with me about their regular journeys to Mae Sot, visits to their family in their homeland in Burma, as well as participation in cross-border activities. I asked one Kachin man to draw a map of the route that he often walks in the camp or from the camp to Mae Sot. He said he could not do so, but he was willing to show me his favorite route by walking with me. I visited his house several times after the walking interview finished. One day he drew the map and route of his house in Kachin state. Through this, I knew that almost every year, he traveled back to his village in Kachin state not far from the border between China and Myanmar. He went there not to visit his family, but to participate

in political activities and various community development projects. Through refugees' mobility, the camp is rather well connected to the borderland. It is not an isolated place, as I will elaborate on in chapters 5 and 6. Although the refugees' freedom of mobility is officially limited, they are able to negotiate and navigate in a variety of important ways .

Visual and Material studies

Refugees like to attach calendars, pictures and posters on the walls of their houses. As usual, they are a form of decoration or an indication of the date and month; however, they also elucidate some of the cultural practices and ethnographic data of its owner. A calendar, for example, is a common gift to give among camp inhabitants during the New Year celebrations. Politicians, religious, and community leaders like to produce and distribute calendars with a picture of them and their family. If the leader is from the Karen National Union, they like to put a picture of important Karen politicians with the national flag and Karen year. Meanwhile, the priest usually has a calendar with a picture of a church or Jesus Christ with a cross. So, the calendar contains some personal information as well as socio-cultural norms and relationships.

Another common decoration seen in refugees' homes are posters with random pictures of nature—such as waterfalls, forests, the famous Dutch garden Keukenhof—British football players, celebrities, famous political leaders (e.g. Obama, Aung San Suu Kyi), the Thai king and queen, Buddha, or Jesus. Before 2012, the poster of Aung San Suu Kyi was famous among camp inhabitants to show that they were part of the democratic movement in Burma. In 2014, however, her poster disappeared from people's houses. Although the posters themselves rarely contain a specific message, they act as a key to informants' world and everyday life.

An important part of my data collection method was my video camera, which I used to record political and cultural events and everyday life in the camp and along the border. The change over time in how my camera was viewed and accepted helps elucidate changes that took place in the camp during my time there. When my friend and I brought the camera to the camp in 2014, we had to hide it from the Thai Volunteer Defense Corps as the Thai government did not allow outsiders to take any pictures of the camp. However, camp inhabitants were allowed to take pictures and record video of themselves, and they would often share them on social media and Youtube. At that time the only moment that we felt it was safe to take our camera out in the public space inside the camp was during the festivals and events, when everyone was using their mobile phone and video camera to record the event.

By 2018, though, cameras and smartphones had become ubiquitous in the camp, as they had in most other places, and thus it became less problematic for me to take pictures or videos around the camp. Doing so was not only met without suspicion, but even encouraged by some camp participants. For example, we were asked by the leader of the hip-hop band to film him and his band members while walking from his house to the studio in zone A. We were unsure if we should do so, but they assured that there was no problem since many people had phones with a camera. Later, we shared that footage with him, and he made use of it. Moreover, refugees who trusted us liked to be documented and asked us to record their concerns so that we could present their voices to an outside world. In this way, the video camera served not only as a device to record informant's daily life, but also as a tool to participate in daily camp life and collaborate with camp inhabitants.

These visual and material methods complement the interview method to understand the cultural-social relation and the social world of refugees. There are often stories behind the poster choices in people's homes, and asking about the poster would often elicit information that might not otherwise have become a topic of discussion. It gives an additional insight, which may not be part of the story that they tell. Moreover, it is the selection of things that the informants put there themselves, which shows certain aspects of their identity and their lives.

ETHICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Informed consent

My research focuses on refugees and refugee camp formation, and refugees are considered to be a vulnerable group. I, therefore, have been aware of ethical issues throughout the process, from the early stages, to fieldwork, to the writing and publishing of this dissertation. My research follows the ethical guidelines of University of Amsterdam and borrows from the Association for Social Anthropologist of the UK and Commonwealth³ on, for example, protecting research participants and honoring trust; anticipating harms; avoiding undue intrusion; informed consent; rights to confidentiality and anonymity.

