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### Re-imagining the refugee camp

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

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

# Conclusion

## **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis has placed the Mae La camp, located in northwestern Thailand near to the Thailand-Burma border, at the intersection of several fields of study: refugee studies, border studies, and human geography.

The main claim of this thesis is that the discourse of refugees as passive and waiting and the refugee camp as an isolated and undesirable place, needs to be reconsidered for long-term refugee camps such as Mae La. Clearly, politico-economic and environmental conditions remain very important factors as to why refugees are unable to return, and to be a refugee—to have had to flee conflict or disaster—is never desirable. However, I have argued that the knowledge production on refugees has suffered from this frequently one-dimensional discourse. There are many aspects of refugees' lives in the camp and the camp itself, which are understudied and which this thesis has aimed to elucidate.

The aim of this thesis has been to provide an alternative understanding, a re-imagining, of long-term refugee camps, requiring a new or updated epistemology that goes beyond the dominant state-led narrative and humanitarian conceptions of camps. While not diminishing the often precarious and difficult situation in the camp, nor the very real reasons of fleeing the place of origin, it urges the researcher to look beyond victimhood. This research has placed the refugee as a subject, rather than a category of analysis. It is important to see refugees as full persons with agency, capable of engaging with their socio-political setting and transforming their social world. Such refugee agency is apparent in multiple dimensions in the Mae La camp: in refugees' efforts towards autonomy and self-governing, in place-making where they transform an originally transitional space into a place of permanence, and in various tactics of mobility to maintain links to networks in the wider borderland. The effects of refugee

agency have changed the long-term camp even to the extent that it has developed beyond its original function: it has become a destination of interest for migrants from neighboring Burma, an educational hub, even an imagined homeland, as it takes its place as an entity in its own right in the urbanizing Thailand-Burma borderland.

My main research question addressed the transformation of the camp and the reasons why it has been there for so long. To provide the answer for my main research question, the sub-questions formulated in the Introduction addressed the following issues: (i) long-term camp governance and organization; (ii) the perceptions of the camp by the refugees themselves and how this affects their tactics to rearrange and transform the camp in line with their views on their own social world; (iii) how camp inhabitants are linked to the wider borderland society (including cross-border networks) and how these contacts contribute to camp urbanization.

This thesis is based on ethnographic research in the camp for a consecutive period of nine months in 2014-2015. I revisited the field for at least one week every year after finishing this main fieldwork period in order to understand and capture ongoing camp developments and reconnect with my respondents. This methodology allowed me to see and examine the relationships between refugees themselves and between refugees and other actors or entities: how refugees organize the camp; how they relate to multiple sovereigns and negotiate among them; how they perceive of and pursue their lives in this so called long-term encampment. Ethnography, as borrowed from Sorensen, thereby allows the researcher to 'grasp the particular complexities and dynamics of local situations of forced migration that are concealed by aggregated statistical data and presentations based on generalized categories' (Sorensen, 2003: 65).

## **FINDINGS AND REFLECTION**

Refugee agency is demonstrated through much of the transformation of the camp. I categorize and reflect on my findings related to long-term camps in terms of sovereignty and autonomy, spatiality, and temporality.

### **Sovereignty and Autonomy**

From my research findings on the camp governing system in Chapter 2, I argued that the Mae La camp and its organizing system are not characterized by the state of exception where laws and regulations are unclear or suspended (Agamben, 2005; 1998). Black-and-white portrayals of the sovereign who is all-powerful and the

refugees as 'bare life' do not reflect reality on the ground. The camp is rather a space where multiple sovereigns play roles, while enabling the camp committee to organize and govern themselves. Analyses in refugee studies often overlook such dynamics at the micro-level, the level of the refugee camp committee, even though it plays an important role in organizing and managing the camps.

I hereby agree with Bonilla (2017) who has argued that

Across academic fields, we are increasingly coming to understand sovereignty as an uneven and fragmented performance, rather than a stable capacity (...) The notion of a sovereign state, and its attendant sovereign individual who speaks and acts autonomously, is thus giving way to the recognition of the non-sovereign nature of most social relationships – political, intimate, and affective – all of which require brokered and negotiated forms of interdependency and a relinquishing of autonomy.

