

# Karen Refugees' Self-Settlement: Refuge in Local Administration and Contingent Relations

การตั้งถิ่นฐานด้วยตนเองผู้ลี้ภัยชาวกะเหรี่ยง:  
การลี้ภัยในการปกครองระดับท้องถิ่นและ  
ความสัมพันธ์แบบมีเงื่อนไข

ประเสริฐ แรงกล้า

Prasert Rangkla

## บทคัดย่อ

ข้อถกเถียงในปัจจุบันเกี่ยวกับ “ผู้อพยพลี้ภัยที่เลือกตั้งถิ่นฐานด้วยตนเอง” (Self-settled refugees) แสดงให้เห็นว่า การแสวงหาและการให้ที่ลี้ภัยมีหลากหลายรูปแบบ มิได้จำกัดเฉพาะการให้การดูแลในระบบค่ายผู้ลี้ภัย อย่างไรก็ตาม เรายังมีความรู้ค่อนข้างจำกัดว่าการรับรองความปลอดภัย การคุ้มครอง และการเข้าถึงสิทธิพื้นฐานของกลุ่มผู้อพยพลี้ภัยกลุ่มนี้เกิดขึ้นได้อย่างไร บทความชิ้นนี้สำรวจว่าสภาพการอพยพลี้ภัย “นอกกระบวนการกฎหมายเชิงสถาบันที่เป็นทางการ” (Non-institutional) มีลักษณะอย่างไร โดยศึกษากรณีกลุ่มผู้อพยพลี้ภัยชาวกะเหรี่ยงผู้ตั้งถิ่นฐานอยู่รอบ ๆ พื้นที่เมืองแม่สอดในภาคตะวันตกเฉียงเหนือของไทย การศึกษานี้เสนอว่าการทำความเข้าใจเรื่องการคุ้มครองผู้อพยพลี้ภัยต้องให้ความสำคัญกับพลวัตความสัมพันธ์

ทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรมระหว่างเจ้าบ้านกับผู้อพยพลี้ภัย บทความนี้เสนอข้อสรุปว่า การเข้าถึงสิทธิพื้นฐานและการคุ้มครองผู้อพยพลี้ภัยนั้นขึ้นอยู่กับฐานของความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมเฉพาะท้องถิ่นและความเข้าใจร่วมในทางปฏิบัติระหว่างเจ้าบ้านคนไทยและผู้อพยพลี้ภัยชาวกะเหรี่ยง รูปแบบทางเลือกในการอพยพลี้ภัยนี้ให้ความปลอดภัยและความคุ้มครองแก่กลุ่มผู้อพยพลี้ภัยชาวกะเหรี่ยงที่เลือกตั้งถิ่นฐานด้วยตนเองและพร้อม ๆ กันนั้นก็ก่อให้เกิดความสัมพันธ์แบบมีเงื่อนไข

**คำสำคัญ:** การลี้ภัย, ผู้ลี้ภัยกะเหรี่ยง, ผู้ลี้ภัยที่ตั้งถิ่นฐานด้วยตนเอง, ความสัมพันธ์เจ้าบ้าน-ผู้ลี้ภัย

## Abstract

Recent discussion over self-settled refugees has revealed that refuge seeking and giving can appear in multiple forms beyond the encamped refugee care system. However, there is very little known about how safety, protection and basic rights access are guaranteed among self-settled refugees. Based on the case of self-settled Karen refugees living around Mae Sot town of northwestern Thailand, this study explores how the delivery of refuge takes place within the non-institutional refugee protection model. This paper proposes that there is a need to pay attention to the socio-cultural dynamics between hosts and refugees in understanding the way self-settled Karen refugees obtain protection after flight. This paper argues that the refugees' access to basic rights and protection is actually based on localized social relationships and practical understandings achieved between the Thai hosts and the Karen refugees. This alternative form of refuge provides safety and protection for the self-settled Karen refugees while simultaneously entails conditional relations.

**Keywords:** Refuge, Karen refugees, self-settled refugees, host-refugee relations

## Introduction

The international refugee protection system has created a particular notion of settlement pattern for people seeking refuge across nation-state boundaries. The system has been underpinned and globally institutionalized by the enactment of international law, especially convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees, and practices of humanitarian organizations around the world. It works on providing shelter and assistance for refugees by reference to the notion of universal inalienable human rights. In principle, the refugee has the right of access to aid, safety and human dignity. Within this international norm, refugees must be treated with a certain level of hospitality, even though they are strangers to the host societies.

