Re-imagining the refugee camp
Sovereignty and time-space formation along the Thailand-Burma borderland
Laocharoenwong, J.

Publication date
2020
Document Version
Other version
License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):
Laocharoenwong, J. (2020). Re-imagining the refugee camp: Sovereignty and time-space formation along the Thailand-Burma borderland.

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
CHAPTER FIVE

Node of connection and place of opportunities

INTRODUCTION

The previous two chapters showed refugees’ agency in turning camp space into a productive space and a place that meets their needs, not ‘waiting’ but living their lives in the camp, while at the same time nurturing their idea of the Karen homeland. I pointed out that Mae La camp inhabitants go out of the camp to visit Karen state in Burma on a regular basis for festivals or family visits, even though few of them want to return permanently. In this chapter I aim to further examine this observation that, although the camp is officially physically segregated from local Thai communities nearby, it is nevertheless well-connected through refugees’ networks, which has enabled a constant flow of people coming to and going out of the camp over the years. Some refugees leave the camp daily to work, trade, or study. Formally, they need a permit to go out of the camp, but there are other, informal ways to leave the camp, and this chapter will look at some of the tactics refugees use to navigate the surrounding borderland.

Additionally, apart from reasons of seeking refuge, which is to be expected for a refugee camp, my findings suggest that new arrivals also come to Mae La to seek opportunities: to find work, to study, to get a chance to resettle in third countries, to participate in a political movement, or for romantic reasons. Over time, the mobility of refugees and flows in and out of the camp have led to the camp being less undesirable or a ‘dumping site’ (Bauman, 2004). Instead, I will argue in this chapter that these flows are an integral part of refugees’ everyday life and that they have transformed the camp into a center of refugee mobility, a place of opportunity, and a node of connection in the borderland.
MOBILITY AND FLOWS IN REFUGEE STUDIES

Mobility in refugee studies often focuses on the period of fleeing a homeland and the time of resettlement. Also for the Karen, the trajectory of fleeing from Karen state in Myanmar and crossing over the border to Thailand is well-documented (and summarily presented in chapter 1), as are the resettlements from Mae La to third countries, such as the U.S., Canada, and several countries in Europe. But while staying in the camp, mobility is generally considered limited (Loescher & Milner, 2006). Such implied lack of agency and mobility on the part of refugees while staying in the camp, however, is far removed from daily practice in the camp and the surrounding Mae Sot borderland. Some refugee scholars in Thailand believe that refugees living in the camp lack freedom of mobility as indicated in the government refugee policy. The lack of freedom of mobility reduces them to bare life (Tangseefa, 2003). In the case of the Mae La camp, however, refugees are able to negotiate, and navigate their access to mobility in different ways; in fact, they enjoy quite a lot of mobility. This does not mean that they intend to violate the rules, but they find ways to sustain mobility as an integral part of their daily life. They go to school, go to buy goods or visit friends in Mae sot. Mobility is essential to them from personal connections to strengthening professional and religious networks, or to participate in political movements.

Countering dominant narratives about the refugee camp as an isolated space, a few studies have shown that refugees and camp inhabitants build their networks and connections between themselves and local people in other refugee camps and across the Thailand-Burma border. Prior to the establishment of formal refugee camps, the Karen and Mon and other ethnicities had straddled along the border (Rajah, 2002; van Roy, 2017), and Keyes (2002) has put forward the critique that the Thai-Burma territory demarcation has cut and divided many ethnic minorities living along the border. In fact, refugee camps and refugees belong to these ‘border-crossing communities’.

Karen refugees build networks and relations among refugees in other refugee camps, local communities and across borders. Lee (2012) points out that although Karen refugees are dispersed, they stay connected. Other research has shown that religious networks have also played important roles among refugees and local communities and cross-border networks (Buadaeng, 2003; Horstmann, 2011). Similarly, Rangkla (2013) emphasizes the strong religious relationship between Karen refugees and local Thai Karen communities, arguing that Karen refugees are able to move out of the Mae La camp and relocate themselves in the Thai villages only with the help of local Thai Karen people. Refugees also integrate into local Thai society through participating in
To understand mobility and the Mae La camp, I will first describe some of the refugee networks and local community relations of camp inhabitants to illustrate why refugees’ lives often take place out of the camp. I then examine the practices and tactics of refugees going out of the camp, because officially their mobility is limited. In the second part of this chapter, I subsequently shift to flows of people into the camp: the new arrivals and in particular those coming to the camp to seek opportunities for a better life. The camp is at the intersection of these flows, which makes it a hub of connection for refugees.

