Re-imagining the refugee camp
*Sovereignty and time-space formation along the Thailand-Burma borderland*
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CHAPTER SIX

Urbanizing camp, urbanizing borderland

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I want to consider the Mae La camp and its development over the past decades in view of ongoing urbanization processes, first in the camp itself, and second, in the broader Thailand-Burma borderland in which it is situated. I return to one of my research sub-questions: Why is the refugee camp situated at the border and how does the political economy of the Mae Sot borderland contribute to an urbanization of the camp? This chapter examines the relationship and connection between these two spaces in greater detail.

The previous chapter showed refugee mobility in and out of the camp: camp inhabitants go out to visit their homes in Karen state, to trade, to work or to study, and new arrivals of refugees and migrants come into the camp to seek opportunities. Non-refugees also come in and out of the camp, including local traders from the borderland area, and a steady flow of humanitarian workers who regularly visit the camp. In this chapter, I delve deeper into the consequences to the camp of these flows of people in and out. I will argue that the camp has gradually started to become more urban, dynamic and vibrant, and that in particular for young refugees the camp has become a place of personal transformation through which they gain a more cosmopolitan worldview. I thereby argue that differences (in the literature) between ‘urban refugees’ and refugees in designated refugee camps are disappearing. The Mae La camp shares more and more similarities to a city, to which migrants or people from the countryside have often gone to seek better opportunities, and I place my findings in the context of these city-camp debates in the literature.

The main linkage between the camp and the borderland is clearly the mobility and
movement of refugees and camp dwellers. This makes the long-term existence of the Mae La camp a unique characteristic of the borderland, which I believe is unlike other borders in different parts of Thailand. On the one side, there have been protracted conflicts among ethnic insurgents and the Burmese military; on the other side, the border economy is booming from cross-border trade. It is coexisting, and interdependent. The border itself is porous and permeable (van Schendel and de Maaker, 2014). Flows and movement of undocumented migrant workers and illicit flows of commodities pass through this border every day, and the refugee camp is a hub of connection, an enclave in this urbanizing borderland.

Additionally, over the past decade, the largely underappreciated (by central states) borderlands in mainland Southeast Asia have experienced an influx of Chinese investments and accompanying rapid economic development as part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to reinvigorate old trading routes (the ‘new Silk Road’) and remake Asian infrastructure. This can be witnessed, for example, in Boten in Laos, in Muse in Burma, in Sihanoukville in Cambodia (not a land border, but a deep sea port), and developments have now started to reach the Mywaddy/Mae Sot area, too, not far from the Mae La camp, on the Burmese side of the border.

These new developments of an urbanizing borderland, with new actors and new flows of mobility, have the potential to challenge the balance of power in this borderland, which has been fractured among the insurgent groups, the Burmese government, local Thai authorities, as well as refugees.

All the chapters so far have shown how the camp and its inhabitants have been dealing with the situation of camp life, exercising their agency in various ways to be able to live their lives in a decent way. But the most recent announcement of the closing of the camp and the actual withdrawal of humanitarian agencies really does make the refugees feel that this time it might be true. This is not because refugees have to rely on external support from humanitarian organizations alone, but rather because refugees know that when there are no humanitarian workers, there is no reason for the Thai government to keep the refugees. Some refugees may be willing to return to Burma if there is more economic opportunity on that side. Yet, many of them also indicate that they will cross the border back to the Thai side and find another place to stay in Thailand. These refugees have coped with an uncertain future for the past decades, using a variety of tactics to navigate the powers at play in the borderland. When a new actor appears in the form of Chinese investors, they might also very well adapt again. It still remains to be seen whether or how the balance of the borderland will actually be upended.
URBANIZATION OF THE CAMP: THE CITY-CAMP

In the previous chapter the cases of Frog and others, who came to the camp to seek opportunities, showed that Mae La exhibits quite similar characteristics to migrant destinations in migration studies, where many migrants seek new opportunities in cities or in high-income countries—opportunities related to work, education, love, or to generally create opportunities for a better life and gaining cultural capital (Pongthippat et al., 2018; Sooudi, 2014). I would argue, though, that such a destination being a refugee camp is remarkable and rather understudied. The idea that refugees voluntarily come to the camp to seek opportunities and improve their lives is not seen much in the dominant narrative of forced migration. Similarly rare is the idea that camp transformation takes place as a result of such voluntary migration. These findings suggest that it may be worthwhile to look at the camp through a lens of the city and urbanization.

