Re-imagining the refugee camp
Sovereignty and time-space formation along the Thailand-Burma borderland
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We live here

INTRODUCTION

The church in Zone A of Mae La camp provides free lunch for children every Sunday. As I was helping two Karen women (one 70, the other 62 years old) clean the dirty plates after such a lunch, I asked them about life in the camp:

I have been living here for twenty years. The life in the camp is often of suffering, every day I am struggling, trying to make my life better. My husband passed away a long time ago, and I raised my three children alone. All grew up and went to school in the camp. Two of them moved to America, they also wanted me to go there, to help them take care of their children. My granddaughter often told me when we talked on mobile phone Phee Phee (grandma in Karen language) come, come to stay with us. (She smiled). I had a thought of going there to be with my grandchildren. But, I am afraid of cold weather (she laughed). I do not want to start a new life again. I feel safe and happy to live here.

I continued to ask her whether she felt lonely since I knew that she stayed alone. Her children went to resettle in a third country. She said she did not feel lonely. Every day she was busy almost the whole day; visiting fellow Christian houses to pray together, teaching the Bible at an evening class at the church, or having friends stop by for a visit. Her everyday life is repetitive with these activities. When she had some free time, she said she liked to make Hkyain Ngarr (fermented fish, a kind of gourmet dish, popular among Burmese and other ethnic groups in the region) to sell for earning some extra income.

Later, her friend came to join our conversation. I asked them about the rumors that the camp will be closed in the near future. Have you heard that the camp is about to
close down? How do you feel about living in the camp, do you feel yourself waiting for something? At first, they did not understand what I meant by waiting. So, I asked them did they have any experience of waiting to meet a doctor? They understood me right away. Yes, we experienced that. I asked them again do you feel your life waiting for something while living here? Eh Du said:

We are Bakaw-Bakae (people who suffer). Our life is not that easy. We are struggling, making our lives better. But, we don’t feel waiting. We do feel worry about camp is closing, we don’t want to return because we live here. I will stay here until the last day of the camp.

‘We live here’. It was a recurring theme in my eight months of fieldwork in Mae La camp and much in contrast to the dominant discourse on refugee camps as temporary, only an emergency response to an acute situation, and of refugees themselves being in limbo, stagnant, and perpetually waiting. In Mae La, people have made and continue to make their lives in the camp. They have built infrastructure and community spaces. They work or they start their own business. Moreover, they have built and renovated their houses from bamboo to concrete houses with their own money and labor, indicating that they intend to stay here not just for a short time. They are there not simply waiting for help from humanitarian organizations. Whether the camp will eventually be closed or not, these refugees indicated that they belong there.

The first argument in this chapter is therefore temporal, shifting the academic focus from notions of temporariness to the widely felt sense of permanence in the camp. I discuss three main aspects of it (humanitarian, material, and personal), arguing that this is a better lens through which to understand long-term camps. My second argument relates to space and place. Transitioning from temporariness to permanence, from ‘waiting’ to ‘everyday living’ goes hand in hand with place-making, with giving meaning to a certain space. Whereas refugee camp space is usually taken for granted as a territorial space where refugees are forced to stay, strictly controlled by one or multiple sovereigns (see chapter 2), I will argue that refugees use space in the camp productively, whereby everyday place-making activities also transform camp space to fit their social world.

REFUGEE CAMPS IN TIME AND SPACE

The state that refugees are in, is often characterized as liminal. The concept of liminality originates from Turner (1964) where he states that it is a state of transition,
a becoming, a betwixt and between, not here and not there. But it is also a state of transformation. Refugees who take refuge in other countries, for example, but who have not yet obtained citizenship status, often find themselves in a rather vulnerable situation in which they cannot return to the country that they fled but also cannot really integrate into the country where they took refuge. They are in a state of legal uncertainty, which Menjivar (2006) has called liminal legality.

Liminality is supposed to be temporary, a transitional phase. Similar to the state of refugees, a refugee camp was also supposed to be temporary, a liminal place where refugees spend time between fleeing from an origin and either returning home or being accepted at a new location (either the host country of the camp, or a third country for resettlement). For long-term camps, this premise no longer really holds. While intended to be temporary, in many cases these camps continue to exist due to enduring conflict situations, lack of options for resettlement, or other reasons. Months become years, and years become decades. In the literature such long-term camps are sometimes characterized as a state of extended temporariness or permanent transience due to its protracted existence (Picker and Pasquetti, 2015). The long-term camps such as the Palestinian camps in Lebanon are seen as space and time dislocations in which refugees fall into a state of perpetual beginning or live suspended lives (Peteet, 2015; Turner, 2005), or otherwise are suspended in a period of long-term waiting, where time for refugees is stagnant (Khosravi, 2014). It seems that refugees’ lives are stuck in a space of transition where every day seems to be the same (ibid).

Other academic work has, however, criticized such views as too one sided, overlooking the agency of refugees in building and negotiating their lives and the camp space itself. (I discussed some of this work in chapter 2 on the autonomy of the camp committee). Ramadan (2012) for example sees the camp as an assemblage of people, institutions, and organizations, and thereby as a distinctive political space. Others focus on the urbanizing aspects of refugee camps, for example the urbanization of the Kakuma camp that has turned into a city, but is still a place of violence and exception at the same time (Agier, 2011). Martin (2015) finally proposes to conceptualize long-term refugee camps that gain characteristics of permanent temporariness as a campscape in which the camp turns to be an inclusive place where both non-citizens (refugees) and other marginal groups live together.