(Bonilla, 2017: 333)

The conceptualization of sovereignty for long-term refugee camps should be expanded accordingly. Contemporary debates on sovereignty are moving away from the all-powerful, unitary sovereign and increasingly revolve around competing sovereigns, such as the European Union versus its member states, or countries in the Global South 'selling' or 'leasing' sovereignty to China in return for investments. In much of Southeast Asia and other parts of the Global South, there is also a long history of local mafias, hybrid sovereigns, and dimensions of sovereignty, which ought to be taken into account. This study has shown that sovereignty is actually often much more multi-faceted, messy, and negotiated.

More specifically for Mae La, I have shown that the camp committee, comprising elected camp officials chosen from its inhabitants, still reflects the camp's original self-governing system that was used before the formal camp was established. For the camp committee to remain autonomous, they have had to navigate and maneuver and maintain a good relationship among different parties: mostly, the Thai state, the humanitarian organizations, and the Karen National Union. This governing structure leaves some room for the camp committee to exercise their agency to negotiate and carve out their own space for practicing self-governing through its various subcommittees, organizing daily life in the camp.

For the camp committee and camp inhabitants, the iron rule is 'avoiding conflict', which in the Thai context literally means 'not to make any trouble' with the Thai government or the Thai society in a broader sense. In order to maintain its autonomy, the camp committee needs to keep the camp in a peaceful condition. Meanwhile, the Thai government, as *de jure* sovereign, allows the camp committee to care for and manage their own camp population. I have argued that the Thai state has essentially reverted to long-standing practices in the Thailand-Burma borderland as 'guested sovereignty' where the refugee camp committee is allowed to govern themselves, as the Thai state has traditionally done with other groups of war captives or refugees in the past. This arrangement allows the Thai government to officially remain in a position of being neutral and 'non-partisan' in the political conflict of the Karen and Burmese government, while simultaneously deflecting the responsibility for the care and daily management of the camp to the designated camp committee.

### **Spatiality**

The second dimension of refugees' agency is visible in the camp space. In contrast to some refugee literature, which sees refugee camps as 'non-places' (Augé, 1995), spaces of transience where people do not actually 'live' (as opposed to anthropological places, which are full of meaning), this thesis has rather argued that the long-term refugee camp is very much an anthropological place, where refugee agency is expressed and can be analyzed through place-making and tactics of everyday life (De Certeau, 1984). In chapter 3, I have shown how this applies to camp infrastructure (connection to the electricity grid, mobile phone networks, and the development of water pipelines), as well as to the multitude of ways, via memories, material objects, and tactics through which refugees make the camp their personal home. This has resulted in a profound sense of permanence on the part of the refugees, as expressed in many ways by camp inhabitants, and reinforced by the regularity of humanitarian support and an implicit acceptance of the camp in its environment due to ambiguous regulations.

It has led camp inhabitants to build durable houses, a variety of public spaces, and places of worship. Transitioning from temporariness to permanence, from 'passive waiting' to 'everyday living' is also reflected in everyday life activities, with giving meaning to a certain space. Unlike the image of some refugee camps as makeshift settlements set up by humanitarian organizations, this thesis has shown that the long-term nature of the camp has transformed it into a productive space, where refugees have re-organized spaces to fit their social world, and a place where people live.

Spatial-cultural formation in the Mae La camp is significantly informed by ideas about

the Karen homeland (Chapter 4), which plays an important role in political and ethnic unity in the camp. Many Karen refugee elites participated in the insurgency and have a strong belief in their ethno-history. Bringing their ideas, culture, history, and strong notions of Karenness to the camp, the elite refugees have set up schools, colleges, a curriculum, and several Karen political and cultural organizations according to the political and ideological concepts as they used to practice in Karen state. These camp institutions spread and reproduce Karen ethnic history, ethno-nationalism, and the glory of the Independent Karen homeland. These practices are embedded in refugee's ideology and transformed the camp physical space as well.