Urbanization—as marked by the coming together of a large number of people, mobility, population growth, and an increased social diversity—leads to changes in spaces where people live. The German sociologist Tönnies thereby distinguished social relationships into two categories: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, which can be loosely translated as community and society. In the former, people generally know each other personally and social relationships are based on face-to-face interactions, such as in a village. In the latter, social relationships are more indirect, impersonal or formal, and based on agreements, rules, or contracts, more like in a city (Tonnies, 2001). Simmel (1999), similarly, emphasizes the stranger in the city. Similar urbanization processes in the camp, I would argue, are transforming it from a big village into a small city.

Refugee studies literature tends to separate the study of refugees in a camp and refugees in urban areas. A previous study showed a clear identity difference between camp refugees and town refugees (Malkki, 1995). Scholars working on refugee camps and spatial formation have, in more recent years, made comparisons of camp development to a city (Herz, 2014; Jansen, 2011; Diken, 2004; Agier, 2002; De Montclos and Kagwanja, 2000). In particular Agier’s analysis on a long-term refugee camp in Dadaab in Kenya invites us to rethink the change and transformation of refugee camps that exist beyond an emergency range of time, arguing that the camp becomes more or less a city or similar to an urban marginal space like a ghetto (Agier, 2002).

These city-analogies, however, have mostly been limited to similarities between the camp and a city in terms of size, longevity, and facilities offered, prompting others to
argue that the analogy is too simplistic, that it assumes a development process that is
too linear, and also that it overlooks the politics of space (Sanyal, 2014; Malkki, 2002).
New studies reveal that a boundary distinction between the two is not so clear-cut
(Lee, 2012; Sanyal, 2010). Sanyal proposes refugee space should be viewed as an urban
marginal space. Agier, in later work, also states that refugee camps, which continue to
exist for a number of years, experience urbanization in terms of social organization,
economic practices, and material development in which the distinction between the
town dweller and refugee hangs in thread (Agier, 2011). Mae La and the borderland area
around Mae Sot experience urbanization processes through transnational and national
investment in the border city of Mae Sot and on the other side of the border in Burma:
significant infrastructure improvements, designation of a special economic zone, and
on the other side of the border there are large investments by Chinese entrepreneurs.
These urbanization processes increasingly blur the boundaries between camp and
city, with the refugee camp becoming less of a camp, and more an enclave in the
urbanizing borderland. As a consequence, this chapter will argue that the differences
in identity between ‘urban refugees’ and ‘camp refugees’ (Malkki,1996;1995) are
gradually disappearing.

The city camp in Mae La
I believe that the city-lens has proved rather useful in dispelling many persisting
preconceptions about refugee camps, which this dissertation also attempts to redress.
Looking at the Mae La camp through a city lens, I would identify urban aspects in
four areas: economy and production, complexity of social life, progressive time, and a
place of opportunities.

First, the economic practice among camp inhabitants shows similar practices
compared to urban dwellers. The majority of camp inhabitants do not rely on a self-
sufficient economy, but they are part of a global market. Traders come to and go out
of the camp to buy and sell commodities and the production of commodities from the
camp also aims to reach a wider market than only selling among camp inhabitants. It
also clearly shows in the education system in the camp that prepares students for a
labor market in the service economy and not in agriculture, which would have been
their occupation in the villages.

Second, there is a social complexity of life in the camp, because of the transformations
taking place by the influx of so many different people. Coming back to the case of
Frog from the previous chapter, he shared with me that he thinks that the camp is like
a global space, because there is such a diversity of people in the camp. In his village,
there are only Karen people, but in the camp, there are international aid workers, foreign volunteer teachers/priests, Thai security, Muslims and people of many other ethnicities. These people have different religious beliefs and speak different languages, all of which he encounters and interacts with in daily life. At the same time camp inhabitants are connected to the wider world, in terms of news and sports, sharing common interests such as watching the Premier League together at the same time as matches are played in the UK. Moreover, many camp inhabitants have relatives/friends who have resettled in third countries, thereby maintaining active transnational links, even on a daily basis through modern communications (the internet and Facebook). Such diversity and heterogeneity has produced an extraordinary complex town (Agier, 2011).