**CAMP INHABITANTS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY RELATION**

Refugees go out of the Mae La camp on a daily basis, for example, for visiting friends and family, for trading, participating in religious activities, to study at a school nearby, to work, to do professional training, or to strengthen their social, political, or religious networks. Figure 5.1 shows the school bus operated by a camp dweller waiting for students to take them from the camp to a Thai school in the morning, and it will take them back to the camp in the evening.

Tiny is 17 years old. Her parents came from Kachin state, but she was born in the camp. Her dream is to travel around the world and be a tour guide. The first country that she wants to visit is Israel, to see Jerusalem. This is because she is Christian. After finishing high school from the camp located in zone A, she was thinking either to pursue her higher education in the camp or go to study outside at a university in Thailand or another country. With her love for languages, she taught herself Korean and Japanese by learning from Youtube videos. At the same time, she wanted to know the Thai language, so she searched for the Thai school nearby and found out the Facebook page of the St. Joseph school. She contacted the teacher (that she called ma soeur) and told her that she was from the Mae La camp and wanted to study at St. Joseph, but she did not have much money or even a Thai ID card. Fortunately, the teacher helped her to get into the school. Tiny case is interesting in the way that she had to build a connection with the Thai school by herself. Some other refugee students, of whom the parents were able to afford to pay for the transportation and school fees, also send their children to Thai school with the hope that their children are better off being educated in Thai and receiving the Thai certificate.
The above case of Tiny shows that mobility is really part of refugees’ daily lives and not an exception. Camp inhabitants maintain relations of various kinds across the border, which makes them go out of the camp on a regular basis, for example, visiting their relatives and homeland in Karen state in Burma for special occasions such as attending a wedding, or participating in religious ceremonies, as also mentioned in the previous chapter. Horstmann (2011) examined the important role of refugees’ religious networks across the border. He emphasized that this religious network helps refugees and new arrivals to cross the border without being caught by the Thai authority and the network also plays an important role in political and religious activities inside Karen state.

The existence and apparent permanence of these refugee camps have also motivated Thai traders to set-up and run businesses inside the camp. Some stores in the camp and the open market inside the Mae La refugee camp have Thai owners but are run by the refugees. Outside of the camp refugees provide cheap labour and they have become a key part of the economic system helping to stimulate the border economy.
(Brees, 2008), about which I will go into more detail in chapter 6. To refugees and local Thai entrepreneurs, economic relationships established are mutually beneficial and the refugees go out of the camp on a daily basis to work in fields, shops, etc.

While the Karen use their religious and ethnic connections to rebuild their lives in Thailand, Muslim groups have used religious and ethnic connections primarily for entrepreneurial endeavors. In the Mae La camp, most grocery stores, clothes or electricity shops are run by Muslim inhabitants. Muslim camp merchants receive support from Muslim merchants in Mae Sot in terms of money, commodities, and connections with local Thai authorities. Through these connections, Muslim merchants are able to set up grocery stores in the camp and bring all commodities from Mae Sot into the camp, too. One of my Muslim informants told me that he went to Mae Sot two times a month, normally the first and last week of that month, to order and buy new products to resell in the camp. The Muslim shop owner in Mae Sot would drive a pick-up car to bring all ordered products to his shop in the Mae La camp. He said without the help from the Muslim community, he could not have settled and opened the shop in the Mae La camp.

**MOBILE REFUGEES: ARRANGEMENTS, EVERYDAY PRACTICES, TACTICS**

**Mobility arrangements**

There are three kinds of arrangements for refugees to go outside of the camp. The first one is through written permission from the Thai authority (the camp pass); the second is through networks and connections that refugees have with informal actors or part of acquired knowledge gained from everyday life; the third requires a strong connection.

