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Infrastructure and Anxiety of Return

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Introduction

Refugee camps are often places of uncertainty and anxiety. Makeshift living conditions, little contact with outside communities and no right to work or do other activities harm refugee wellbeing (Bjrertrup et al. 2018). Powerless to influence asylum decision processes, refugees and undocumented migrants are forced to wait, which can be detrimental to their mental health (El-Shaarawi 2015; Phillimore and Cheung 2021). Hage (2009) has termed this situation "stuckedness," while Khosravi (2021: 203) articulated the notion of "border waiting," referring to "all waiting times that citizens and racialized citizens are pushed towards."

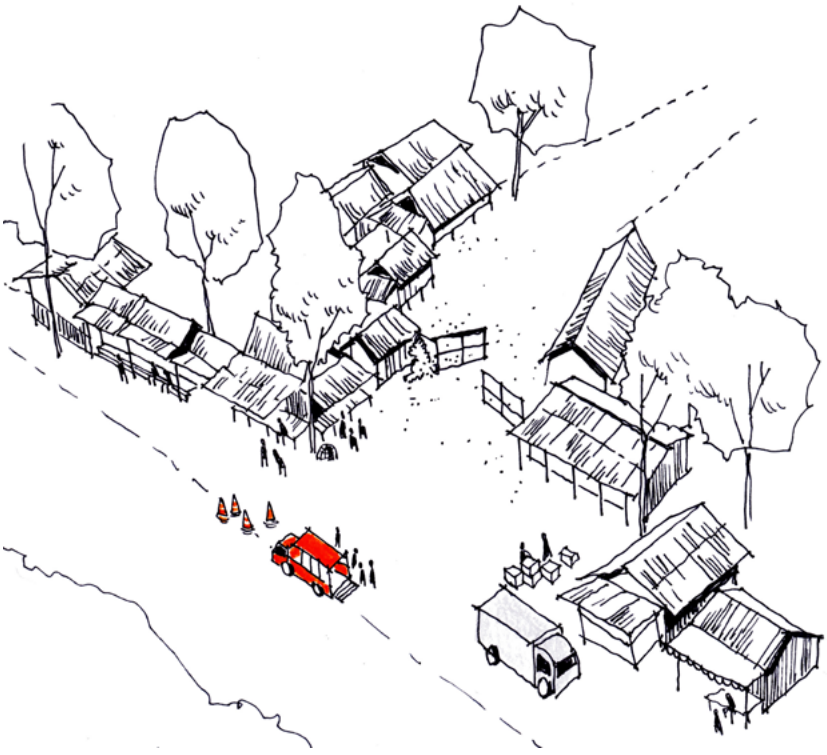
In the case of long-term camps which have been in existence for decades, this article proposes that anxiety is experienced differently, because of the way temporality is perceived. In the Mae La camp on the Thailand–Myanmar border, anxiety and uncertainty have given way to an attention to the present, which is channelled into building durable infrastructure. This has anchored refugees and attached their lives to the camp, which they now call home. Infrastructure and temporal logics have thus turned waiting into living. Anxiety about their current situation in the camp, I argue, thereby morphs into anxiety about the future of the camp itself.[1]

[1] This article is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the refugee camps along the Thailand–Myanmar borderland from 2015 to 2024.

Permanent Temporariness and Infrastructure

Mae La refugee camp was formally established in 1984 as a response to political conflict and war between the Burmese military and various ethnic armed groups. Currently, it hosts approximately forty thousand refugees (IOM 2020). Despite the fact that the camp has been there for almost four decades, the Thai government still considers it as 'temporary shelter' (พื้นที่พักพิงชั่วคราวสำหรับผู้หนีภัยจากการสู้รบ). This temporary condition functions as a narrative of the status quo to inform refugees that they are only guests, allowed to stay for just a short period – with the implied expectation that the camp's inhabitants will return to their homeland someday (Betts and Bloom 2014). Over time, the temporary condition of the camp has become complex due to protracted wars and political-economic instabilities in Myanmar. Durable solutions provided by international communities have helped resettle registered refugees, but many unregistered refugees remain in nine refugee camps in Thailand, the largest being Mae La. The conditions in the camp have therefore become a situation of "permanent temporariness" (Bailey et al. 2010: 125), "frozen transience" (Bauman 2002: 345), or of a place where temporariness and permanence coexist (Herz 2017).

As a camp endures, longer-lasting and more durable shelter and infrastructure tends to replace initial makeshift structures – for example the houses in Palestinian camps in Lebanon (El Masri 2020) and the public buildings that used stucco and concrete materials in refugee camps of the Western Sahara (Herz 2017). In Mae La, a similar transformation of camp space has taken place, through the building of more robust infrastructure. There are three different types of infrastructure at Mae La: Thai government, humanitarian and refugee-built.



One of the camp gates: the Thai security staff patrol the gate to check refugees going in and out. Drawing: Siriluck Songsri, 2020.