Third, time is often referred to by camp inhabitants when they think of urban life. They prefer to stay in a place where time progresses and moves forward. The time and the way of life in the camp are going forward, while they see that time in Karen state especially in their villages is slow and rather stagnant.

What we have also seen from many of the cases described in chapter 5, however, is that there is a fourth important urban aspect to Mae La, which has not been considered much in the city-camp literature discussion. This is the camp as an intersection of flows or movements and place of opportunities, where people also voluntarily migrate to the camp in search of a better life. The Mae La camp, in this sense, bears similar characteristics to the draw of the city in rural-urban migration, where people have always migrated from the countryside to the city to study, work, or search for a better life.

And just like as a city, these flows contribute to urbanization, construct and reconstruct the camp, and thereby transform the camp. I would therefore suggest that it is these flows, more than longevity, size, or the variety of facilities offered, which have contributed significantly to the transformation of the camp to an urban setting, or ‘a city’. Moreover, I believe taking this aspect into account in the camp/city debates in the literature addresses some of the analogy’s critiques.

**COSMO-URBAN IDENTITY, CAMP AS A PLACE OF TRANSFORMATION**

Going back to the cases from the previous chapter, we can see that new camp inhabitants, as they arrive in the camp and spend time there, also undergo a process
of transformation from rural to urban and become more cosmopolitan. Frog’s case clearly shows that his perception of rural-urban spaces is derived from a comparison between modern and traditional ways of life and the difference in the availability of resources between his camp and Mae La. Meanwhile, when he indicated that the Mae La camp is a global or cosmopolitan space he referred to the diversity of ethnicities, languages, and cultures, which contribute to heterogeneity and cross-cultural interactions occurring in one space. This camp characteristic, as described by Frog, is what Gilroy names ‘conviviality’, where inter-ethnic interaction is an important aspect of the urban experience. As Gilroy described:

Conviviality is a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not—as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must—add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication
(Gilroy, 2006:40)

Mae La, therefore, seems to be such a convivial space in which people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds dwell together, and where there is a regular inflow and outflow of people, thereby connecting it to the outside world. This shapes the understanding and experience of camp inhabitants as they stay in the camp. The English language is a good linkage to the international world. For educated camp inhabitants, English—rather than Thai— is usually their second language after their home language of Karen or Burmese.

Frog was transformed from a rural Karen boy who could not even speak a word in English, to a fashionable, cosmopolitan English- and Thai-speaking young man (who was even a local hip-hop star) through his experience in this convivial, metropolitan space. Through his hard work both in school and on his own, he was able to bring his English up to the same level as his friends at college. He shared with me that to make himself feel comfortable in commanding English, he listened to English songs and watched English movies. By listening to large numbers of songs every day, Frog also came to know hip-hop music and found that the music resonated with him, since the lyrics do not talk only about love as most pop music does. Hip-hop represents a sub-culture in which artists express their views on racial and political issues, or criticize the global inequality and a suppression of the lower class. Frog recognized himself and generalized his experience of being Karen, oppressed and having to flee their homeland to the camp, and related to the lyrics narrating the experiences of the
Apart from lyrics, his music videos are well-produced and always present the life of Karen people and natural scenery in the camp and Canada. The way they produced one music video, shot in two places required a lot of preparation: the one who stayed in Thailand chose the location and made a recording, and sent the file to his friend in Canada. Most of the time it was his friend in Canada who edited the video, while Frog and the rest of the group members finalized the sound and vocals at the studio in the camp. Such transnational network and connection is actually common practice among camp inhabitants, since many of them have at least one family member or friend who resettled abroad. Transnational activities vary from personal talk to sending remittances back home, exporting traditional Karen food and clothes to doing charity and making merit from abroad as well as spreading the Christian faith. These transnational practices of camp inhabitants change and transform camp space into an urbanized, cosmopolitan space from below.