The Karen have, in a way, been able to mold the camp to resemble the Karen idea of the (unattainable) Karen homeland, albeit dislocated from its original geographic location in Burma. Given the fact that facilities are generally better in the camp and the international attention to the Karen struggle that makes them feel the world has not abandoned them, many refugees expressed the absence of desire to return to the actual homeland in Karen state in Burma.

This thesis has, therefore, argued that the idea of the homeland in the camp has become dislodged from its geographical location. It is no longer territorialized, but rather functions as a point of reference. This is unlike Palestinian refugees in Lebanon or Israel, for example, for whom their homeland is territorialized to the extent that they built a key in front of the refugee camp gate as a symbolic reminder to one day return and claim their homeland space. For the Karen in Mae La, the homeland idea is firmly planted in the collective memories of the Karen people but it has become portable and reproducible, and can be applied to spatial and cultural production in the camp or elsewhere.

The insight that the idea of the homeland is portable, and its role in the camp's spatial formation, I have argued, are key to starting to disentangle the tying of the homeland narrative to a desire for return, which is so often conflated in refugee studies. Although for many cases these two notions may well largely overlap, this should not be automatically assumed.

A final aspect of spatio-cultural formation and the transformation of camp space is refugee mobility. Previous refugee camp studies, and certainly those focusing on short-term camps, depict the refugee camp as an isolated space and undesirable place for the host state and refugee themselves. On the contrary, I have argued in this thesis that although it is officially segregated from the surrounding area, a long-term

camp such as Mae La has in practice become a node of connection and a place of opportunity. Refugees go out of the camp to Mae Sot border town or cross the border to the Burma side for doing business, trading, education, work, attending religious ceremonies or participating in political groups. Of course, their freedom of mobility is limited by camp regulations, but camp inhabitants invent and apply a variety of tactics to mobilize themselves in many ways. But it isn't just the camp inhabitants that go in and out of the camp, additional flows of migrants and refugees have come to the camp, not just to seek refuge, but also for education, work, religious reasons, or romantic relationships.

I have argued that it is through these flows in and out of the camp that the camp space has become a place of opportunity and a node of connection in this borderland. This challenges the dominant narrative that the camp is undesirable or a dumping site (Bauman, 2004). The longevity of the camp and the mobility of camp inhabitants have led to organic growth and diversity, to urbanization, and the camp has come to exhibit characteristics of a city. I hereby built on Agier's (2002) observation in the Dadaab camp that physical changes, more durable structures, and facilities for inhabitants, have increasingly turned the camp into a 'city'. Yet where Agier mostly zooms in on physical changes and a growing population, I have argued that Agier's analogy of the camp with the city should actually be stretched further, looking at other urban aspects: the city as a node of connection and a space of flows, a place of seeking opportunities, an educational hub, and ultimately a place of transformation, in particular for the younger generation. The camp transformation blurs the boundary between the camp and urban refugee as suggested by Sanyal (2012).

### **Temporality**

Studying long-term refugee camp formation reflects two aspects of time. First, 'refugee time' in the camp is often neglected in refugee studies, ignored, seen as stagnant, or taken for granted. Second, 'temporariness' in the camp is a dimension of life that is not specific to the camp, but can also be found in the city, where people come and go, neighborhoods change all the time, and which I have argued adds to the blurring of conceptual boundaries between the camp and the city.

Refugee time in the camp is often conceptualized as stagnant. This may be because the camp is seen as an uncommon place, isolated and excluded from the outside world, because the activities in life of the people who live there hardly seem to move forward. This view of time as stagnant may also be related to the nature of the camp being in 'limbo'—a space that falls in-between two national borders (Missbach, 2014).

Khosravi (2014) explains about refugees' experience of time in the camp as 'every day being Monday', and days being virtually indistinguishable as if time has stopped. However, this is not at all the experience among the Mae La camp dwellers as they have re-invented everyday life in the camp as I have shown in chapter 3 and chapter 5. Refugees go out to work and study on certain well-defined days; they go to church on Sunday; there are normal 'weekend', and days designated to celebrate special religious or cultural holidays. Each year their children go to a higher grade. They clearly feel that their time is moving forward, not standing still.