A formal arrangement happens through permission of the camp commander. There are some exceptions, in which the Thai government allows refugees to go outside for short periods of time if refugees need to seek health care, need materials related to education, or desire to visit relatives. However, only three refugee camps in Tak province have this kind of arrangement. They can leave the camp after receiving a letter of permission. Refugees call this letter a ‘camp pass’. This camp pass allows a refugee to leave the camp and stay outside for a period of seven days. One camp pass can be used for only one person and one has to arrange it individually. This can be done either going through the procedure via the section leader, or one can use a broker in the camp to expedite the procedure. Say Say, a Mae La camp resident, told
me that she paid 250 baths (around 8 USD) to an agent who could arrange a camp pass for her. It is far faster going with the broker. With this camp pass, she could leave Mae La camp to visit her friends in Mae Sot and her parents in Mae Sarieng, Mae Hong Son Province.

However, not all refugees are able to pay for the camp pass every time they want to go outside the camp. Some refugees consider other ways to unofficially go outside the camp. This goes through informal arrangements. An informal arrangement is related to trust, connections and networks that refugees have built with local communities nearby the camp. Refugees learn and know how to avoid encountering or dealing and negotiating with the Thai authorities. Several tactics are used, ranging from the simple to the complicated.

**Avoiding checkpoints**
The first and simplest tactic that refugees use is to avoid the times that the Thai authorities are at the checkpoints or avoid the checkpoints altogether. Moreover, they observe where checkpoints are located along a route that they need to take and which checkpoints are strict and which ones are flexible. This information is shared among refugees. This tactic is applied among refugees who are day-by-day laborers. They traveled outside the camp to work in local Thai agricultural fields around the camp. However, this tactic is not always successful. There are times that the Thai authorities extend their working hours due to orders from their upper-level commanders.

**Knowing hidden routes**
Through their everyday movements around the camp, camp inhabitants have come to know that there are secret gates or hidden routes connecting the camp to main roads or neighboring villages. Mae La and other refugee camps are surrounded by forests, mountains, rivers and agricultural sites belonging to local Thai people. Actually, the hidden paths are well known among camp inhabitants, especially for those who often walk outside the camp to a nearby forest, or who frequently travel a short distance. Refugees use these hidden paths to go to work outside the camp, gather forest food and bamboo shoots, collect firewood, or walk their goats. However, after the Thai government restricted refugee mobility, this method has become one of the everyday tactics among camp dwellers.

The other route that the camp inhabitants use is to cross a small river. The river starts from the mountain behind the camp, and divides into two streams; one passes through the camp community and another passes the edge of the camp to a local
Thai community. The river is not that deep but sometimes the current is quite strong. Refugees also use this river for bathing and washing clothes. The river can be crossed throughout the year, the only exception being the rainy season. After the Thai government controlled their mobility by closing all camp gates to discourage refugees to go outside, this river became a popular route among refugees.

**Going with locals**

The second tactic relies on good connections with local communities. As mentioned before, refugee camps do not exist in isolation. Refugees have built strong ethnic, economic, and political relationships with local communities around the camp. The refugee camps, camp residents, and their connections are part of broader border communities, in which refugees and local communities have a shared reciprocal relation. This allows refugees to get access to mobility outside Nupo, U mpiem or Mae La camp. Some refugees go to Mae Sot town by riding in local people’s private cars or going with a local motorcycle taxi driver. Going in local people’s cars gives them a privilege not to be checked by the military or police as Thai people can move around freely without being checked by the authorities.

Jason, a former Mae La camp resident who now lives in Mae Sot shared with me that when he lived in Mae La, he also went to stay and study at U mpiem and Nupo. During weekends or school holidays, he worked at a cornfield and vegetable farm with a Hmong employer. Sometimes when he wanted to go to Mae Sot he asked his employer to take him by car. He said the Thai police hardly check any private car at the checkpoint, but only public transportation like the mini bus Songteaw. The police know that refugees are poor and they could not own a car, so they have to take public transportation to go into town.

Saw Ti, a resident of Nu Po camp, told me that when he had to go to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp at the border inside Burma, he had to rent a car. The car owner was a retired Karen National Union (KNU) soldier. He is married to a Thai-Karen and stays in the Thai village not far from Nupo camp. The driver has a very good connection with the Thai security staff and other Thai authorities. The Thai security staff at the Nupo camp recognise his face, so he can come in and out easily. Only he and his car can bring refugees out of the camp. Even in the nighttime, when the IDP from Burma fled to the Thai border, Saw Ti has to rely on this driver to pick up IDP refugees. He states ‘with the help and connection of this driver, he can travel around quite freely’.
Performing Thainess