Based on my observation, refugees tend to study and speak English more than Thai. The schools and college even teach students by using English textbooks where teachers and students have a good command of English. Many schools provide a long-distance learning paired with schools in Australia or Canada. Teachers went to study in Nagaland or Calcutta in India or Philippines and returned to work in the camp. The language spoken in the camp reflects how refugees perceive and position themselves in the wider world. Refugees know that the Thai people do not pay much attention to them, but they do receive more attention from international community. This might lead them to feel connected to the wider world more than the region. Moreover, students and refugees are concerned about universal norms and issues, such as climate change, human rights, equality and discrimination. These issues are transferred to them via humanitarian workers and foreign volunteer teachers. Young people who participated in the anti-Hatgyi dam protest told me that they were upset that local people from both sides of the border did not care much about the negative impact the dam would have on their livelihood and villages. This also reflects that the camp has become an urbanized space where refugees possess a more cosmopolitan world view, then it is common in the region.

The cosmopolitan world view of the refugee students shares similarities with studies on international migrant students where they migrate to study in Western countries in order to gain different knowledge and acquaint themselves with overseas culture (for example, Lan, 2019). In the camp it is the other way around: This group of students is
able to gain the international knowledge even while they stay in the camp due to the movement and long-term presence of foreign volunteer teachers and international humanitarian agencies.

The interaction between space and identity goes both ways as described in the larger context of migration processes. When migrants move, they also move not only through space, but also through former cultural barriers, allow them to negotiate their cultural position with new cultures (Bhabha, 1994). Open to new ways of thinking, they have the advantage of being able to reinvent themselves (Hall, 1992: 311). In the process, Frog has clearly transformed from a rural Karen guy, with limited exposure to anything outside of his village, to an urban, cosmopolitan young adult where his hip-hop identity links him to global sub-cultural groups. His case challenges the common difference of identity between a camp refugee and an urban refugee (Malkki, 1996). It invites us to see how identity is formed and transformed during the time that refugees/migrants stay in a camp, especially regarding the young people and the second generation who grew up in the camp, exposed to different cultures. This also counters mainstream refugee studies, which often see a camp as a transitional space, assuming that it is only a short time and that there is no change in identity, or events in life.

**BORDER ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT**

Nowadays, the Thailand-Burma borderland experiences more and more urbanization. Border cities (Mae Sot and Myawaddy) are fully opened up for trans-border and regional investments with mega projects. Despite the cities being relatively small—less developed in terms of transport and infrastructure and still likely to have cross-border conflicts—there have been long-standing informal routes and border crossings for trades, goods, and movement of people. Figure 6.1 shows the Tha Kao informal border crossing\(^\text{12}\). The local people in this border community use this informal border crossing as a part of everyday activities: education, day-by-day labor, shopping and petty trading. It has been a long-standing, traditional practice whether the Thai state is unhappy with it or not. It is an agreement among the insurgent groups, and the local Thai entrepreneurs and authorities which are taking care of these cross-border activities.

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\(^{12}\) The picture was taken on the Thai side. The small river is the borderline between Thailand and Burma. The dusty red road shown in picture is an expansion part that was just built last year. Two years ago, there was no casino on that side. Local people use to cross the border back and forth as a part of their daily activities.
The flows of international humanitarian workers have almost disappeared since many of them withdrew from the camp after 2014. However, those have been replaced by new flows of new actors, namely the Chinese entrepreneurs and tourists. They come for a trade investment, to find cheap labor for manufacturing, or for casinos. In Shwe Kokko along the border in Burma side, the Chinese investors built a new manufacturing city, gated communities with a shopping mall, luxury hotels and restaurants, as well as a plan on building a new airport in the area.\footnote{Bangkok Post ‘Kokko Chinatown project sparks concerns in Tak’ online article. \url{https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1700208/kokko-chinatown-project-sparks-concerns-in-tak} last accessed 16 August 2019.}

The border cities have become more urbanized because of transnational and regional connectivity. The space that was previously seen as periphery, an in-between space between states, becomes of more and more economic value, and a core of economic investment. This leads to new patterns of mobility: There are massive flows of money, Chinese people, tourists, and traders, similar for example, to what happened in Sihanoukville in Cambodia.\footnote{Hannah Ellis-Petersen ‘No Cambodian left: How Chinese money is changing Sihanoukville’, The Guardian \url{https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/31/no-cambodia-left-chinese-money-changing-sihanoukville} last accessed 17 August, 2019.} This raises questions regarding how such new mobility
patterns will change this borderland space (with new citizens) and what implications this will have for Mae La as a camp?