In practice, the refugee protection system diverges from the ideal of universal refugee rights. In the nation-state system, many refugee-receiving countries show reluctance to give protection to refugees, as they are not citizens of the state. Recently, many western countries have employed diverse instruments to block the illegal migration of refugees (Black 2003). At the same time, numerous developing country governments prefer the policy of refugee encampment to local integration, because of their anxiety over economic and environment burdens, security concerns, xenophobic prevention and asserting of sovereignty over border areas (Crisp 2004). Encampment is largely criticized for its controlling approach, for putting constraints on the freedom of movement of refugees and generating idleness and dependency. The anti-warehousing campaign condemns the authoritarian and self-focused character of the humanitarian

organizations (Harrell-Bond 2002). Smith (2004) even considers confinement unnecessary, wasteful, hypocritical, counterproductive, unlawful, and morally unacceptable.

Some recent research in refugee studies has discussed informal and non-institutional patterns of refuge-taking. Many cases from African countries explore alternatives to international refugee protection that do not depend on external intervention. Hovil Lucy (2007) demonstrates that self-settled refugees in Uganda live and work with the host population and carve out their own security by seeking acceptance from the local government, in a situation when camp settlement failed to ensure human security. Campbell Elizabeth (2006) also shows us that the Somali urban refugees living in Nairobi with illegal status have established clan-based trade networks between Somalia and Kenya and attain sustainable livelihoods through regional commercial trade. This research also challenges the traditional conception of local integration that focuses on the acquisition of legal citizenship and the refugees' self-reliance (Ager and Strang 2008; Jacobsen 2001). They find that these refugees have potential for local integration, in spite of the encampment preference of the host governments and the lack of support for local integration in particular host countries.

Discussions of these unrecognized refugee alternatives indicate the limits of the 'human rights' discourse of the international refugee protection system. Lisa Malkki (1995) suggests that dehistoricized and depoliticized constructions of the refugee figure discourage investigation into the way refugees actually respond to a new place in which they

have arrived. Refugees attempt to seek safety and protection in many ways, not solely by claiming refugee rights in accordance with the institutionalized refugee protection regime. Temporary or permanent solutions to particular displacement situations can appear in various forms. Refugees might not see the predominant refugee rights discourse as a universal answer to their experience of displacement. However, we still know very little from current literature how safety, protection, human dignity and basic rights access are guaranteed among self-settled refugees. We do not understand the mechanisms of the delivery of refuge through existing non-institutional models.

Drawing upon the ethnographic study of self-settled Karen refugees living around Mae Sot town of northwestern Thailand, this paper emphasizes that people in exile have different ways of addressing the experience of displacement. It suggests understanding how self-settled Karen refugees have obtained protection after flight requires attention to the socio-cultural dynamics between hosts and refugees. Seeing 'refugee protection' beyond written protocols or institutionalized refugee protection principles, we discover the intersubjective aspects of refuge seeking and giving. The Karen refugees' self-settlement is an alternative form of refuge based on practical understandings achieved between different cultural spheres. The Karen refugees' access to protection is embedded in situated and localized social relationships between the Thai hosts and the Karen refugees. The outcome provides Karen refugees safety and protection, as well as conditional relations.

## Karen Refugee Residents of a Thai Village

The Thailand-Myanmar borderland has officially and unofficially received a large influx of Karen refugees from Myanmar since 1984 (Lang 2002; South 2008). Officially, the Thai government has recently hosted about 140,000-150,000 Karen refugees in seven refugee camps.<sup>2</sup> More than a half of these figures live in three major refugee camps in Tak Province; they provide shelter to 70,000-80,000 Karen refugees. Since the mid-1990s, the Thai government has used the technology of encampment for delivering relief materials and for limiting refugees' movement and livelihood freedom. At the same time, a number of displaced Karen from Myanmar have opted to be outside this humanitarian system and informally live along local villages in Thailand. The population numbers of these self-settled refugees are unknown, Thawngmung (2008) estimates that there are between 50,000-100,000 Karen in Mae Sot town. In this section, I investigate a case study of these Thai border villages.