In the Mae Sot borderland, identity classification and differentiation of refugees, migrant workers, and local people are complex. This actually benefits refugees and migrant workers if they dress similar to local Thai people and are able to speak Thai, in which case they would not be noticed by the Thai policemen. Yet the Thai government officials sometimes ask them to show ID cards to identify who they are. Refugees who work with humanitarian organizations in Mae Sot obtained cards that help them to travel around the area. The variety of such cards, however, can also be used to adapt one’s identity to particular situations and to one’s advantage, as shown below. Refugees/migrant workers know that they have to speak Thai when they encounter local Thai authorities at the checkpoints. Often, refugees use this strategy when traveling by public mini-bus Songteaw when the police checks passengers for documents. However, only a small number of refugees can speak Thai fluently. Those who speak it well likely studied in a Thai school or attended Thai class at the camp school. The majority of the refugee population chose to study English, so they have to find other tactics when they travel.

In another example, a Buddhist Karen monk that I interviewed had been staying in Thailand for more than 10 years. However, he had not obtained any legal document to do so. He crossed the border from Burma to Thai side because he wanted to study. Educated in a Thai temple, he was able to speak Thai, Sanskrit and English. Being a monk, a highly regarded status in Thailand, he is automatically treated with much respect and able to travel without being caught, in contradiction to his actual status as an undocumented migrant.

This shows that language and performing particular identities play an important role in negotiating with the state power and authorities. By practicing and performing to be like a real ‘Thai’, refugees can enjoy some freedom of mobility.

Different cards, multiple identities

The multiple identities stem from the multiplicity of cards that refugees use. Cards used in the Mae Sot area are, for example, the labour card Bat Rang-Ngarn/Bat Tangdao, Ten-years card Bat Sip Pee, student cards, KNU card or (fake) Thai ID cards. Some refugees who worked with organizations in Mae Sot were able to get a labor card through their offices. Some may have gotten a card through personal, ethnic, political relationships or through bribes. Each of those cards allows a different freedom of mobility. All cards except for passport and Thai ID card are restricted in terms of distance. The labor card allows refugees/migrant workers to stay in Mae Sot and to
travel around Tak province. But they cannot travel to other provinces unless they ask for permission from the mayor of Tak province first. This is the same for the Ten-years card. The only difference is that the labor card is requested by an employer. If refugees/migrants quit a job, they also lose the card. Meanwhile, the Ten-years card gives more privilege. Migrants are allowed to stay in Thailand for ten years without guarantee by an employer. The student card is given by the migrant schools around Mae Sot and is used among refugee and migrant students who register themselves with the school.

The KNU card is quite exclusive and limited to a small group of Karen refugees. The card is offered by the Karen National Union through a special relationship and arrangement with the Thai government. The way to obtain this card is to serve the Karen army or work with Karen organizations, or through personal relationships with KNU leaders. The card states that the cardholder is a citizen of Kawthoolei (Karen) state with a signature of the Karen leader. It is represented as a Karen National ID card and valid only for one year. The KNU card holders are able to travel along the entire western borderland area and the frontier, which is guarded by Karen insurgents.

A refugee might hold multiple cards if (s)he works with a humanitarian organization and used to serve in the Karen army as well. This person will have a labor card, a KNU card, and possibly a Ten-years card. Carrying many cards leads refugees to perform multiple identities. The multiple cardholder has to know when and where, which card can be used at one particular moment especially when they encounter or are stopped by the policeman at a checkpoint. For example, the labor card is used during weekdays and when they travel for a short distance around Mae Sot. But the KNU card is used in the weekend or for long-distance travel outside Tak province. Pow, a Karen man who holds both a labor and KNU card told me that normally when he travels from Mae Sot to Mae La camp, he uses the KNU card to show to the police or military. The Thai authorities recognize the KNU card and they do not ask him where he is going. It is a special agreement that is known among Karen military personnel and Thai authorities along the Thai-Burmese border. But the KNU card cannot be used when he travels with other people like a Thai or foreigner, then he has to present the Ten years card instead. Shneiderman (2005) in a different context describes similar practices by Nepalese traders on the border of Tibetan autonomous region as ‘swapping identities’.

In chapter 3, I analyzed refugees’ tactics as they are living their daily lives in the camp. Building on De Certeau, I argued there that simply by walking, congregating, organizing activities, celebrating festivals, building infrastructure and housing, refugees exercise their agency, thereby modifying camp space slowly but surely, especially because
the camp committee, comprising refugees themselves, is mostly autonomous in organizing camp space, as pointed out in chapter 2. Even more so than city people, in the refugee camp these tactics are essential in producing the space.