In terms of economic development, refugees and their mobility are a key part of the economic system helping stimulate the border economy (Brees, 2008). The large numbers of people in the refugee camp have motivated Thai traders to set-up and run businesses inside it. A fruit seller who has a big stall in an open market told me that he has been working in this business for more than twelve years. Every Tuesday and Friday night he drives from Mae Sot to buy fruits from a wholesale fruit market in Bangkok and returns in the early morning to resell it in the Mae La camp. Big grocery stores and stalls in the open market are owned by Thais or Muslim people (mainly from Mae Sot) while petty traders and small grocery stores are run by refugees. Many of refugee traders are female. Each day these traders take a Song Taew to Mae Sot and return with a big bag full of snacks, bottles of fruit juice to refill their stores (see figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 A female trader with her child in Songteaw with goods
In a broader and bigger scale, the refugee camp benefits local entrepreneurs and the border economy. There are approximately 75,000 refugees living in three camps in Tak province (Mae La, Um Piem, Nupo). Each year the humanitarian organizations have to provide food and rations to this population. The rations are basic and comprise 7-15 kilograms of rice, fish sauce, mung beans, and charcoal for cooking. This will typically last three months. To provide these rations to a 75,000-strong population needs large amounts of supplies. The humanitarian organizations buy these rations from local entrepreneurs in Mae Sot.

Moreover, the regular flow of refugees helps boost the economy at a small scale in this borderland. The Song Taew driver who has been plying the route between the Mae La camp and Mae Sot town for twenty years complained to me that his business got affected by the policy from the Thai government to restrict refugee’s mobility during the year 2014. As a result, the numbers of refugee passengers were significantly reduced. This affected his daily income and his business. Moreover, it caused a scarcity of refugee labor. Farmers who relied on refugee labor were badly affected by the policy since their products were not harvested on time.

*Figure 6.3 A Mobile tower at the edge of the camp*
The refugee camps help to improve other infrastructure along the border too. The significant population of the refugee camps, moreover, motivates mobile phone companies to compete for new users. When I was in the camp in 2012, there was only one mobile signal tower from one mobile company. By 2015, there were three new towers set up close to the Mae La camp. One of the three companies even asked permission from the camp commander to go inside the camp to distribute a free prepaid sim card to camp dwellers.

Humanitarian organizations are allowed to set up their offices at the camps, but their staff are not permitted to stay inside the camp. Therefore, the humanitarian organizations have their main offices in Mae Sot and their operations teams have to travel back and forth between Mae Sot and the camps. The road between Mae Sot and the Mae La camp is an asphalt road, although it was built as a part of rural road development to Mae Hong Son before the camp was established. The road has been kept in a good condition compared to other rural roads around the border area. This condition is similar to other roads that pass through other refugee camps.

Furthermore, the Mae Sot airport is another good example of infrastructure improvement. Before, Mae Sot was a small town and it did not get much attention among the Thai people. The airport itself was built and served a military purpose during World War II but was then abandoned and remained closed for a long time. Apart from local people and some businessmen, the town attracted only humanitarian workers to go there. Interestingly, with the amount of humanitarian workers growing, Mae Sot airport was revived with regular flights between Bangkok and Mae Sot and Mae Sot and Chiangmai.

The route to Chiangmai was terminated in 2013 due to a lack of passengers. Nowadays, the Bangkok-Mae Sot flight is full with Chinese tourists and a few Burmese businessmen, but not many humanitarian workers anymore. The airport is undergoing a major expansion to meet the demands of the increasing passenger traffic, and also to open international flight routes. Given all of this, it seems clear that the infrastructure in the border area was improved and the economy developed due to the refugee camps and through the mobility of actors involved in the camp connecting the camp with the border area. They not only coexist but also contribute to the mutual development of both areas.
URBANIZING BORDERLAND

Research on borderlands and refugee studies have different points of focus, since they derive from different disciplines, and as a consequence tend to conceptualize the two objects of study as separate rather than connected. Scholars working on the Thailand-Burma border often take the camp as a background context, adding to the complexity of this border, but do not ask what role the refugee camp plays in the border region. Meanwhile, refugee studies focus on humanitarian work, exile, human rights, health and education, but barely examine the (political/historical/socio-cultural) relationship between the camp and the borderland.