Sawtika is a borderland village on Thai territory. It is less than ten kilometres from the Mae Sot business centre. My visits to the village made me aware of its multiethnic character. Residents from various ethnic backgrounds live together there. The Mae Sot annual report (Mae Sot District 2009) says that Sawtika has 362 households, with a population of around 1,228. The figure actually omits a group of people who are considered as illegal migrants. They are displaced persons who fled armed conflict from Burma into Thailand in the 1980s, and are comprised of two different groups. The first are ethnic Thai who grew up in Thai

villages located on the Burmese side of the border. When the fighting between the Burmese military and the Karen rebels broke out in 1984, they fled and sought shelter with Thai relatives and friends in Sawtika village. The second group is refugee Karen who are interspersed amidst the Thai residents and in the cultivated areas surrounding the village. There are around 110 non-Thai households in the village, with the number of residents at 450-500.<sup>3</sup>

Sawtika is one of several villages in Pae where, altogether, thousands of Karen refugees currently live. Pwo-dialect speaking Karen from Hpa-an Plain (hereafter Hpa-an Karen) is the predominant group among the refugees. Hpa-an Karen constitute around 80 percent of the total displaced persons. They arrived in Pae due to different historical and political forces. Most Karen families rent small land plots for housing. Some Thai landlords have subdivided their underused land into small plots which they rent at cheap prices to Karen, who build simple shacks upon them. These Hpa-an Karen have been there for a decade. They seem to receive a certain level of hospitality from the local community.

There are a number of refugees residing in our village. They live with their landlords or rent small land plots from the Thai villagers. Most of them live in simply built shacks. Even though they are illegal migrants, we allowed them to live here as long as they respect the community rules, such as having proper toilets.

This quote from Dam, a Thai assistant village headman, refers to the Karen refugees currently living in Sawtika village. It indicates that most of the displaced Karen live in the village as illegal migrants, according



to Thai law, but are recognized and counted as village residents. Throughout my fourteen-month fieldwork, I heard no one talk about the arrest and deportation of undocumented Karen. Some Thai residents of Sawtika have empathic feelings towards their Karen fellow residents. They acknowledge how Hpa-an Karen have encountered life-threatening danger and economically stressful situations on the Burmese side of the border. I noticed this sense of empathy from Dam. In our discussion about a Karen family that lives opposite to his house, Dam expressed pity for the family's children. He also commented that their lack of citizenship obstructed them from gaining higher education and future opportunity.

The family has four daughters in total. The eldest one works as a domestic worker in Bangkok. The other young girls are studying in the village school. They speak and read Thai fluently, and do not know Burmese at all. I do not think they can survive in Burma. I think the Thai government should help these stateless children. They were born here and play with Thai friends. They can be naturalized as Thai citizens.

Karen residents of Sawtika are able to get access to basic rights, including ones denied to camp-based Karen refugees by the Thai state authorities. They comparatively attain more basic freedoms. They can move freely in the village and around Mae Sot valley, with the exception of the Thai police checkpoints. They have relative freedom to choose how to make their livelihood, ranging from daily-wage jobs, petty commerce, and tenant farming to migration for work to the big cities, although these options are not available for all Karen refugees. They can

use local natural resources. For example, several displaced women collect forest tree leaves for thatch-making and sell them for cash. When I asked a few Thai grocery shop owners in the village about the refugee presence, they said that they are customers, not aliens whom should be eliminated. They even allow these Karen residents to buy on credit at their shops.

Furthermore, Karen villagers can obtain access to certain public services. The best example is childhood education. The public school of Sawtika village had enrolled undocumented children in classes even before the Thai government's cabinet resolution of July 2005, giving children education access regardless of their registration status. In 2009, there were about 110 undocumented students in the school: half were displaced Thai children and the other half displaced Karen children. The school receives all students whose parents want them to study there. Some children of Karen refugee families are, however, out of the Thai educational system because their parents do not want to or cannot afford the costs of their children's uniforms and textbooks.<sup>4</sup> The public schoolmaster has quite a positive attitude toward his Karen students:

They (Karen students) are children from families that tend to stay here in the long term. They are very active and hardworking at study and other activities, probably due to life difficulties. Many are school representatives in the inter-school academic skill and sport competitions.