Not only do these daily life practices signal a progression in time, but they also reveal the agency with which each refugee pursues their life. Refugees enact their agency by setting up their own businesses and by increasing their mobility, by finding ways to go outside the camp. In this way, they are not simply waiting or feeling stuck, but rather living active lives. This sense of productivity manifests itself temporally as well. Refugees in Mae La described the time they experienced in the camp as 'faster' than in the village in Karen state. Those who come to the camp to seek opportunities, as well as refugees who go back and forth to Karen state on a regular basis, described the same difference: Karen state is seen as stagnant, with time seemingly standing still, while they describe the camp as dynamic, more developed, and more connected to the modern world.

Moreover, the time that refugees spend in the camp should take into account that an enduring stay creates a sense of attachment or develops a sense of belonging between camp inhabitants and the physical space of the camp. As the camp is a productive space, which refugees adjust and re-adjust to fit their social world, the camp also transforms refugees. Some of the younger generation of Karen refugees who were born and raised in the camp, indicate a sense of not belonging to their Karen homeland nor of having strong social ties to Karen state, since they never actually lived there. So, the perception of time in the camp is relative to the space where they have spent their life. What they have been experiencing is the long-term conflict, which they feel does not belong to their generation, but is the outcome of their parents' or grandparents' generation.

As shown in chapter 6, students are aware of global issues. They study about global climate change in the classroom. At the camp announcement boards, there were posters with cartoon stories written in Burmese and English language telling stories about gender equality, human rights, anti-sexual harassment, and anti-domestic violence. These stories exposed refugee students to other cultural-political ideologies, and they



became aware about universal values. These ideologies and values were transferred from foreign volunteer teachers as well as the humanitarian organizations. Meanwhile, the local villagers from both sides of the border did not share their cosmopolitan ideas. It shows that the time refugees spend in the camp is not wasted, but transforms refugees' cultural and political ideology in many ways. Therefore, the time that refugees/migrants spend in a transitional country or spend during a process of migration does matter and should get more understanding rather than taking it for granted.

To give more examples of the perception of time, during my PhD study in Amsterdam, I got to know a few Thai female migrants through participating in a cultural festival organized by the Thai migrant community in the Netherlands. These women described how they had a different experience with time in different places, which shares similarities to refugees in the camp. It also shows that the time during (temporary) migration should not be taken for granted. People, as well as places, change during this time. What I learnt from the Thai migrants is that they did not migrate only once, moving to the Netherlands and then staying there exclusively, but they actually return to Thailand for a short time and then return to work in the Netherlands again. They told me that when they were in the Netherlands, they thought of Thailand as their home, they missed the taste of the food, and the warm weather. They thought of their time in the Netherlands as being temporary. After saving enough money, they decided to go home (for good). In Thailand, they built a nice house for their parents, shopped, and spent time with their children. However, during this time back in Thailand, they started to feel bored or, perhaps they ran out of money. They now began to think of their time in the Netherlands as a time of freedom, good quality of life, and changing seasons. They also missed working as they spent much time at home, doing nothing. So they decided to migrate back to the Netherlands. Furthermore, one of the events organized by the Siam Samakom (the organization that helps Thai migrants with Dutch laws) was an orientation workshop to help and prepare Thai people, who have stayed for a long period of time in the Netherlands and who want to move back to Thailand for retirement, to re-adjust themselves when they return home. The notion that migrants just migrate once and stop when they are either integrated into host societies, or return to their home countries, does not reflect the reality of migrant life. It is, rather, a continual process (see also Lan, 2019).

Temporal aspects also blur the boundaries between city and camp. Based on the finding of this research, there is no clear boundary between these two spaces. There is an element of temporariness in the city as much as a sense of permanence in the camp. The perception of time (short- vs. long-time) is defined by space. Comparing

between the camp and the city, in Bangkok for example, people usually stay in a high-rise condominium buildings. According to the Bangkok municipal regulation for condominium buildings, residential building must be demolished and rebuilt every 50 years. When I bought my apartment, the building was 15 years old, so I have around 35 years left. I thought it was long enough to stay in that building until my retirement. But, I realized it is exactly the same period of time that Mae La camp has existed. Interestingly, to me this building feels like my permanent home—a home that will last a considerable time, but when 35 years refers to a refugee camp the focus is on its ‘temporariness’. It is a strange perception of temporality between two spaces. The notion of time that is really influenced by a place/space than the sense of time alone. To see that camp and city share many similarities and the blurred boundary helps to understand refugees and displacement not through the lens of emergency or crisis. The only obvious difference is that these people supposedly do not belong to a nation-state and are put in a camp.