Mobility, I have shown above, is an integral part of refugees’ lives, but its tactics are different. Here refugees’ tactics and actions are not inscribed into camp space, but consist of maneuverings and navigations along borders and checkpoints. In this way, the tactics of place-making are also trans-border and involve cross-border mobility. Interestingly, the camp boundary often requires more of an effort to cross than the international Thailand-Burma border, which runs through the borderland, but is highly porous and crossed by traders and people permanently living at the border.

While refugee mobility is officially limited, this does not block refugees from being mobile. From the examples above, it shows that they use a variety of techniques and ways of operating to look for opportunities to enable their mobility beyond camp boundaries. As De Certeau said:

A tactic is an art of the weak. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position and plan raids. (...) What it wins it cannot keep. (De Certeau, 1984:37).

For mobility, as seen in the examples given above: speaking Thai, acting like a local, or knowing which card to show the authorities, go hand in hand with acquired knowledge, or developed skills. This knowledge works together with the tactics; it determines the tactics that they can and need to use. Tactics are also relative to strategy. When those in power strongly wield their power, the less powerful or disenfranchised need to utilize better tactics and more trickery, when they encounter that power.

The examples above show that utilizing such variety of tactics greatly expands refugees’ possibility for movement in the border area outside the camp and beyond into Burma. The Mae La camp perimeter does not stop refugee mobility nor the many long-standing connections and networks in the area, which remain active, and these mobility tactics complement the place-making tactics described in chapter 3. This also goes the other way: the next section considers flows of people from the borderland and Burma into the camp, where I will show that place-making and production of camp space is also highly influenced by the camp as a place of opportunity and a node of connection.
NEW ARRIVALS: SEEKING OPPORTUNITY

The second aspect of mobility in this chapter focuses on flows into the camp, the new arrivals. In earlier times, most inflows were refugees fleeing from war and ethnic conflict in Burma, as explained in more detail in the introduction of this thesis. Over the years, though, due to the long-term existence of the camp in the borderland setting, and also because of refugees’ agency in governing and building space in the camp, the camp gradually became a place of opportunities, which were not available to other communities along the border, especially those farther inside in Karen state or other states in Burma. Nowadays, for young people, the camp provides the best value for money regarding education, and it links with education opportunities in neighboring countries such as India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Hong Kong or Singapore. This means that some new arrivals have reasons other than fleeing conflict for coming to the camp. Consider the following five short stories about Frog, Mo, Thara Mos, Rosie, and La Raw, who decided to leave their villages in Burma or other refugee camps to go to the Mae La camp, in order to seek opportunities and a better life.

Frog
Frog is a hip-hop singer and a university student in Bangkok. His family came from a rural village nearby Pa Pun Township in Karen state to live in Mae La Oon camp. After finishing high school, Frog came to study at the college in Mae La camp because there are no higher education opportunities in Mae La Oon camp. He said that Mae La is where he discovered who he wanted to be; it is the place that made his dream come true. Frog likes hip-hop music and he dreamt to have his own band. At college, he met a few friends who liked the same music style and they formed a band together. His band, Tempered Boyz, is well-known among Karen adolescents, both to those who stay in the refugee camp and those outside. His band has released 10 songs so far, which were uploaded to Youtube and Facebook. As of October 2018, most videos had from 3,000 to 20,000 views and likes from both platforms. The one in the picture (figure 5.2) was a big hit and got 1.2 million views. He has more than 1,500 followers on his Facebook and Instagram pages. Young people like his music due to its professional production and unique lyrics. While the majority of Karen music is pop-style with lyrics about love and broken hearts, Frog’s band expresses a mix of American hip-hop and a sense of the oriental, using the traditional Karen instrument. The lyrics, moreover, are about being a Karen and a refugee; they discuss ethnic conflict as well as love in a long-distance relationship. His close friend, who resettled in Canada, works as their sound engineer and music video producer. The music video often shows locations from the Mae La camp, Karen state, and Canada.
After graduation, Frog applied for a scholarship to further his study in Bangkok. In Bangkok, he works a part-time job in a Japanese restaurant to earn extra money which he spends on his own interests, also paying careful attention to his looks, such as clothes, shoes, caps, sunglasses, a necklace, a watch, a mobile phone case, and other such things. He shared with me that when he arrived in the Mae La camp he spoke only Karen, and only started studying English seriously at the college in Mae La. Since he is staying in Bangkok, he has also started studying Thai and Japanese.