The benefits that Karen refugees in Sawtika derive sometimes exceed what the Thai laws allow. An example is the Karen refugees' property tenure. Some Hpa-an Karen householders bought land plots

from Thai landlords and built their own houses. The striking fact is that these undocumented Karen use different stratagems to circumvent their illegal status in order to possess private properties.<sup>5</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that most Thai neighbors in the village know, in detail, how a particular Karen family completed the land transaction. Certain tactics are even drawn up cooperatively between the Thai landowners and the Karen refugees. Most of these methods are illegal in the eyes of the Thai law. Nevertheless, those involved in such deals see no alternative. A Thai man who engaged in such an unlawful transaction conceded that ‘our Karen neighbors cannot buy land legally, we have to deal with the law in this way’.

The presence and actions of Karen refugees in the village, however, have attracted criticism about their effects on the host society. As Grundy-War and Elaine (2002) mention, state agencies and national media in Thailand often tag, intentionally or unintentionally, displaced persons as aliens and threats to national security. Some of Sawtika’s Thai residents share the conventional Thai impression, which stereotypes people from Myanmar in Thailand as aliens who pose potential threats to their community’s security. The perception is dominant among those working as public servants. A nurse who lives in Sawtika and works at Mae Sot district hospital claimed that her fellow Sawtika Thai are more vulnerable to health risks owing to the arrival of so many illegal migrants. In her view, these aliens worsen the public health situation in Thailand’s border areas, for they spread infectious diseases to the wider Thai population.

Stories about the methods Karen adopt to secure ownership of land mentioned above also attract some comments from the Thai villagers. A public car (Sawtika-Mae Sot route) driver, who lives in Sawtika and was a Thai soldier during 1982-1986, is one who expressed concerns on this issue. He remarked to me that some well-off ex-leaders of the KNU.<sup>6</sup> illegally bought and own large amounts of land there. The situation, in his mind, signified that his fellow Thai have increasingly lost land to foreigners, which is a major threat to Thai national security. The driver's xenophobic sensibility quite exaggerates the actual situation. I found that there are two ex-KNU leaders who own, in total, about 50-60 acres of land—a share that has little impact on the overall village land distribution, especially in comparison to big Mae Sot landlords who buy larger numbers of land plots from villagers. These kinds of comments form a sub-current of gossip among Thai villagers. I found no deterrent against or explicit dissatisfaction with the Karen land tenure.

### **Situated Reception of Refugees**

The stories about Karen villagers discussed above imply ambivalence in the Thai reception of Karen refugees. On the one hand, it seems that the Thai village offers a relatively friendly atmosphere for Karen refugees. On the other hand, some Thai villagers feel uncomfortable and suspect the Karen presence is a threat to the village order. I explore here how the culture of refugee reception has been historically developed in the context of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. I trace the way that local residents identify village membership and how they responded to the arrival of the displaced Karen persons from Myanmar.

Basically, the Thai villagers' response to Karen refugees from Myanmar can be contextualized within a history of mobility. Sawtika village was first established at the end of World War II through the immigration of ethnic Thai people. Many middle-aged and old Thai informants in the village I interviewed can trace where their ancestors came from: no one claims to be a genuine local. Prapai, a Thai woman, aged 61, told me that her parents moved from Lamphun province, while her surrounding neighbors also came from other provinces of present northern Thailand. Some Thai migrants went further to settle down on present Myanmar territory. Thai people on both sides of the border traveled back and forth for work and marriage. Prapai suggested that many Thai residents in the village today have a cross-border background. For example, Pang, the present Thai village headman, was born of Thai-Mon parents and grew up inside Myanmar. He later married a daughter of the former village headman and moved into the village in the 1970s.

The village ethos, as outlined to me by elderly residents of mostly northern Thai ancestry, is that membership of the village - defined variously as residential proximity, kin affiliation, access to common resources or inclusion in community activities - has long been open to people of other ethnic groups.<sup>7</sup> The Thai villagers use ethnic criteria in identifying cultural differences, but not to define legitimate residency as the modern Thai state does. They consider the ebb and flow of people from multiple backgrounds to be a common borderland situation. Prapai mentioned that Sawtika also had some non-Thai residents before the influx of refugees in the 1980s. The most memorable one to her is a Karen man named Cha, who has been in the village since the mid-1960s. Cha is a

Thailand-born Karen man who traded cattle across the border in the 1950s-1960s, when the Thai state power still paid little attention to cross-border activities. He married a Karen woman inside Myanmar and stayed there. Later, Cha's family moved to Sawtika village. The local Thai authorities legally recognize Cha, his wife and their six children as authorized village residents. They were granted Thai citizenship in the 1970s. Their neighbors seem to accept the family as a part of the community.