Urban studies scholars suggest that globalization led to a re-urbanization of the global city (Sassen, 2008) and urbanization itself has become more regionalized (Soja, 2014). Border cities and regions that were remote frontiers and overlooked have become spaces where urbanization is picking up rapidly (Chen & Stone, 2017). The Mae Sot border town is going through this process. The town actually has been targeted for economic development as a special economic development zone for more than a decade, which was initiated by local entrepreneurs businessmen and authorities. Before, the Mae Sot border city was booming from a black market and illicit flows (Pongsawat, 2007). This special economic zone idea was put in the National Economic and Social Development Plan after the economic crisis in 1997, but it was only recently that the current Thai government has pushed it to happen.

Prior to that there was regional cooperation for economic development among ASEAN countries. Due to the financial crisis in 1997, ASEAN countries sought a more stable economy. One of the projects that was initiated right after the crisis was establishment of economic corridors, announced in the Eight Greater Mekong Sub-region Ministerial Meeting (Thant, 2012). The six Greater Mekong Sub-regional countries endorsed the East-West corridor concept and aimed to build a 1,450 km route which would connect the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea through a road corridor linking Mawlamyine, Mae Sot, Phitsanulok, Khon Kaen, Savanakhet, Mukdahan, Lao Bao, Hue and Danang (ADB, 2001 in Thant, 2012). Shown in the figure below are the nine highways linking mainland Southeast Asia with India and China. The economic corridor will integrate infrastructure development with trade, investment and other economic opportunity in the region.

Currently Mae Sot has promoted cross-border economic development as pairing border towns with Myawaddy. On the Myawaddy side in Burma, there is a true mushrooming of casinos and duty free shopping malls attracting Chinese and Thai tourists. According to Tak and Mae Sot Chamber of Commerce, Mae Sot was touted not only as a border town, but rather a gateway to the region. They planned to expand the connection with Muse-Ruili, the border between Myanmar and China, and the Trilateral highway road between Thailand-Myanmar-India with Mae Sot-Moreh border town (interview with Mae Sot Chamber of Commerce in 2014).

The renewed take-up of Mae Sot as a regional gateway and a special economic zone to attract foreign investment, has caused a significant upgrade in infrastructure. The second Thailand-Myanmar Friendship bridge was built with a newly made road. The Asian Highway 1 road was rebuilt and expanded for transport. The road from Mae Sot to Mae Sarieng was improved and expanded. This road passes at the front of the Mae La camp. Recently, as mentioned earlier, the Mae Sot airport underwent construction in
order to expand to international flights to support the route between Yangon and Mae Sot, and new routes between Mae Sot and China. This strengthened and intensified cross-border mobility, establishing larger hubs and wider channels that allow greater and denser flows of commodities, services, and people across an enlarged border. As far as activity is concerned for Mae Sot as a special economic special zone, setting up new businesses and attracting foreign investment at the Thai side has not been very successful, due to problems of strong regulation, many commercial buildings were left empty without business sectors moving in.

At the Burma side, the new mega investment from China entered into a former conflicted area called Shwe Kokko. This area used to be a garrison of the Karen National Liberation Army which was lost to the Burmese Guard Force. The mega investment is backed by Jilin Yatai Group, the Chinese State Company. The project wants to build a mega industrial city with gated communities, shopping mall, hospitals, schools and an airport. It aims to be a hub for trade that is standing at the linkage of Asian Highway 1. The Shwe Kokko mega project seems like a threat to the Mae Sot special economic zone since the industrial sector will probably move from Mae Sot to the Kokko side (Bangkok Post, 2019). What will happen to the special economic zone in Mae Sot? This mega investment from China will transform the landscape of this borderland, as well as reshuffle of power relation among all (former) power holders. However the consequence of this towards the refugees and the people in the borderland are still unclear.

**BORDER ZONES IN PERSPECTIVE**

Ong (2000) examined assemblages of governmental practices in middle-range Asian states in relation to globalization. These states, according to Ong’s concept of ‘graduated sovereignty’, accommodated global corporations and global regulations in designated special economic zones, where the state chooses to treat segments of the population differently based on market calculations, often in combination with certain domestic laws being relaxed in that zone. Her emphasis is on the role of the state, the formal actor and the sovereign, vis-à-vis its citizens, and the policy is top-down. But in this special economic zone of the borderland, the leading actors were originally the local authorities, for example, the Mae Sot local authority, the ethnic insurgent leaders and Chinese/Thai entrepreneurs. National, state-led development plans for a special economic zone were made after the 1997 economic crisis, but they were not very successful. It was not until Chinese investments started to flow into the area, with
mega-developments across the border in the Shwe Kokko area, that the central Thai state seriously started to pay attention to the area as an economic zone.