In most of these critiques, however, except perhaps that from Martin, there remains a strong focus on the intrinsic temporariness of these camps, the liminality of refugees making a living for practical reasons and adapting to the situation, but always with the
waiting and an eventual return or resettlement hovering in the background. In Mae La, it is rather the sense of permanence I want to highlight, which can be observed through day-to-day life activities, and the perspective of the refugees who live there.

Along with the temporariness of refugee camps in the literature comes the notion of placelessness, or in Augé’s (1995) terms a ‘non-place’. The non-place of the refugee camp creates the shared identity of every individual only as a refugee, who enters at some point, leaves at some point, and in the meantime bides his/her time in the camp. Like airports, refugee camps supposedly share the same characteristics wherever they are situated (Sharma, 2009). This is not my experience of Mae La. In particular the personal aspects of the sense of permanence, which I will elaborate upon in the second part of this chapter have everything to do with place-making, and I will build on various works such as De Certeau’s (1984) tactics of everyday life which Agier (2002) refers to in the context of refugee camp as ‘inventions of the everyday’, and Adams’ (2013) work on place-making to illustrate and conceptualize how refugees have been struggling and finding their way to use and produce camp space to make it their home. De Certeau looks at spatial formation through everyday practice of people living in cities. Instead of seeing the city from the top-down, e.g., how it is structured or planned, he positions everyday pursuits of ordinary people interacting with it, such as walking, shopping, eating, speaking, or in general ‘ways of operating’ as an enunciation of city space. He claims that an individual’s action has purpose and meaning in understanding the city and social life. De Certeau thereby distinguishes between strategies and tactics: strategies refer to the hegemonic, permanent, and institutional ways that a city is laid out; tactics refer to the these fleeting everyday practices of individuals interacting with these structures, encountering strategic power for a short moment and thereby every time slightly disrupting or changing the hegemonic structure, eroding power mechanisms if only for a brief moment. The main point of De Certeau is to emphasize that individuals are active agents of daily-life practices, continually reconfiguring existing power relations whenever there is an opportunity and producing new forms of resistance against predetermined ways of living. Agier (2011), influenced by De Certeau, emphasizes the ‘invention of the everyday’ in the specific context of the refugee camp, where he conceptualizes the practices of refugees in public spaces such as a tea shop, where refugees order and drink tea and chat, as a claim to get their refugee life ‘back to normalcy’. I consider this framework useful in helping to analyze spatial practices and understand the everyday life of Mae La camp inhabitants.

In the next sections I first explain the three main aspects of the sense of permanence that is generally felt in the Mae La camp: humanitarian, material, and personal aspects.
HUMANITARIAN SENSE OF PERMANENCE: REGULARITY OF SUPPORT

Since the refugee camp is in a protracted situation of existence, but under the spotlight of the international community, there were around 26-30 humanitarian agencies during 1990s-2010 providing different services in the camp. (I showed the variety of humanitarian organization in chapter 2.) It was only recently that many organizations withdrew from the camp and moved to set up their offices inside Burma. All these years that humanitarian support organizations have been providing aid in the camp such as food, shelter, and healthcare have created a sense of regularity and stability of life in the camp. The Border Consortium, for example, has been providing food and shelter to refugees since the early 1960s. On the contrary, undocumented Burmese migrant workers in the city of Mae Sot (which means: those not in the camp) have to rely on themselves: there is no healthcare or shelter provision, and some of them might face exploitation. Compared to the life of these undocumented migrant workers, refugees actually have a rather stable life. In general, the long-term regularity of welfare provisioning from humanitarian agencies can be seen as a sense of permanence.

The food and other welfare provisions are quite basic, however. Refugees have to work inside and outside of the camp to earn an extra income. But, it ensures that refugees do not venture out into the forest to plant rice or cut bamboo, causing deforestation, which is also actively condemned by the Thai government. Therefore, providing such basic necessities helps to keep refugees contained within the space of the camp. They may go out of the camp to work or visit friends, but they do not roam around to take wood from the forest or occupy empty land to cultivate rice. As long as refugees are kept within the camp realm, it benefits everyone (the Thai government, humanitarian agencies, local Thai people, and refugees themselves). So, although the refugees do go outside for various purposes, the camp is their main habitat.

Healthcare and education are other aspects of stable support in the camp. Aide Médicale Internationale (AMI) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) set up hospitals in every camp to provide primary healthcare to camp inhabitants. In Mae La, AMI operated two hospitals. The first and the biggest one was set up in the center of zone C. Its services are divided into two sectors: disease prevention and medical treatment of disease. The hospitals have both an Out-Patient Department (OPD) and In-Patient Department (IPD) with referrals to Mae Sot hospital in Mae Sot town or Chiangmai hospital in Chiangmai when necessary. The second one was opened a few years later and was located at the edge of zone B. This hospital mainly does obstetrics
and gynecology, maternal care, and child vaccinations. AMI also set up an isolation TB village at the edge of zone A for treatment of Tuberculosis patients. The healthcare service in the camp is considered to be better than in Burma or even in remote areas in Thailand. Similarly, educational resources tend to be more available and accessible in the camp compared to Burma, because it has been subsidized by the humanitarian organization. ZOA had supported the camp until 2012 but withdrew their office to Burma now. (I will elaborate more on the educational aspects in the camp in chapter 4 and 5.)

Garbage and sanitation in the camp are taken care of by Solidarités International. It is important for 40-50,000 camp inhabitants to have a good garbage and sanitation system to prevent disease outbreaks or infections. There is a dumpsite at the edge of the camp to separate and destroy garbage. The organization also trains the camp sanitation staff on sanitation and helps to build toilets in every house in the camp.