Cross-border social dynamics, especially commodity smuggling through underground markets of the 1970s-1990s, have shaped the sociable disposition of the Thais in this borderland village. A number of Thai villagers were engaged in the cross-border trade and some developed close relations with Karen trading partners. Karen people living and working around the black market, from Karen rebel leaders to ordinary men, befriended Thais from Mae Sot, who also had come to work there, through common business dealings. A Thai man whom I met during a pilgrimage trip to a Thai Buddhist temple in Myanmar described how he used to work in *Wang-kha* market, carrying consumer goods by ox-cart and selling them in Myanmar. 'I could earn some money and got to know some Karen merchants and workers there', he recalled.

The growth of the informal economy and the inter-ethnic relations it fostered, contributed to the later reception of Karen refugees. Upon the arrival of Karen refugees in 1984-1985, the Thai villagers accommodated the large influx of Karen people in a locally contextualized manner. Many Thai villagers employed Karen refugees as cheap labor

for their intensive farming. Furthermore, the Thai reception of Karen who fled the fighting was based on their enduring relationships. Owing to their interactions during the previous two decades in the black market, not all Karen arrivals were strangers to the Thai locals. Quite a number were friends and acquaintances.

The friendship, in some cases, has lasted until today and supports the Karen refugees' self-settlement strategy. After refugee camp relocation, many Karen were able to seek new residential places with their Thai friends' help. For example, I met a Thai villager who visited one of my Karen informants' houses in March 2009. He came there to collect the land rent fee. He described how the arrangement had come about:

We got to know each other when we were cattle traders in the border market. He moved to the new camp site, but he later came back to ask for land to rent. This land was unused for a long time. I gave it since I knew he faced displacement hardship.

The case indicates that the Thai-Karen coexistence in the village relies on historically contingent relations. The local approach to the reception of new residents is socially contingent rather than fixed to the notion of citizenship. Local Thai responses to Karen refugees, to a certain degree, are situated within particular social relations of the region. Those Thai villagers who already were acquainted with Karen individuals seeking solutions to their forced displacement, were favorably disposed towards the latter as friends or acquaintances. The border dynamics in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century influenced the way these Thai hosts responded to the Karen refugees.

It is important to note here that not all displaced Karen can manipulate the relations with Thai host locals to get hospitality in Sawtika village. Some Karen refugees are newly arrived refugees. They can stay in the village by drawing upon their personal networks with either Karen relatives or the senior ex-leaders of the KNU who have long settled down there. The Thai villagers seem to be able to live alongside these others, as they say they have done throughout their village's history. The presence of these new arrivals is tolerated as long as they are well-behaved. Karen arrivals for their part bring to the project of settling in the village their own mechanisms and standards for appropriate behavior. In Sawtika, there is an informal control system that shapes Karen residents into proper local residents, and I will investigate that mechanism in following sections.

### **The Informal Karen Administration**

Karen residents' lives in Sawtika village are linked together under an informal system of civilian administration. I became aware of the existence of this informal authority from the contact with a middle-aged Karen man named Timaw, in order to get data on Karen refugees in this village. Timaw is locally known as the Karen village headman of Sawtika. He takes responsibility for the Sawtika Karen community's internal affairs. He collects basic data about people under his authority. When I asked him for information about the Karen households in Sawtika, he brought out a pile of A4 sheets and made a listing of all Karen household heads and household numbers.



The Sawtika Karen residents consider the informal register made by Timaw as a form of semi-official permission for them to reside in the village area. They feel a sense of security living there under the Karen headman's authority, notwithstanding their lack of a Thai employer who can give protection through patron-client relations. They see registration with the Karen headman as a requirement of residence in the village. For example, I found a Pa-O couple at Timaw's house on an afternoon in May 2009. They came to ask for registration with the Karen headman. Timaw filled out the family's details on one of the Burmese-language registration forms. When I asked about their visit, the husband explained:

We worked in Bangkok for three years and returned here a few days ago. Before that, we lived here and were under Timaw's leadership. I withdrew my membership and now I want to re-register. I think it is useful. If I have problems, I can come to consult with him, as well as ask for help, if necessary.