## **WHY THE MAE LA CAMP HAS BEEN THERE FOR SO LONG?**

In bringing this ethnography to a close, I return to the main research question of this thesis: the reason(s) that the refugee camp of Mae La has existed for such a long period of time. This follows from the answers to the sub-questions and must be seen along these dimensions of sovereignty, spatiality, and temporality. The protracted struggle and ongoing conflict in Burma is the reason for fleeing and still in some cases blocking refugees to return, but as I have analyzed in this thesis, it is also very much the development of the camp over the years, which makes people stay. Moreover, development in all these aspects has led to a certain balance and status quo, which appears to benefit everyone to a certain extent: the Thai government (including local communities close to the camp and border town), humanitarian organizations, camp inhabitants as well as the Karen insurgent group (KNU).

Each actor has a different perception of the camp. An important reason to keep refugees in the camp for the Thai government is to officially segregate non-citizens from citizens. By keeping refugees in one place, it is easier to manage and control their mobility than by letting them disperse into nearby cities. This also helps humanitarian agencies to distribute resources and provide services to the camp population more easily than having refugees dispersed among small shelters along the border. Before these camps were set up, refugees relied on the refugee committee for their food

and struggled by themselves for shelter, and this created tensions about conflicts of resources between local Thai communities and the refugees. This tension was reduced when humanitarian agencies stepped in. Local Thai people around the camp see the camps as a place for so called 'UN people' meaning that the refugees are under care and protection by the United Nations and they somehow receive better aid than them. On the other hand, local people also see opportunity and benefit from the refugee camps. Having large numbers of refugees at the border has attracted manufacturing in search of cheap labor (Brees, 2008; Pongsawat, 2007), and has also benefited local agriculture that relies on refugee laborers during the harvesting season. When the Thai government increased restriction of refugees' mobility out of the camp, the *Songteaw* drivers were hugely affected with very few passengers. Moreover, the camp population itself also contributes to the local border economy. Open and closed markets in the camp are run or supplied by local Thai/Muslim traders in Mae Sot. Since humanitarian agencies provide external help to camp inhabitants, the amount of money circulating around the refugee area is huge and helps boost the local economy.

For refugees, being in the camp means that there is a spotlight on them, getting international attention and support. The camp also provides better living condition than in Burma. Refugees can receive an education, nurture their cultural identity, and for some the camp provides opportunities, which they would not have had in their place of origin. They can build long-term, durable structures and public spaces for themselves, and they have a relatively high freedom of movement, as they can go back and forth over the border to visit relatives and work outside of the camp.

The Karen National Union and the Karen National Liberation Army, which used to provide protection to the Karen refugees in Thailand from cross-border raids before the consolidation into camps, still believes that the camp and its refugees legitimate the fight for their own independent nation. The camp, in turn, serves as a nurturing ground for Karen ideology, with the possibility to recruit young people from the camp to serve with the KNLA army. Additionally, the camp is used as a place for their politicians, soldiers, and families of soldiers to stay and get an education.

None of this is formalized, which means it can change, and there are no guarantees, but every party is to various extents invested in maintaining the status-quo as there appears to be an implicit acknowledgment of mutual benefits. It would be interesting to analyze whether, and how, similar status quo arrangements, embedded in their particular settings to multiple parties' mutual benefits, also apply to other long-term camps with different historical, political, and cultural contexts.