The Thai government segregates the camp from outside communities with barbed wire, gates and military checkpoints, controlling the flows of refugees and undocumented migrant workers going into and out of the camp and along the border. Inhabitants who want to go outside in order to visit a hospital, a school or a relative's house must pass through the checkpoints guarded by local Thai authorities.

There are several humanitarian infrastructures in the camp, including a primary healthcare hospital, schools and a disability support centre. These are operated by humanitarian agencies and the refugee camp committee. Education available ranges from kindergarten up to college level, including vocational training and religious education. Inhabitants with suitable knowledge and administrative skills are hired to work as local camp staff, taking up roles such as medic, teacher, rations provider or administrator. This infrastructure of care and services not only somewhat mitigates the miserable conditions, but also transforms the camp into a more liveable and emotionally fulfilling space (cf. Feldman 2015). Naw Gyi, who works as a medic at a camp hospital, shared the sense of time and liveable conditions that exist here:

> *"Conducting day-to-day life here is not easy, but better than what I experienced in Myanmar. Because when the armies fought, we had to flee and stayed in the forest for maybe a week or months. Here, I can work and earn some money. My children can go to school. To see my children grow up and pass from grade one to grade six, it already gives me a sense of continuity and ordinary life" (Fieldwork interview, January 2020).*

Temporary house transformed into a concrete building. Photo: Jiraporn Laocharoenwong, 2020.

Naw Gyi's experience at Mae La shows a two-way interaction where infrastructure not only provides a service but also reduces refugees' anxiety by giving a sense of continuity and agency to those who participate in it.

↑ Water system built by the camp section committee.
Photo: Jiraporn Laocharoenwong, 2018.

← This concrete bridge, built in 2015, was still in use during my fieldwork in 2024.
Photo: Jiraporn Laocharoenwong, 2024.

Finally, there is the housing and community infrastructure built by refugees themselves. They renovate houses using durable materials, and carry out floor and roof extensions, making the camp a more liveable space. To solve conflicts and tensions over long queues for water, a pipeline was constructed by the camp committee that itself comprises refugees. This required some complex infrastructure. Mae La has a fleet of streams at the back of the camp, but that raw water needs to be pumped into a tank and then purified. To lay the pipelines, camp section staff had to understand the topography of the area, before creating a line going to every house. A concrete bridge was built in 2015, also with money and labour contributed by camp-dwellers. Other examples of refugee-initiated projects are infrastructure that facilitates communal life: teahouses where people watch football together, temples and other religious buildings where they congregate and pray, markets, and places for ceremonial purposes and celebrations.

Anxiety of Return

From 2015 to 2019, the voluntary return program for refugees, introduced by international civil society organizations, was a cause for concern and the topic of regular discussions at Mae La and in other refugee camps in Thailand. The recurring question from many refugees and camp inhabitants whom I met was: "Will the Thai government send us back to Myanmar, and if so, will it be soon?" They shared their worries about returning to their homeland – which for most was Karen state in Myanmar – such as their concerns about the political situation there and the living conditions. They also talked about their dream of staying in Thailand and becoming Thai citizens after several years in the camp, and their attachment to the place where they had lived for so long. All of these individuals gave out a strong message that they did not want to return. An excerpt from my conversation with Saw Tu Tu, a camp section leader, represents the refugees' anxiety well:

> *"Of course the news about closing the camp worries me. I do not want to return to Myanmar. I would like to live [in Mae La camp] until I die. I left Karen state when I was fifteen years old, now I am sixty years old. I have often crossed the border to visit my relatives in the village or work with many local communities in Karen state. I love Karen state and its people, but I feel safe and settled in the camp. My family also lives together with me. My children were born in the camp … I have been working as a camp committee member for more than twenty years. Our team built a lot of infrastructure for the refugee community. We laid out a network of water pipelines with the help of volunteers from the USA. The wooden bridge which was slippery to cross during the rainy season was replaced with a concrete one. Some parts of the busy road were paved with cement, so the camp-dwellers who live near the road would not get affected by dust when a motorcycle passes. Those infrastructures have been built by refugee labour and their money. We don't know when the camp is going to close – maybe the day after tomorrow, next month or next year. We built it because the community needs it" (Fieldwork interview, November 2018).*

As temporal logics at Mae La camp over four decades have changed it from a temporary, largely makeshift environment into a liveable space with durable infrastructure built by

and for refugees, feelings of anxiety have changed accordingly. Conventional anxiety emanating from a lack of agency and sense of being powerless while waiting for a potential resettlement decision has mostly dissipated as refugees have made lives for themselves in the camp, expecting to stay. The standard linearity of being a refugee – from fleeing their place of origin via a temporary shelter to a final destination – has been broken. Some refugees were born in this camp or gave birth to their children there; many have few bonds with Myanmar and do not see any future there if they had to leave the camp. Accordingly, many refugees invest their savings not in an imagined future elsewhere, but in the present, where they live now. As they have anchored their lives to the camp through infrastructure, a new type of anxiety rears its head: that they might be forced to depart, leaving behind their lives and everything they have built.

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