The informal registration system maintained by the Karen headman follows a restrictive set of social networks. It does not include all persons moving from Myanmar as members. Timaw mentioned that the non-Thai residents under his supervision are more or less those people who have been in contact with each other or have been acquainted for a while. Some of them were neighbors who once lived together in a refugee camp in the 1980s, while others have been residing and moving around the Karen-controlled black markets and became friends. Although Hpa-an Karen are predominant among the overall non-Thai population, his administration also accepts as members some other ethnic groups who have long lived among the Karen refugees. Timaw is very careful

in accepting new members' applications. He limits the registration to those households tending to live in the village more or less permanently and who are not involved in illegal activities. He accepts certain newly arrived families if their relatives who have already settled in the village guarantee the new arrivals' behavior.

The responsibility of the Karen headman is to take care of the Karen community's internal affairs. Timaw has intervened in several cases to mediate and solve family quarrels, domestic violence and inter-household disputes. For example, a Karen woman ran into Timaw's house one night during the Buddhist Karen traditional New Year celebration in 2009. She complained that her husband was drunk and hit her when she refused to give him money. Timaw told her to go back home and convey to her husband his order that he have no more to drink and go to bed. The woman left and did not come back for further assistance. I learnt of the result the next morning from Timaw's wife:

The drunk man complied with my husband's order and stopped beating his wife. He knew well that if he was stubborn, he would get into trouble when Timaw's assistants arrived.

While the local Thai administration rarely gets involved in the everyday lives of Karen refugees, it is the Karen village headman who is responsible for controlling his fellow Karen. My observations in the community lead me to suggest that the Karen village headman's authority in governing the Karen residents in the village is accumulated and situated, without any legal endorsement. His position has legitimacy in the displaced Karen community because of his facility in combining disparate modes

of authority. The informal Karen leader has both the character of bureaucratic authority and of traditional authority, in Weber's classification (Weber 1947).

First, the leader adopts the hierarchical organization of modern bureaucratic authority in the internal structure of the informal Karen administration. Timaw's village administration is supported by a group of Karen men called 'assistants', who serve as a relay to Karen residents. The Karen residential areas of the village are divided into seven clusters. Each cluster has one to three assistants working under Timaw's command. They monitor the general situation and household affairs within their own clusters, in the name of the Karen village headman. Their responsibilities include distributing news, requesting cooperation and mobilizing resources for collective events. They collect money from households within their clusters and motivate Karen residents to provide labor services for communal events. Just as important is the leader's deployment of symbolic props of bureaucratic authority, from the title of 'headman', which parallels that of the Thai administration, to the use of Burmese language registration forms, emulating the administrative practices of both Thai and Burmese states.

Second, the Karen village headman's power has an element of traditional authority. Timaw accumulates it by personalistic flourishes such as his hands-on resolution of family disputes and by demonstrating accomplishment in building sentiment between members of the Karen community. Timaw tries to reconstitute a sense of community among the members, who come from diverse regional, social and economic

backgrounds. One of the methods utilized for this objective is the cremation fund. Each household is required to pay 20 baht for donating to a Karen family when one of its members passes away. The fund has a double impact. On the one hand, the family of the deceased gets some money to undertake the funeral, at least to buy a coffin. On the other hand and more importantly, the collective activity bridges gaps and builds trust between unfamiliar neighbors. The fund is gathered in advance and is refilled immediately after it is paid to a funeral host.

His authority among refugees in Sawtika is concurrently reinforced through sponsorship of other cultural and religious activities. These communal actions range from the founding of a Karen Buddhist monastery to the organizing of several Karen traditional and Buddhist ceremonies throughout the year. Timaw has regularly organized these community activities since he took the position of Sawtika village headman in 1999. These activities have indirectly benefited the self-governance among the Karen. They show Timaw as a Karen headman with a great capability, since their arrangement requires skillful management, including planning, fund raising, labor division, and monitoring as well as accounting. Furthermore, these events bring people together. They are social spaces where Karen refugees gather and share the communal atmosphere.