Nyiri (2012) looks at the transformation of border zones into zones of economic development in the context of the China-Laos borderland, pointing out that even though both national sovereigns officially control the territory and the population, much of the practical sovereignty is actually vested into a private corporation. He refers to this as ‘post-national sovereignty’. In this setting the private corporation borrows certain administrative or symbolic power from either or both of the two states involved, in order to bolster the corporation’s own standing.

Both Ong and Nyiri focus on how private corporations under the influence of globalization change state sovereignty, where the state is willing to give up some of its sovereignty over parts of its territory if it gets benefit from economic development, in particular at border areas where power demarcation is unclear. But does the development trickle down its benefit to the local people? Sihanoukville in Cambodia, where Chinese workers have taken over the entire town, shows quite an extreme case that the benefits hardly go to local people but only toward Chinese entrepreneurs and Chinese people.

Unlike Nyiri’s (2012) case of Boten on the China-Laos border, it is also not the case that practical sovereignty in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy area is vested in private corporations. In Chapter 2, I explained how ‘guested sovereignty’ is vested in the camp committee for the refugee camps, but for the economic activity in the borderland the local authorities, and later the central Thai state, remain firmly in control.

What Ong and Nyiri do not consider (because their border is not in a conflict zone), and what is lacking in Chen and Stone’s (2017) general analysis of the blurring of core and periphery in Southeast Asian states, is the point that this entire economic edifice is being built in a conflict area. While some of these regions, such as in Laos and Cambodia, are largely politically stable, the Mae Sot-Myawaddy region and borderland still suffer from political instability – there are regular insurgencies and fighting between ethnic groups – and it is uncertain whether and how this will affect or possibly hamper investment and economic development in the long-run. The fact that there are several refugee camps (such as Mae La) at the border is of course another important aspect, which has been absent in other border regions.

The mutually coexisting relationship between the Thai government and the Karen/
Burmese army is hereby noteworthy. When the Thai local authorities restricted the mobility of migrants along the border and interrupted the flows of commodity, or when they exploit the Karen/Burmese workers who came back from Bangkok to visit their home in Burma by taking too much money from them, the Karen army or Burmese military responded to the Thai action by closing the border (this happened a couple of times during my fieldwork during 2014-2015). The border closing affects the entire cross-border economy, which means parties then start to negotiate to open the border again.

CONCLUSION

The urbanization of the borderland can be traced through moments and encounters between the past, the present, and the future. In the past, the area was defined as a frontier between Thailand and Burma, when the national territory was demarcated. It turned into a buffer zone during the Cold War, with the border economy relying predominantly on the black market. Nowadays, the area is urbanizing rapidly; going into the future, the entire border region is being promoted by the Thai government to become a special economic zone with mega-economic developments and improvements of infrastructure preparing the border to be a gateway of this region.

From the perspective of the (refugee) people, the border used to be a safe haven or a space of refuge. They have been able to re-build their homeland community; their identity is nourished and nurtured here. Many of them could rebuild their lives after fleeing from warzones in Burma, their children get access to good education, and seem to have a good future. The Mae La camp, as described in the previous chapter, has become a place of opportunities. It has transformed and urbanized through flows of connectivity, which camp inhabitants have within the borderland, as well as transnationally. The camp has been coexisting with the borderland, for decades.

As the entire border is now all but set to be made into a special economic zone, the implications for the camp and the (refugee) people living here are unclear. What is clear, though, is that urbanizing developments will increasingly blur the boundary between camp refugees (at the border) and urban refugees (in the city), with the Mae La camp becoming less of a refugee camp and more an enclave in the urbanizing borderland. The question furthermore is whether economic development, foreign investment, and more national attention will diminish the long-term conflict in the area, if even insurgency groups may be willing to exchange some of their informal sovereignty to private corporations. It might even strengthen their position against the
central Myanmar government, or perhaps investments will continue in parallel while the conflict remains. The border has always been a space where conflict and economic development coexist. This coexistence along with multiple and changing sovereignties has existed for a long time, and now the new actors—Chinese entrepreneurs—may again change power relations and traditional practices in this borderland.