**MATERIAL SENSE OF PERMANENCE: INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT**

Mae La has a material sense of permanence as well, as opposed to characteristics that one would find in a makeshift, temporary place, and it has been expanding. There are electric poles, wires and meters, water pipelines, satellite and mobile phone signals and internet. During my last visit to the camp in January 2018, electric poles and wires had been built everywhere, with connection to almost every house in the camp realm. When I first went to the camp in 2008, I did not see this within the residential areas. According to information from the section leader, electricity was connected from a Thai village nearby to the camp at the beginning of 1990. It was used only at the hospital, schools, camp command office and humanitarian office, but still quite limited for the camp residents. The camp residents had access to free electricity from a dynamo generator which ran from 18.00-21.00. Later, a group of camp residents negotiated with the local Thai government officer to get more electricity connection to the camp. They arranged for electric poles, wires and a meter for usage measurement. Camp inhabitants who want to use this electricity have to pay for the cost of the electric wire, meter and units of electric use. The price per unit is a bit more expensive than the regular price paid by Thai people. This includes the special arrangement and services because in fact, it is officially impossible for camp inhabitants to get electricity. Their settlement is not legally recognized by the Thai government. But through this informal and special arrangement, refugees are able to get electricity.
Along with the availability of electricity, technologies such as Wi-Fi, mobile phone signals and satellite TV signal arrived in the camp. Today, almost every house has a satellite dish on their roof. Mobile phone stores and prepaid SIM card stalls are mushrooming. Less than 5 kilometers from the camp, three mobile signal towers were set up by private companies competing with each other to provide strong mobile phone and internet connections. A mobile signal is available throughout the entire camp area. It was different when I visited the camp in 2012. The signal was limited, one needed to know which spot of the camp had coverage. Similarly, at that time, when I wanted to use the internet I had to go to an internet café. I had to queue waiting for other internet users to finish. Nowadays, camp inhabitants easily connect to the internet via their own smart phones or laptops. They no longer need to go to the internet café, which has since disappeared. The college that I stayed during my fieldwork in 2014, also surprised me with Wi-Fi connection and internet provisioning to their students.

Comparing this good infrastructural connection to Rachme, the Sarachin tribe camp in Israel border, which has also been there since the 1950s, and was also officially unrecognized by the Israeli government, this paints a starkly different picture. The Israeli government blocked any infrastructure connection to the camp, prohibited the building of durable houses (houses are instead made of makeshift structures) or any new buildings in order to prevent expansion (Katz, 2016), thereby clearly keeping the emphasis on and enforcing the temporary nature of the camp.

While a good connection to utilities and facilities renders the Mae La camp much more a place to ‘live’, at the same time this kind of infrastructural provisioning, especially the electricity that is made available through cooperation with the local government, elicits feelings of implicit acceptance from the Thai side that the camp is here, and here to stay for a long period of time. On the contrary, not far from the camp, some groups of local Thai-Karen squatters set up their houses in a territory that the Thai government later designated as a national forest, and those houses are not able to connect to electricity or water services. Provisioning of utilities therefore gives refugees a material sense of the camp being permanent.

**Water pipeline**

The development of piped water supply also shows how an improvement of camp infrastructure and regularity of service gives a more permanent nature to the camp. In the past, water used to be scarce during the dry season, and fighting over resources easily sparked conflicts among camp inhabitants. In the early days, after the camp was
established, refugees used to get water from the river stream that runs from the East to the West side of the camp. In the lower area, there was a hand tap well to get water from underground. During the dry season, the river stream that runs through the camp can run dry, and then refugees had to walk farther into the forest to get water. Many refugees thereby also took forest products back to their houses. The flow of refugees walking outside the camp created a nuisance in the eyes of the Thai government, and the camp commander informed the camp committee about this. The camp ration supply then worked with humanitarian organizations on water supplies. They raised funds from donors to get water tanks and hand well pumps and tap stands. Together with this, they developed water filtration that could supply clean water to the camp population.

The water supply team built tap stands and water collection points in all the areas of the camp. This water ran twice a day from 06.00-08.00 and from 16.00-18.00, so camp inhabitants could collect water from the tap stands near their houses. They queued up to get water. At that time, section leaders received many complaints from the new arrival groups, mostly from different ethnicities, that they experienced waiting for too long and were blocked from accessing water by the groups who were there before. These problems intensified and even sparked a camp conflict between the new and the long-staying camp settlers.

The camp committee and the ration distributors then negotiated with the Thai government and the humanitarian agencies to build a water pipeline as a solution (see figure 3.1 for a map of the water network in Mae La). The water supply team installed a system of water pipelines that connect from the main water tube in each section to individual refugee houses. As a result, nowadays, each house can access water via their own water pipe, and there is no longer any tension among refugees about this. This serves as another example of refugee agency and self-reliance, solving problems they experience by themselves. The fact that it can be solved to satisfaction of most, while at the same time adding a connection to fixed utility infrastructure, again leads to an increased sense of permanence in the camp.

It further shows that the Mae La camp is not stagnant or forced to remain temporary, in which no improvements are allowed. Water service here is not simply a story about successful re-distribution of resources, but also a development of infrastructure in the camp throughout the years. This is similar to the case of Gaza, where a change of water service has transformed its social and physical landscape. Water services were defined as permanent, presumably not to be withdrawn as circumstances changed (Feldman, 2008).
Do-It-Yourself durable houses

The material aspect of the sense of permanence can also be observed on an individual household level, meaning not only in the sense of connection to and provisioning of utilities (the connection to the world outside the camp), but also in refugees’ own efforts of building in the camp. Mae La refugees’ houses are built more and more from durable material, such as concrete, despite the fact that the Thai government officially still considers the camp a non-permanent place and mandates that the structures in the camp reflect this situation. According to the camp regulation, private building structures such as houses and shops are all required to be built using temporary materials which are easy to remove, not showing any permanent condition or nature. Only public buildings such as churches, temples, schools, and hospitals are allowed to be built with durable materials. Camp inhabitants mostly live in houses built from bamboo and Garjun tree leaves. This is easy to build and well-suited to the hot weather since it allows wind to pass helping air ventilation. But, it is also easy to catch fire during the dry season. At least one fire occurs in one of the camps each year, and the humanitarian agencies have proposed that the Thai government consider adjusting
the structure and allowing different materials to be used to build refugee houses, but the Thai government has still not formally changed their mandate. To avoid expanding of the refugee camps and discouraging new arrivals, the Thai government has even recently mandated the burning of houses when refugees move out.