Frog’s case is not unique. Many students came to the camp for a good education with a hope to get a job or further their educational opportunities at a Thai university or abroad after graduation. In the camp, education is designed as a tool to develop
human capital. The Karen Refugee Committee on Education Entity (KRCEE) is the main actor and education designer. The camp educational opportunities are varied; they include both formal and informal education, special training for medics and humanitarian work, vocational training, and other evening classes for adults. There are many options for vocational training, such as barber, hairdresser, cooking, baking, motorcycle or mobile phone repair, computer skills, basic accounting, and human resource management. These help students to build their technical skills for particular work. For formal education, KRCEE designed and standardized the curriculum similar to education in India and UK rather than Thai or Burmese. Students will receive the certificate when they finish. They use many English textbooks as a prototype and translate the contents to Karen language. The Christian college, which is a religious school, was required to teach general subjects aside from religious subjects, for example, philosophy, sociology of religion, and English literature. Formal education clearly aims to train and prepare students to participate in an industrialized market or services economy rather than for working on a farm or in agriculture.

Young people study hard to get good grades with which they can apply for scholarships to study in Thailand or abroad. Apart from further higher study, some of them want to work in international organizations or other organizations in Thailand. They do not want to return to work in Burma, except for a few of them who participate in humanitarian work in Karen state, because many humanitarian agencies have now moved out of the camp to launch their projects in Karen state. Young people shared their concerns that there will not be enough jobs available in Burma compared to Thailand. Their concerns and anxiety around that became more imminent due to the camp potentially closing in the near future. Some of them said they would rather work as unskilled migrant workers in Thailand than go back to work in agriculture in Burma.

Mo

Mo works as a project coordinator for a humanitarian organization responsible for the health of refugees. Her husband works as a secretary in section B. Both of them left Karen state with a hope for a better life. Their son had polio, which left his weak leg and shrunken due to the inaccessibility of vaccination and public health service, and poor conditions of living in the village they used to live. When Mo took a bus to a clinic far from her village to bring her son for treatment, one of the passengers in the bus told her about the Handicap International organization that is helping disabled people in refugee camps in Thailand. She discussed with her husband, both of them sold their land and came to the Mae La camp. Life in the camp was not easy at first, they did not know anyone in the camp. Later when they went to a church, they were able to make
friends. In the camp, their son was entitled to the disability scheme from Handicap International. A year after their arrival, he got a new prosthesis. He went to school and now he studies at high school level.

**Thara Mos**

There are also a number of people who are not refugees, but who are voluntarily willing to stay in the camp because of their desire to contribute to help the other refugees who live there: to develop the camp, and do social work, while at the same time gaining a valuable opportunity to work. This group of people are mostly college lecturers. Thara Mos, one among other examples, is a Dean at the Christian college. He is Thai Karen and graduated with a Ph.D. from a university in the Philippines. Initially he just followed a foreign priest to participate in religious activities at the camp, but then continued to do so every year. The foreign priest later got funding from a Christian network and used it to set up the college to teach the Bible to students. Mos was then asked to teach at this college, of which he would later become the Dean. Mos told me that there are two reasons why he decided to stay and work in the camp: first, he said, to live a good Christian life one needs to sacrifice oneself and do good things; second, he aims to develop the college into a center of religious study to invest in human capital, since he believes whether his students stay in the camp or return to Burma eventually, they will continue to do something good for a place, wherever it is that they stay.

**Rosie**

Rosie is a trader and the owner of a traditional Karen clothes shop. Her shop is big and full of traditional and modern Karen shirts and dresses. She travels to Bangkok to sell clothes to different Karen migrant communities every two weeks. In the camp, she worked with other Karen women to produce the clothes from her design. Her business goes very well: she sells clothes among refugee camps, in Bangkok, and exports to Karen diasporic communities in the U.S. and Australia. Rosie first came with her parents and stayed at a village along the border, outside of the camp. When she finished primary school, she got a job working in a grocery shop that was owned by a Muslim man for three years. Then a friend of hers, which she met in the camp, told her to go to work with her in Bangkok. She worked in Bangkok for twelve years, saved some money, and then decided to return to the camp (her home). After returning, she stayed at her parents’ house, but she was bored and thinking of running her own business. She heard about a few empty shops available in the camp and she thought it would be a good opportunity for her to have a business as she wanted, so she did. Rosie has two children and the money from her business goes to support her children.
Her husband left her to resettle in the US, met a new girlfriend and set up his new family there. Her children study at the primary school in the camp and her mother takes care of them while she goes to work in Bangkok.