### **Integration into Local Governance**

The informal Karen administration I am discussing here is not a recognized part of the official Thai administrative system. Thai state authorities have never formally acknowledged the existence of the Karen civilian control system. According to Pang, the Thai headman of Sawtika

village, in the monthly meetings at Mae Sot administrative district office, the district head usually discusses crimes and security topics related to alien persons—a category which refers to people labeled as unauthorized migrants. The Thai village headmen are required to deal with these problems. The Thai officials seem to not care what methods local leaders employ; their concern is only whether a particular problem associated with Burmese migrants has been relieved and finally solved at the village level.

In stark contrast to the higher-level officials' neglect of the fine details, local village leaders on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland have worked in close cooperation with the Karen leaders. Pang elaborates that Karen headmen are found in other Thai border villages as well. At the very least, each village community has a contact person who helps village leaders to communicate with non-Thai residents. Pang is inclined to acknowledge the importance of the Karen headman in his own village. When I asked him about the role of the Karen headman, he explained:

Timaw works voluntarily for his own people. I asked him to work as a part of us, we have a lot of Karen refugees and Burmese migrants here. He becomes the headman among aliens. He is my assistant over the non-Thai internal affairs.

Pang's words hint that the Karen administration is indeed not an autonomous governing system, rather it is locally integrated into the Thai village administration. The term 'Karen headman' (in Thai, phooyai kariang) is the same as that used for the conventional position of village headman, which is part of the Thai state's formal system of administrative rule at

the local level. Pang emphasizes that the title Karen headman is a local term used for underlining Timaw's legitimate authority and increasing his leadership over the Karen and other non-Thai people in the village. The title encourages these people to respect him, and consequently enhances Timaw's power over people under his control.

Recently, the Karen civilian control system has gained much more relevance to the local Thai political administration. The Karen headman's work has become an indispensable part of local governance, especially in dealing with the problems related to the massive inflow of migrants from Myanmar. Nowadays, the non-Thai population in Sawtika has expanded to include more than the Hpa-an Karen refugee residents. Some Thai landlords hire Burmese migrants as long-term farm workers to satisfy the demand for farming labor. Local labor agents also import temporary Burmese workers with three-month permits to solve the labor shortage problem during the harvest season. These workers rarely associate with the group of Karen village residents; they are not parts of the informal Karen political setting.

The recent influx of migrant workers originating from Myanmar has challenged the capacity of the village administration. An interview with Dam revealed that local leaders worry about their diminished control of village order. Dam spoke of a general upsurge in crime. He mentioned how there had been few cases of crime when the village had hosted hundreds of displaced person from Burma in the mid-1980s. He credited the social order during that period to the internal affairs administration of the Karen refugees. He contrasted such an orderly past with the

current situation. In his opinion, the village nowadays encounters a lot of problems from the massive migratory flow.

A few weeks ago, there was a murder case at a bamboo hut in the cultivated fields to the far south of the village area. A middle-aged man was killed by his nephew, after they drank together and had a dispute. They were drunk, had a quarrel and a fatal fight. The murderer ran back to Myanmar. Last week, a Burmese man stole chickens from a coop of a Thai villager. We arrested the thief, and sent him to the Thai police.

The Thai village leaders have demanded that the Karen headman take overall care of all so-called Burmese migrants. These expectations of Timaw appear highly ambitious given the realities of the migration situation in the borderlands. The civilian control system among Karen originated in the specific context of a particular flow of displaced people. Correspondingly, Timaw can exert his authority over the Karen residents living permanently within Sawtika's areas. However, he has limited power over Burmese migrants in general. What he can do in the changing migratory situation is to help address criminal cases.

The assignment was given to Timaw owing to two of his personal qualities. First, Timaw has multilingual skills; he can communicate in Burmese, Thai and different dialects of Karen language. Since some Thai village leaders don't know Burmese, Timaw can interview Burmese witnesses or disputants who mostly do not know the Thai language. Then he can communicate what he discovered, in Thai, to the Thai headman and the Thai police. The second quality is his authority

as a leader, which he can use to mobilize volunteers for tasks requiring unpaid labor. It does not require much effort for Timaw to assemble a group of Karen men to complete certain urgent tasks.