I separate the ethical practices into two levels: (i) informed consent while doing participant observation; (ii) permission to record and publish. I applied participant observation throughout my fieldwork, I asked key informants who had agreed to

³ Association for Social Anthropologist of the UK and Commonwealth 'Ethical guideline for good research practice', retrieved from <https://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.shtml> (last accessed 14 January 2020).

participate in my research to fill out consent forms. These were always individuals with whom I had already built rapport. This group includes around 40 people. For other people who I interacted with only one time, I used an oral consent form by informing them about my position and asking for their permission to potentially use their information in the future. I encountered difficulty to hand respondents an informed consent at the beginning of the conversation. To hand in the form means to finish my work before starting it. Therefore, the oral consent was more practical in my case. Any photo I share in this thesis is done so with the explicit consent of the person pictured and the owner of the photo (if I did not take it). Personal information of informants has been and will continue to be handled with complete confidentiality. My informants remain anonymous except for a few cases where they allowed me to use photos revealing their faces. The names that are shown here are pseudonyms.

'Do no harm', preventing exploitation and giving back to the community

The idea of 'do no harm' relates to minimizing danger to informants; it is a foundational principle for ethnographic scholars. The principle requires a moral responsibility of researchers to be able to judge and anticipate any future threat to participants. Pink suggested that researchers should discuss harm with informants. For example, researchers need to ask if there are personal or cultural reasons to ask if personal photos or other images are offensive to or create anxiety for that individual or community (Pink, 2007). In my research the security of each refugee was (and remains) of utmost importance. I did not reveal any information that can be traced back to a real person. When issues that I thought may be sensitive came up in conversation, I specifically asked whether the topic was creating any stress or anxiety to them and if they were comfortable discussing it further.

Mackenzie et al. (2007), however, argue that the principle of 'do no harm' is not enough. In their ethical paper, they criticize time-constrained researchers who visit a refugee community, collect information, then leave. This makes refugees feel exploited by researchers. They suggest that it is necessary for researchers to conduct research that brings a benefit to refugees and their community or orients toward finding a solution to their situation. On the contrary, Pink points out that the idea of 'giving something back' implies that the researcher extracts data and then makes a gift of something else as a compensation in return, rather than making research less exploitative. It also benefits researchers who feel ethically virtuous but may leave informants wondering why they were given something. She proposes a collaborative research that focuses on the idea of 'creating something together' in which agency becomes shared between informants and researchers (Pink, 2007: 57).

In my case, a female refugee working with one of the rights-based organizations asked me the question *'What is an outcome of your research and how do we (refugees) benefit from it?* I believe that almost every scholar who works with a community—not only refugee communities—might be asked this question. The refugee communities I worked with are experienced research subjects. When I was asked the question above, I did not know exactly how to answer as it was quite a heavy question. I went back to her a few days later and explained the objectives of my research. We had a long discussion about urbanization in the camp, and the experiences of refugees who had been in the camp for a long period of time. She told me about her concerns about young people and camp closure. Towards the end of our long discussion, I told her that my research explains about the nature of long-term refugee camps and captures one moment of history of the camp. It may not bring any immediate improvement to the refugee community. She appreciated our long discussion and my honest answer.

I agree with MacKenzie et al. (2007) on the exploitation of research participants which I also witnessed from the refugee community that I worked with. However, I wonder whether Mackenzie et al.'s requirement puts an unnecessary burden on scholars or sets a normative requirement. Will this idea set up refugees' expectations what the scholar will bring or do?

Some refugees are used to being interviewed or completing a questionnaire; they like to talk with researchers or humanitarian workers since they know that they would get something back in return. They often come to approach a researcher and already have a set of answers to patterned questions asked by researchers. When they approached me, I listened to them, their worries and their background and other information they wanted to share. I offered tea, coffee or lunch, but I did not offer anything else.