Aware of the camp regulation on building with durable materials, refugees, however, still use their own resources to build decent houses with durable stable structures. Those who have family members that work outside the camp receive an extra income in the form of remittances back home. Part of this money is used to rebuild houses from short-term materials to cement, steel and other concrete structures. For example, the Garjun tree leaf roofs are replaced by tin roofs. These tin roofs and concrete houses are an investment and clearly exhibit a long-term outlook and a sense of going from waiting to living in the camp through this transformation. Figure 3.2 presents a shop in the camp selling construction materials, and a man putting a concrete block at the back of his motorcycle and bringing it back to renovate his house. Figure 3.3 shows a single-story house under construction. I asked the owner of the store what she thought about the policy to close the camp in the near future. She said that she heard a rumor that the Thai government will close zone A and B and will relocate camp inhabitants who decide not to return to Burma to move to stay in zone C. This would be accompanied by a halt in support and humanitarian provision as well. Ironically, I observed that her store sells many more construction materials than I saw in 2016.

This building of more and more concrete and stable houses without any apparent backlash from the camp authority goes on despite the fact that all nine refugee camps will supposedly be closed in the near future. It is noteworthy that this happened even in an accelerated way between my visits to the camp in December 2016, July 2017, and my last visit in January 2018. Figure 3.4 and 3.5 show a transformation of a house from a bamboo house to a concrete house. The process took two years. The owner of the house told me that the construction process took a long time since she had to wait for remittances from her husband working in Bangkok, which he transferred to her every three months. She planned to open a salon. Figure 3.5 is her house during my January 2018 after it had been completed.

Whether the camp closures will happen or not, I believe that the camp inhabitants clearly state their perception of permanence through materially inhabiting and claiming their space by making it more durable to better suit their needs, cleverly making use of the ambiguous discrepancies between official policy and loose or pragmatic enforcement of it. Similar to what was said by urban historian Colin
Ward that if you can build a house between sunset and sunrise, then the owner of the land cannot expel you (Ward, 2002: 5) the actions of refugees show that they use this so-called ‘twilight zone’ to affirm their stability and assert their right to stay.

Apart from that, houses in the camp indicate the economic status of the owner. As stated above, a better-off refugee family will put their savings into upgrading their house from bamboo to concrete. Moreover, houses are personalized through styles and decorations according to ethnic and religious beliefs of the owner. For example, the Buddhist houses typically have a small altar sticking out of the house on the second floor as can been from figure 3.2. Muslim houses show a greater degree of decoration and attention to detail, with sounder construction than other ethnic groups.

![Figure 3.2 A shop selling construction materials](image)
Figure 3.3 House under construction

Figure 3.4 A worker constructing a concrete house
As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, in the literature on refugees and the emphasis on ‘waiting’, there is often an implication that refugees are victims in a place of transition, that their time is stagnant and that they do not have a sense of belonging to the place (Khosravi, 2014). By looking at how the inhabitants of Mae La camp make sense of and create the place they want to live in, this case study provides a different picture of what it means to live in a refugee camp. In this section, I outline three elements of place-making and a sense of living that I observed in the camp: memory, material objects and cultural practices, and tactics of everyday life. Memory, material objects and cultural practices are interconnected with each other and overlapping. Places are reproduced through people’s imagination, memories, emotions and feelings, both positive and negative, and by using different sense (Relph, 1976; Thrift, 2009; Trell & van Hoven, 2010), or as per Krase: “the power of ordinary people to
change the meaning of spaces and places by merely being in them” (Krase, 2002 as cited in Adams, 2013).

**Memory**
The narrative that Jon shared with me indicates a sense of permanence through the process of camp development for almost thirty years.

When I was around 8 years old, our family moved from Karen state to the camp. When I arrived the *Blae-Kaw* (Karen refugees called the camp by this name as explained in the introduction), there were few houses, one church and one school. Houses were more compounded. My father decided to build the house a bit farther from the former settlement because he wanted to have a bigger space to grow vegetables. At that time, *Blae-kaw* was like a forest, full of trees. My father cut trees and built the house. I remember we had to be careful with monkeys that liked to come and walk around our house, stole our vegetable from the garden. They liked cucumbers and bananas. Those monkeys came from the mountain at the back of the camp. There were a lot of them until we could not keep an eye on them all the time. My father had to fence our garden. Today, we do not see them anymore. Many people came to settle here, the forest disappeared, but more and more houses appeared. Those new houses were built with roofs over each other. Similar with the river, I liked to swim with my friends in the small stream that runs throughout the camp. I remembered we followed the stream very far until we reached a Thai village nearby (outside the camp). Nowadays, the stream is full of trash, Blae-kaw is crowded, and many motorcycles run pass your house and create nuisance, you cannot imagine how the camp was once like.