## REFLECTION ON REFUGEE MANAGEMENT IN THAILAND: PAST AND PRESENT

Gatrell (2013) examines the role of history that gave birth to modern refugees mainly in the context of Europe. His later work emphasizes the absence of refugees in mainstream historiography and wonders whether when we look back at the refugee crisis of 2015-2016, this could entail “ ‘thinking through oceans’, not just the nation-state” (Gatrell, 2017: 172). Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, the study of refugees and their history is often overlooked and still lacking analysis and conceptualization of knowledge production, even though this region has been a place where millions of people have historically been and still are displaced.

Thinking along with Gatrell’s idea, the knowledge production of refugee studies in Thailand has been stuck in an old paradigm that sees refugees as a problem that needs to be solved. The academic institutions working on refugees have difficulties moving away from positivistic approaches to what they see as the ‘refugee problem’. This also relates to the politics of academic funding where the major funders set the research agenda where academic institutions are compelled to do research according to the mandates because they are dependent on this funding.

Concerning the historical reflection from the refugee situation in this region, the Thailand-Burma borderland has always seen movements of various peoples—Thai, Burmese, Karen and other minorities—as a result of droughts, famines, upsets in power balances, or wars. Previous generations of the Karen currently living in the camp have migrated to this very same area before, or settled here temporarily for agriculture, economic, religious, or other purposes, and they have migrated back at other times. The border was porous and never strictly enforced. Few attempts were made to stem flows of these people, as long as they stayed and did their business within the general borderland area and did not venture farther into the inner areas. This is to say that the presence of the Karen in this geographical area for the past decades has actually been common.

The Thai government has dealt with refugees in different ways. In the past, the Mon refugees from the West, who came to Thailand long before the Karen or Vietnamese refugees, for example, were welcomed by the Thai king, and treated much differently (not as undesirable refugees) than today (van Roy, 2017; Lang 2002). They were locally integrated into the Thai society and granted citizenship. For the case of Indochinese refugees from the Vietnam war, the Thai government started to segregate them

into camps, but they dissolved the camps and resettled refugees to third countries quickly. Knowledge production on refugee camps in Southeast Asia thus became largely based on experiences of Indo-Chinese refugees fleeing from the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnam war, and the resulting temporary condition of refugee camps at the Eastern border of Thailand drove historical precedence of the Mon refugees into the background.

The Karen were dispersed along the border and their settlements became consolidated into camps later, but these camps did not dissolve as quickly as the Indochinese refugee camps. Camps were intended for short-time use, yet have remained much longer than anticipated. This case therefore differs from the other two cases above, notably because time and longevity turn out to be an important factor of the nature of the Karen refugee camps and their corresponding transformation. As other refugee situations are continuing to unfold in Southeast Asia (for example, the Rohingyas on the western border of Burma), I believe it is imperative that knowledge production relating to camps in this region shifts from the often still prevailing Indo-Chinese, short-term lens to the reality of long-term camps, and how the life in and development of these camps ought to be themselves the subject of anthropological inquiry.

Looking from a linguistic perspective, the usage of the word for refugee itself has changed in the Thai language. First the Thai word *Phu-Lee-Phai* derived from the Sanskrit language indicated people seeking asylum; later the words *Phu-Op-Payop* and *Phu-Plad –Thin* were increasingly used by the Thai state, which means migrant and displaced person respectively. This reflects the ideology and the way the Thai state deals with refugees—from welcoming, helping, and providing shelter to treating them as illegal migrants who form a threat to national security. Additionally, before the Thai state became the main actor dealing with refugees (the modern way), there were local authorities or local communities helping and dealing with them. This sense of local communities who refugees were in contact with, thereby also disappeared from the official picture. A comprehensive understanding—that takes into account history, language, power, and context—provides a better understanding of the refugees along the Thailand-Burma border.

Historically ‘being a refugee’ did not carry a negative connotation. It was actually relatively common to become a refugee whenever one was oppressed or treated with extreme unfairness by the current ruler. One could flee to seek protection from a neighboring ruler, such as the Mon refugee to seek protection under the Thai king (van Roy, 2017; Lang 2002), or live in a jungle outside of the territorial control by

ruler as seen for example in the study of Scott on 'freemen' (Scott, 1998). At some later point, the refugee either integrates into the new society or returns home if the political situation changes or a royal pardon is granted. Under the modern nation-state system, though, this works differently: the refugee is treated and labeled such that they fall outside of the nation-state system. As a result, they are often segregated and treated as a burden or as a threat to national unity and security.