My research does not yet reach to the point of collaboration in Pink's terms, but neither is it 'hit and run'. What I aimed to do was to contribute to the community by participating in community development activities. I taught English to college students and helped the college with administrative work both in Thai and in English. I taught Thai language to refugee staff working in the hospital so they could learn Thai medical vocabulary and terms that are often used. This helps them be more confident to talk when they have to communicate with Thai staff at the Thai hospital. In this way, I did give back—but I did it on a communal, rather than an individual level.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The organization of the rest of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 examines the camp governing system. It focuses on the smallest autonomous governing unit in the camp, the refugee camp committee, which has managed the camp even before the Thai state and humanitarian agencies showed much interest in the camp. It argues that Mae La is not governed under a 'state of exception' as suggested by Agamben, but rather governed by multiple sovereigns (Hanafi & Long, 2010). The Thai government thereby lends partial sovereignty to the camp committee through what I call 'guested sovereignty', letting it manage and govern the camp population in a similar way as the Thai state used to do with refugees and war captives historically. The chapter further discusses how the camp committee navigates and negotiates with the multiple sovereigns involved (the Thai state, humanitarian agencies, Karen Insurgency groups) to carve out a certain autonomous space, in which they can govern according to their own ideals.

Chapter 3 counters the commonly held notion that refugees are 'in limbo' and spend most of their supposedly temporary time in the refugee camp 'waiting', arguing that this notion no longer holds true in long-term camps such as Mae La. The chapter shows many examples of how refugees have used their own resources (money and labor) to develop physical infrastructure in the camp, build houses, and set up shops and facilities, thereby giving it a sense of place and making it their home. Through the lens of the camp as a productive space, this chapter gives an insight into how temporariness has transitioned to permanence and everyday life from 'waiting' to 'living'.

In Chapter 4, I argue that refugees' living and place-making in the camp remain inextricably connected to the ethnic struggle of the Karen in Myanmar. The camp thereby serves a crucial function concerning Karen identity, which cannot be easily abandoned. Ethno-nationalism is strong in the camp, and refugees have built and developed Mae La in the image of their homeland in many dimensions: governance, education, history, and culture. When ceasefire agreements in 2015 opened up the possibility of 'return', it turned out that this is actually not a desirable option for many. This chapter argues that the homeland idea has become decoupled from its geographical location, that is has become portable and that it moved with them.

Chapter 5 challenges static and liminal notions of the refugee camp by considering another factor: mobility, or the flows of people in and out of the camp. It discusses

the variety of tactics that refugees use to go out of the camp on a regular basis, for work, study, religious activities, or other purposes. Secondly, it highlights the flow of people coming to Mae La voluntarily, to work, to study, to resettle in third countries, to participate in a political movement, or for romantic reasons, where one is able to pursue a better quality of life than by staying in villages in Myanmar. From the refugee perspective, the Mae La camp is definitely not an undesirable or a 'dumping site' (Bauman, 2004). Moreover, through the flows of refugees going outside and coming into the camp, the Mae La camp turns into a node of connection and a place of opportunities for refugees and migrants in this borderland. This pattern of refugee mobility is similar to migrants seeking a better life in a city.

The former chapters provide explanations of why the camp has existed for a long period of time, and how the camp has transformed over time. Chapter 6 takes these observations to debates about urbanization and links the discussion to the wider Thailand-Burma borderland. This borderland has been designated as a Special Economic Zone, and received large investments from China at the other side of the border in Burma. This diminishes differences between core and periphery, as the refugee camp arguably becomes less of a camp and more of an enclave in an urbanizing borderland. These changes at the same time bring renewed uncertainty to the lives of refugees, as they fear that rumors of camp closure may actually be real this time. This urbanization process of borderlands is a broader phenomenon in Southeast Asia, in which refugees will have to reposition themselves. This also means that differences between urban and camp refugees are getting increasingly blurred.

Finally, Chapter 7, the conclusion, comes back to the research questions raised in the beginning of this Introduction, provides answers based on the analyses in the preceding chapters, and reflects on how this research contributed to an epistemological re-imagination of long-term camps.