Jon’s memory of camp development shows the perception of an insider as someone who has lived in the camp for many years. What I wish to show here is that the process of camp development suggests that the camp, to him, is like any other space, the development of which in other contexts outside the camp could be recognized as an urbanization process. Yet the childhood memory of how it was before and seeing the place develop, even though negative in various aspects, indicates a very special meaning of place and a sense of attachment, which implies that this place means a lot to him and he sees it as his home. The sense of place comes from various interactive associations, not only physical associations alone, but also emotional responses with the place, the
events occurring in that place, and social interactions with other people (Mowla, 2004).

**Material objects and cultural practices**

During my fieldwork I often visited my informants at their houses. In their own homes, they felt more comfortable and shared with me their stories, which are easier to talk about at home than in another setting. A researcher can sense all kinds of things happening in this most natural setting of the informant. Every time I would visit, camp inhabitants would invite me to have a drink or have a meal with them. They always made sure that I felt comfortable, although they did not explicitly say ‘make yourself at home,’ I did feel that they wanted me to feel at home. The three examples below (on materiality, gardening/cooking and spiritual practices using material object) illustrate how creating a sense of place makes refugees feel at home in the camp.

The short scenario following shows how plants and gardening are means to re-create a sense of place which is not often being taken into account.

My friend, Dan, came from Nagaland at the far West side of Burma. His father is Karen and his mother is Naga and Kachin. They have stayed in the camp for more than 12 years. I was about to leave my friend’s house, when my eyes fell on many pots of small plants covered by a blue mosquito net, that I had not seen before. So I asked him about these plants:

Dan: *They are all herbs my mom uses when she cooks Naga dishes. Many of them are hard to find or buy in Thailand.*

Me: *So, your mom planted those?*

Dan: *No No, my dad did it. He planted all those herbs that my mom loves to cook.*

Dan’s father got some seeds of herbs when his relatives went to visit Kachin state in Burma. They took along those seeds and gave some to Dan’s father. I looked at those herbs again and thought, this is how people transform a space into a home.

Narrative is limited to verbal stories. The sense of place has to be observed from the environment and context that one stays. Thrift (2008) suggested we need to feel, sense, and smell in order to understand our participant’s sense of place and the small details that make up their everyday lives. Those herbs and the garden help to transform
a place of strangeness and unfamiliarity into a place of familiarity. People put their emotions into the place and re-create the place to serve their emotions (Adams, 2013). People can also enact a sense of place by engaging in seemingly ordinary activities. Cooking is a common way to create group attachment and a feeling of being at home. Figure 3.6 shows Muslim women gathered to prepare and eat dosa. Dosa is a kind of crispy, savory pancake originating from South India. During the conversation about food and cooking, one of them described:

This is a common food back in our community. We eat it every day. Here in the camp, it turns to be special because we prepare and eat it together. At home, I cooked curry and rice because we receive rice from food provision, but not dosa. To make dosa at home requires a lot of work and preparation, normally I didn’t do it. It is easier to come here and do it with other people, it is also more fun to eat with other people.

Preparing food, cooking and, eating are not just necessary functional activities: culture, identity and group attachment are maintained through this process. It also helps to reveal an important aspect like group value and their lifestyle. From the figure 3.6 Muslim women started to make dosa around 10.00, and then would have lunch together. I wondered where the men were. They said the men went to the mosque, so they had their own free time that they did not need to take care of men. In this Muslim neighborhood, the lively part is the back of their houses where the kitchen is located. I often pass through the front of their house where I could not see anything happening. When I changed my route and went through the back door of that neighborhood. I saw many social activities happening.
Other camp residents make themselves at home through a spiritual object. Eh-Tu’s house is located near the stair steps to the Buddhist temple in zone A. In his house, I saw a small altar having a Buddha statue and five statues of Nats. Nat worship originates in a pre-Buddhist traditional belief system prevalent among most ethnic groups in Burma. Many Nats are animistic spirits associated with the natural environment, such as forests or mountains, but they can also be personal, family, or community spirits, all of which are believed to be influential on people’s destiny. People therefore usually pray to the Nats for good fortune or to avert bad things to happen. Eh-Tu, a twenty-five years old Karen, said his mother worships the altar every morning with flower, water, rice and incense sticks. The altar is very common among the Buddhist Burmese people, where Nats have seamlessly merged with Buddhism. It can be seen at almost every house. But in the camp, it is quite rare to see, because the majority of the population is Christian. I asked his mother about the altar and she explained:

My husband and I used to work in Bangkok for 10 years. After the factory closed, we returned to Karen state. One of our friends from our village returned from the camp, so we met and discussed how we could move to live in the camp. At first, we didn’t get our own house, I prayed to Buddha
and Nats to help me get a house in the camp. Only few days later, I got this house because the former owner decided to sell it to me. I am so happy to find the house here. Before, my family members lived apart from each other (her husband and she worked in Bangkok and her children stayed with their grandparent in Karen state). We did not have a house of our own. Now we found it, the place where can we live under the same roof. In my family, we respected these Nats, we have been worshipping since my great grandfather. I grew up seeing my mom do it. To bring the Nats here did make me feel spiritually secure. My husband and I decided to remake one of the corners to put an altar for our Nats. I worship the Buddha and Nats every morning. I ask the Nats to help and protect us.

These recreated places can be connected to a sense of well-being that include feelings of happiness, security and belonging. Of course, this could also work the other way around, leading to feelings of longing or a certain sadness. However, often seeing Dan’s father rummage around in his herb garden myself during those months, and Eh-Tu’s mother expressing her happiness that the camp gave her the opportunity to bring her entire family to stay under the same roof, indicated that for these individuals, their feeling at home was clearly related to happiness and belonging.

Material objects, such as herbs, food, and ritual items, show the connection of refugees’ experiences or memories before they became refugees and at the same time these objects help them to overcome the feeling of alienation of living in a new strange place (Dudley, 2010). Moreover, for the Mae La camp inhabitants, since they stay in the camp for a long period of time this is not about feelings of coping or dealing with alienation, but these material objects and planting herbs are making and adjusting the space to be more like their home, while cooking together creates a sense of community. Overall, it shows that refugees’ lives are in continuation, living not waiting.