La Raw
After finishing high school in Karen state in 2012, La Raw decided to follow his girlfriend to study at the Bible college in the camp after they met in Karen state at a student activity. His girlfriend was from Mae La camp. Her family had stayed in the camp for around 20 years, but went to resettle in Canada in 2015. La Raw wanted to follow his girlfriend, but could not since he does not have a formal refugee status given by UNHCR. He continued his study and got a scholarship from his college to study in the Philippines for one year. They maintain a long-distance relationship through Facebook and Skype calling. His girlfriend tried many ways to bring him there, but it did not work out. The only way is through family reunion. So his girlfriend and her parents came from Canada to the Mae La camp to arrange for their marriage and the legal process. The wedding ceremony took place in the church in Mae La camp, while the
marriage registration was at the Karen Refugee Committee office in Mae Sot. Through this process, he is able to apply for family reunion.

The ethnographic stories above show some of the different reasons that people come to the camp apart from the original reason of fleeing from conflict. Mo sold her land in order to move to the camp, meaning that she considered life in Burma miserable. Although she may not be affected by war and conflict, the camp provides services to her that are unavailable in Burma. Rosie saw the camp as a good place for setting up her business. Thara Mos wanted to educate the young generation and develop the camp community. Frog and other students need access to good education in order to further their future. All of them came to the camp to seek opportunities. They have dreams of a ‘good life’, expressing a desire to do something to make their lives better. For Mae La, this clearly debunks the myth of the camp as undesirable place—a dumping site—from the perception of those who voluntary live in the camp. Moreover, it is a place where they can acquire knowledge, capital, connections, or resources to pursue their goals.

Furthermore, the mobility of refugees indicates that the camp is not isolated, but rather well connected to its communities outside the camp, in Mae Spot borderland and in Burma. Through the mobility of refugees and transnational network and connection, the camp has slowly transformed to be a node of connection in this borderland.

CONCLUSION

This chapter challenges the dominant narrative about the refugee camp as an undesirable place/‘dumping site’ (Bauman, 2004) and a place of limited mobility (Loescher & Milner, 2006). The Mae La refugee camp, on the contrary, is a place where refugees come to seek opportunities and to pursue a better quality of life than by living and staying in their villages in Burma. While the Mae La camp is officially segregated from the local Thai communities nearby, it is not at all isolated. In fact, as I have shown in this chapter, mobility plays a crucial role in the everyday life of refugees: for some to study and gain knowledge, for others to work in order to generate income for their families, and for many to maintain and strengthen their family or religious networks and connections. Borrowing from Urry (2007), this chapter has shown that mobility is an everyday activity and integral to refugees’ lives.
Moreover, the tactics of mobility employed by refugees clearly show that refugees are agents of their own life. In mainstream refugee studies, the assumed limitations of refugee mobility projects a picture of the refugee as a victim and dependent, waiting for help. It also becomes a parameter for differentiation between who is a good or a bad refugee, with humanitarian organizations portraying the good and genuine refugee as the one obeying the rules and being stuck and miserable, instead of understanding that refugee mobility is common and that refugees need that to continue their everyday life.

For the Mae La camp, specifically, refugee agency is on display in the varied tactics that they explore to maneuver and navigate camp and borderland boundaries. I argue that these patterns of constant mobility, with regular flows of camp inhabitants and other visitors to and from the borderland, has significantly influenced the characteristic of the camp, and form an important reason why the camp has been there for more than thirty years. While ongoing conflicts across the border evidently still play a role in the camp’s continued destination for refugees, I believe it is the camp as a node of connection, a place of opportunities, a center for refugee activity, and an intersection of flows in the borderland, which keeps attracting a multitude of traders, political activists, religious people, students, all of which has contributed even more to its long-lasting presence. In the next chapter I link these findings to debates about the urbanization of camps.