## REFUGEE STUDIES IN PERSPECTIVE

This research on Mae La camp invites us to reflect on the broader situation of other existing long-term refugee camps as well as on the more recent camps, which may well be destined to exist for an extended period of time. Therefore, it is necessary to start questioning this 'camp as temporary' discourse sooner rather than later.

As long-term camps are clearly becoming the norm (more than two-thirds of the total number of refugees live in such camps, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), this reflects trends and norms for dealing with the global refugee situation, too. The United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention was convened primarily in response to people displaced by war in Europe. When refugee camps began to sprawl in the Global South, and also in countries which did not sign the Convention (such as Thailand), the nature of refugee camps changed. At the same time, mobility patterns caused the European response to the refugee situation to change as well: in the refugee crisis of 2015, many European countries chose to close their borders and deport refugees back to their own countries. From the case of Thailand, the resettlement program for refugees from Burma was stopped in 2012 meaning that those refugees could no longer use this way to migrate to the Global North countries. At the time of the 1951 Refugee Convention, mobility of people was rather limited, but more than 60 years later, mobility is increasing and in much higher volumes, so refugees from the Global South can reach Europe much easier than before, to which Europe responded by closing the borders. As the European approach is increasingly trying to host refugees 'in the region' (meaning not to reach Europe) this means that refugees have few other options than to stay in a transition country for an extended period of time. This also means that, over the years, these camps are likely to at least share and build some of the refugee agency found in the already much longer-existing long-term camps, such as Mae La.

Additionally, protracted refugee situations are facing a support deficit, as many

humanitarian organizations withdrew their help given the lack of urgency in the situation, dwindling budgets, or 'humanitarian fatigue'. For the case of refugee camps in Thailand, almost half of the number of humanitarian organizations withdrew their aid. In this situation, refugees found themselves being forgotten.

Ticktin (2006) examines the dichotomy between legal status and the biological integrity of refugees seeking rights to stay in France. She criticizes a system of selection in which states set parameters for which refugees they do and do not prefer to assist and the ways that refugees attempt to fit certain selection criteria (in Ticktin's case violating their biological integrity).

The stricter selection criteria reflect on the Mae La camp inhabitants in two ways. Firstly, there is debate about who counts as a genuine refugee and along with this there is the idea of 'good refugees' and 'bad refugees'. This shapes an environment where the camp committee uses this definition to inform the camp inhabitant's behavior by telling them that the 'good' refugees should not leave the camp without permission, drink alcohol, party, play loud music, or participate in the customary mass water fights during the Thai New Year festival. The one who is not conforming to these norms is considered to be 'bad' or not a genuine refugee. This goes hand in hand with strict regulations for resettlement programs. Refugees whose cases are still being processed cannot leave the camp, otherwise their application will be rejected. Dan, my interpreter, expressed his frustration that he had to leave his life outside the camp behind, quitting his job in Mae Sot, going back to stay in the camp, being unemployed, and not able to leave the camp for two years, when his family decided to apply for a resettlement program due to his father's ill health. The case study shows that the criteria for resettlement selection forces refugees to obey and to fit into a straitjacket definition of what a 'good' refugee is. Resettlement programs thereby reinforce the same systemic narrative of the refugee as 'passively waiting', ignoring their agency.

Relating to Van Schendel's critique that area studies need to break out of their epistemological frame and self-imposed compartmentalization (van Schendel, 2002), this thesis has pointed out some persistent boundaries and framing in refugee studies, which is the state-led perspective on refugee management and humanitarian perspectives that shape the refugee only as a victim, and the impossibility of thinking outside of the nation-state order. This thesis, in a similar way, has attempted to break out of such persistent framing for refugee studies and to contribute to a burgeoning and necessary rethinking and reimagining of refugees and refugee camps. Using an anthropological lens, examining the refugees as subjects, when more than 10 million

refugees are living in a long-term camp and across the world, may broaden the epistemic perspective to understand and help us 'thinking through camps'.