Invention of the everyday
Other important settings of place-making are the public spaces in the camp. Much social interaction and everyday life activities take place in this space and help maintain what many consider common life, not different than outside of the refugee camp.

The camp market has everything one may need from basic needs to electronic and technological gadgets. Markets in the camp are divided into two types: the open market where fresh produce is sold and which sets up every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning; and the covered market which is open every day. The covered market
has approximately 120 retail shops on the main street of zone C where restaurants, tea shops, food stalls, and grocery stores are also located. Figure 3.7 shows the convenience shop in the market inside the camp. It is amazing how much can be obtained in the camp market, including basic cooking ingredients (vegetables, garlic, rice, shrimp paste, dried chili, fish sauce, charcoal) and household utensils, Karen traditional dress, more universal clothes, traditional and modern medicines, cigarettes, home repair and construction materials, SIM cards, TV remotes, TVs, mobile phones, laptops, tablets, fridges, DVD/ VCD players, satellite dishes, cosmetics, motorcycles, betel nut stalls, laundry services, flower stalls, electronics stores, gambling shops, money transferring services, and FedEx/ DHL services. It is not only camp inhabitants who go shopping here, but also local Thai people living nearby.

Jaw Jaw, a college student who just came to study in the Mae La camp for almost one year, expressed to me, *There is everything we need in here. We do not need to leave to go out of the camp to buy something in Mae Sot town.* He compared the market in the camp to his small town in Karen state, explaining that the camp market here is compact and equipped much better than in his town.

![Figure 3.7 A covered market in the camp](image)
Several public spaces, such as the betel nut stalls, the tea shop, and the football field are popular places for camp inhabitants to visit as part of their everyday activities. Chewing betel nuts is clearly part of many camp residents’ habits. There are betel nut kiosks almost everywhere in the camp, while there may be found only one or two in Mae Sot town, and then only in the area where Burmese migrant workers are concentrated. Camp inhabitants like to stop by to order betel nuts being made in their favorite flavor. While waiting for the shop keeper to make it, they engage in small talk, news updates and other social interactions occur. Betel nut flavors are specific to the individual taste and there are hundreds of ways to make it. One may like to mix it with spices, herbs or tobacco, another likes to mix with honey and coconut flakes. Chewing betel nuts is a social activity the camp inhabitants carry with them in their culture from Burma, while the spices are imported from India.

Similarly, drinking tea is part of camp inhabitant culture like they did when they were in Burma and it is everywhere in the camp area. Figure 3.8 shows the Muslim tea shop where camp inhabitants went to watch a movie while ordering a cup of tea. The big tea shops at the main roads are the most attractive since they are competing among each other to attract clients with big TV screens and showing famous films (Hollywood, Bollywood, Chinese). Camp residents like to come here before going to work, for socializing or watching the news. In the late morning, tea shops start showing a famous film on their big screens and compete with each other by increasing the stereo sound. Camp inhabitants come to watch movies or just pass the time.

Football is the most popular sport among the camp inhabitants, both for watching and playing. When there was a big match such as Manchester United versus Liverpool, the football lovers gathered at tea shops to watch a live match on a big TV screen. With satellite connection nowadays, television viewers in the Mae La camp, China, and Britain may watch the same program on the same channel. At the moment of watching a live football match, tea shops thereby turn to be a transnational social field (Aksoy and Robbins, 2003). Gambling is also part of the ritual of watching a football match. At the scene I saw many wrote the expected score on the paper. One told me Gambling makes the match more exciting. For him, he did not do it for money, but rather a feeling of excitement.

The football field is full of players every evening. Both young and adult camp inhabitants like to come and practice. There is the Mae La league for annual competition. The football players will form their teams, wearing their team shirt when competing with others. The football field can be seen as a space of leisure where camp inhabitants
gather, and playing football is part of their everyday life activities. For special occasions, the football field serves as the setting for a big public event and ceremony, such as Karen New Year.

Churches, temples, mosques and other places of worship connect camp inhabitants in religious ways as well. These religious spaces are central to camp inhabitants’ lives, serving as the setting for several public, ceremonial, and ritual events. The Christian church was one of the first institutions set up in the camp. Now, there are around 72 churches, 3 Buddhist temples and 3 mosques and 2 places of worship for local religions. All mosques have religious schools for young Muslims, as well as some of the churches and temples.

In terms of festival celebration, Mae La is one of the biggest places for celebrating Karen New Year. At the festival, camp inhabitants gather at the football field. The Karen come to the celebration with their traditional clothes. There are many different exhibitions including some related to their former and current Karen leaders and Karen ethno-history; there is a board showing Karen script with a teacher explaining the differences between Karen and Burmese script; there are also Karen musical instruments, among
others. The event starts with the sound of a buffalo horn and an old Karen Gong, followed by a speech by the camp commander and camp leader. Then they play traditional music and finish with Dong dance as shown in figure 3.9.

All of this radiates a sense of belonging, a sense of place and a home where people feel they live and belong in the present time. Augé’s (1995) ‘placelessness’ seems far removed from the actual reality in the camp on a daily basis. Time, narrative, and agency have made the camp a home. These everyday activities and their repetitiveness (like going to the market and tea shop) are ‘an invention of the everyday’ that transform a perception of space and help camp inhabitants to feel that they live in normalcy (Agier, 2002; De Certeau, 1984). Moreover, the celebration of the Karen New Year with its traditional costumes and instruments—similar to the building of religious structures such as churches, mosques, and places of local worship—can also be taken as a form of place-making through the use of material objects (Tilley et al, 2006).

![Figure 3.9 A group of Karen youth performing Dong dance in Karen New Year celebration](image)

**Tactics**

Camp inhabitants also make life in the camp into a place through individual tactics in their practices of everyday life (De Certeau, 1984). This section describes two cases of tactics: one is a motorcycle taxi driver, who uses his skill to adapt to work along the camp roads and negotiates with the Thai government to allow him to run this business, and another case is Muhammed who noticed there was no possibility to
grind rice to rice flour in the camp and he set up his own business. His business was innovative in the sense that no one had previously come to the idea of using their extra supply of rice to make it into flour.

Since the Mae La camp is elongated, it is quite far to travel on foot from one zone to another. For example, travelling from a house in zone A to the main hospital in zone C requires approximately 30-40 minutes’ walk. Camp inhabitants often rely on a motorcycle taxi to save time. The motorcycle taxis are popular and available throughout the camp area. It is the most convenient vehicle in the camp, but not the most comfortable due to bumpy roads. Htoo Moo has been driving a motorcycle taxi for a living since 2010. He returned from Bangkok because his wife wanted him to stay close to her. In Bangkok, he worked as a messenger of a clothes shop; every day he carried heaps of clothes at the back of his motorbike. After returning to the camp, he did not find any job that suited him. He worked as a day-by-day laborer in a local rice field owned by Thai people, but the job was unstable. The Thai employer was willing to hire him only seasonally. So, he had to find another job to ensure stable income in his household. He came up with the idea of driving a motorcycle taxi because he used to work this job when he was in Bangkok.

At that time, the motorcycle taxis were run by local Thai people, and they used the highway road outside the camp to transport people. Htoo Moo gathered some friends and ran his motorcycle taxi team, competing with local Thai people. His business went well. It was popular because refugees wanted to support the other refugees instead of the Thais. Yet the Thai drivers were unhappy about the competition and went to complain to the camp commander. The camp commander took their complaint and decided to prohibit anyone to run this service.

Htoo Moo did not give up. He negotiated with the Thai Volunteer Defense Corp to allow him to ride inside the camp (he pays a small daily fee). Camp inhabitants faced difficulties to travel from zone A to zone C, especially for the elderly and disabled people. At first, he did not know all the camp roads, so he rode a motorbike to investigate. Roads and houses in the camp were not built in a grid, but rather like messy branches of a tree. Many houses have a small back street which functions as a shortcut. There is no symbol or sign to indicate directions. Moreover, roads in the camp have no names. It is difficult to know which road would lead you to which destination. To walk in the camp requires a good memory, familiarity, and a local sense of direction, which takes a long period of time to gain. Otherwise, relying on local motorcycle taxi is considered a good option.
To ride a motorcycle taxi on a bumpy, hilly and slippery roads requires skills and good tires. Htoo Moo modified his bike to suit the road by using a special tire and a good pair of shock absorbers to help reduce the bumps. I often used his service because I felt safe on the back of his motorbike.

I observed that Htoo Moo always got passengers. So, I asked what make his business become successful. He laughed and answered that:

Because of my previous job experience. In Bangkok, I navigated my motorbike through small narrow roads. I needed to know shortcuts and backdoor roads otherwise I got stuck in a traffic, and my manager was unhappy if I delayed the delivery. Here I did the same that I learnt when I was there. I always had a map of the camp in my head—it was like my own GPS. When passengers told me their destination, I mapped out in my head first which is the best way to go.

In my opinion, camp passengers like to use his service due to his friendly character and he always drives carefully especially when having young or elderly passengers on his back. People feel safe on the back of his motorcycle. We can see here the individual day-to-day struggle where one makes use of materials and skills to make a living. In Htoo Moo case, his tactic was adaptation and adjustment; he used the skills that he developed outside camp to now work inside the camp. Through his everyday mobility Htoo Moo uses his skills and tactics to make a living.

Muhammed set up his small business in 2000 by providing a service for grinding rice to rice flour. Rice is camp inhabitants’ staple food. They receive it as a monthly ration. Muhammed observed that people ground rice with a mortar and used that rice flour as ingredient for other dishes, such as Dosa and for making a crispy deep fried vegetables. In those times, no one had set up a grinding business. He came up with the idea, so he installed a small grinding machine which can grind a small portion of rice at one time. He charges 5 bath for grinding 1 kilogram of rice. His business became popular, and he had a lot of customers. However, the machine did not run well, as rice often got stuck and he had to fix it. Sometimes, he had to stop the machine for many days to take it to get fixed in Mae Sot. Traveling to Mae Sot created extra costs for his business. Moreover, his neighbors were not happy that the sound of the machine was quite loud and disturbed them.

Therefore, Muhammed borrowed money from the Muslim community in Mae Sot to
buy a bigger machine, which can grind a large portion of rice in a shorter amount of
time. To reduce the noise, he made a wooden box to cover a machine. Today, he has
four grinding machines for grinding rice, dried turmeric, corn and mung bean. He even
sells his mung bean flour to many villages in Karen state and to Burmese traders who
came from Mae Sot to pick it up from him.

Muhammed is a refugee entrepreneur; he used his own creativity to set up a business.
His case obviously shows that refugees like him are not merely victims, and he does
not see himself as being stuck in the camp. His family fled from Karen state in Burma;
his house and the whole Muslim village was burnt down. The military shot gunfire like
rain falls, as he described it, while he was fleeing from his house to the forest nearby.
His wife died from infection three weeks after they arrived in the camp and left a
son and two daughters for him to take care of. Those difficulties he faced in the past
cannot limit him to recover or renew his life. This narrative again shows that the life in
the camp is about adapting and making a living, but not about waiting.

SENSE OF ATTACHMENT AND ANXIETY TO RETURN

After several years of living in the camp, refugees create a sense of attachment due
to the stable condition that the camp provides, as mentioned in the section on sense
of permanence. The following narratives elaborate on the anticipation and feelings of
refugees regarding the possible camp closure and return or relocation. The lack of an
anticipation to return also shows that they have a sense of place and attachment to the
camp that they have been living in for so long.

Going back is undesirable. I do not look forward to returning. We have
been away from Karen state for many years. Although I re-visit my
relatives there, I do not feel I want to live there anymore. My feelings
are very contradictory. I know I love Karen state and the people, but I
feel safe and settled here. Our family live here. If we have to return, how
could we re-start our life again? My physical condition is not as strong as
before and how could I make a living there?

Saw Tu Tu, 53 years old, has been working as a camp committee member for fifteen
years. He arrived at the camp in 1994. Before that, he stayed in an Internal Displaced
Person camp close to the border in Karen state. Later, he and his wife moved to Mae La
camp due to heavy and protracted fighting between Karen insurgent groups and the
Burmese Army. They had four children. Tu Tu shared with me the difficulties to set up his life in the camp since his house was up on the hill, and he had to walk up and down many times to get water. They used the whole of their savings to hire other refugees to build their house since they did not know how to do it. At that time, both of them struggled very hard. His wife ran a betel nut kiosk and later a small grocery store at their home. Tu Tu worked as a teacher at one of the schools in zone B and had to work as an agricultural laborer in a rice field, or sometimes would cut corn during harvesting time in a nearby Thai village to earn extra income to meet the needs of his family. Bit by bit they felt settled.

The reason why he moved to Mae La and worked hard was for the future of his children. The camp provides free, good quality education. He was happy that his children could go to school and study properly. His eldest daughter made it quite far; she was able to get a scholarship and studied in a Thai university. After graduating, she now works as a local district officer. I interviewed his daughter by mobile phone. I asked her what she plans to do if her family has to return. She responded:

I am thinking to rent a house in Mae Sot. I can stay in Thailand (she has the Thai ID card because of the help from her aunt). My family members are welcome to stay with me. But, my father, he really likes his job at the camp committee. To stay here means he has to leave his job that he has been doing for a long time. I don’t know whether he is willing to move.

Saw Tu Tu and his family may have come to the camp to survive, and it was hard at the beginning, but the more time they spent in the camp, the more attachment they feel, and the less feeling attaching to their former home. It clearly shows that they did not want to return. They want to live here, and the camp is now ‘home’ for them.

Similarly, Saw Win, a twenty-nine years old man. He has a strong attachment to life in the camp because it is the place he grew up, more than his former community in Burma.

I left Burma when I was two years old. I have no memory of my hometown. I imagined how it looked from stories told by my nanny. She said our house was on the hill, next to it was a tea field where we grew tea. We were quite wealthy before the military took our land. Our grandparent was taken out of the house by the Burmese military, later they took our house. After we moved to the camp, my mom went to
work in Singapore. My nanny took care of me. I grew up in the camp. I knew every place in the camp. I have a lot of memories of playing with my friends here in the camp. I like to speak Karen, although our family was half Karen half Burman. I can speak Burman, Karen, and English. Actually, I went back to my hometown after we knew that the military moved out of our land. I wanted to know how it looked. I saw my house. I was so happy to see it. It was far bigger than my current house in the camp. The area was nice and peaceful. But, how could I live there, what to make for a living? Here I have my job, and I love the job that I am doing. My girlfriend also lives here; she works as a medic. If we go back to Karen state, we don’t know what to do there. I know nothing about the area. I don’t know anyone there. It is quite unstable future comparing to the situation I have right now.

The story of Saw Win reveals his feeling of attachment through the language he speaks and the social ties with his peers. What he described implies that he must carefully consider analyze the options to go back or stay. Revisiting his homeland helps him to gain knowledge of who he is and where is he from, but it is rather empty because he lacks any attachment to the place and people there. Refugees describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Stedman, 2002). ‘The attachment to a place becomes a unique and deep emotional bond, which is not easy to substitute or replace.’ (Bogac, 2009:272). However, in the camp there is a feeling of being settled down, which enhances the sense of attachment. The two stories above clearly show that over time refugees develop an attachment to the camp. The life in the camp is difficult, but quite stable and secure. Thinking about returning is stressful for refugees, as the three stories have shown.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have analyzed the Mae La camp from an angle of living as opposed to the more dominant discourse of refugees being in limbo, stagnant and perpetually waiting. I have thereby first and foremost stressed the profound sense of permanence as expressed in various ways by many of the camp inhabitants. These feelings originate in long-term and continued humanitarian support and connection to sustained material utility infrastructures, and the implicit acceptance of the camp in its environment by the ambiguous regulations. This led to building more durable buildings, roads, and other facilities in the camp. On a personal level regarding the sense of permanence,
I showed how refugees actively use the camp space to make their home: from childhood memories, entrepreneurship, cooking, gardening and the space of everyday life. Against the top-down perspective of the camp as a pre-ordained place where refugees are seen as passive residents, they use everyday tactics to make their lives here. It took camp inhabitants years of effort transforming the camp to be their home, to develop the sense of attachment through their spatial practices, to make a place, and create a secure and stable life in the camp. As a result, these refugees now see the camp as the place they want to live, not a place of transition or liminality while they wait to return or resettle. The everyday life for refugees continues, and they do not feel stuck; life in the camp for them has created a sense of normalcy; they live here. In the next chapter, I will look at how this affects ideas of homeland and return.