The informal Karen administrative system is integrated into the hierarchical relations of local politics. Under the Thai headman's authority, Timaw's work assists the Thai headman meet the responsibilities of village administration. Timaw accepts his supporting role, and other Karen residents realize the unequal relationship between the Thai and Karen village headmen. Other Karen villagers working with Timaw are enthusiastic to respond to the Thai leaders' requests. To a certain extent, the Thai-Karen partnership helps the village administration to achieve control over local governance. While Sawtika's political leaders gain benefit from the cooperation of the Karen administration, it is interesting to investigate how the Karen villagers perceive the partnership and what benefits they might obtain from it.

## **Negotiation for Refuge**

So far in this paper, I have shown that the Karen refugees' self-settlement has been constituted out of relations of familiarity with the local hosts and the valued self-governance resources deployed by the Karen. I would add here that the informal mode of refugee, care and protection is localized and reconstituted in a continual process of negotiation. The non-institutionalized mode of hospitality-giving and shelter-taking is not only the outcome of historically situated socio-economic contexts and forms of authority. It is also reinvented at every moment. In this section, I demonstrate how the Karen contribution to



local village affairs should be understood within the context of political negotiation for refuge. I present here an anecdote about the apprehension of a pair of motorcycle-stealing gangsters, in order to explore the political dimension of Karen involvement in village society and its implication for the self-settlement option.

In recent years, Mae Sot has experienced a serious problem of motorcycle theft. This crime wave is influenced by the economic disparities between Thailand and Myanmar. Motorcycles are a scarce commodity inside Myanmar, while second-hand Thai motorcycles can meet the demand of Burmese people. The trade in motorbikes has become a lucrative border business, which earns a large margin for those who take part. However, some Thai and non-Thai in Mae Sot town satisfy the demand from across the border by stealing motorcycles. Stolen motorcycles are usually transferred immediately across the border, and the Thai authorities cannot do anything after that. In only a few cases have the Thai police been able to trace and arrest the motorcycle thieves before the evidence, or culprits, disappears over the border.

In November 2009, the Thai police discovered the hiding place of a motorcycle-stealing gang. They distributed a newsletter to Thai village leaders. It informed them that two Burmese motorcycle thieves were hiding around Pae's cultivated areas. In Sawtika, the information spread from the Thai headman to the Karen headman. The newsletter with photos of the two criminals was circulated to Karen residential clusters. The dissemination yielded a fruitful result. A Karen man living in a corn field saw the two moving around his place. Then Pang asked

Timaw to call people to search and arrest the two criminals. The Karen headman mobilized nearly 20 men for the task. I was not allowed to follow them for my own safety. After two hours, some of them returned to Timaw's house and a rice-whisky drinking group was set up. It was there I heard the story of the thief chase.

The story was amusingly discussed during the drinking. A short version of the account is as follows. The two thieves had hidden themselves in a deserted field hut located in a far-flung corner of the cultivated fields. They ran away when they heard the noise of human encroachment. The Karen men chased after them for more than an hour before finally grabbing hold of the elusive culprits. A group of Karen men wrestled with them for a while, eventually managing to tie their wrists and ankles. The captives were trooped back and put in a giant iron cage while they waited for the Thai police. A Karen man told me:

I was so furious at these two thieves, we spent a lot of time searching for them. I could not help kicking them as punishment after the capture.

This story reveals how Karen men engage, high-spiritedly and sometimes impulsively, in the host society's affairs. The story of arresting the criminals was a popular subject during the next few days in the Karen community. It was perceived as a difficult and challenging, but fun, duty. Many Karen men actively responded to the request for collaboration in bringing social order back to the village. A Karen man in the drinking group could not resist showing off his courage. It seemed he wanted to prove how the whole village could enjoy the advantage of the Karen presence in the area.

Thai people may look down on us and call us as *tangdao* [aliens]. But, I have never seen any Thai work as hard to keep the village's order as us. I bet you! The Thais won't scramble to catch the thieves running around the thick growths of corn and weeds like we did. It is us who can do this.

I brought up the topic of this Karen contribution in a discussion with Dam, the village headman's assistant. He accepted that the Karen existence in the village is beneficial rather than threatening to the area's security. He explained that Hpa-an Karen play a significant role in supporting the Thai leaders' authority over village administration. He spoke about the co-existence of both ethnic groups in the village as follows.

Thai and Yang (Karen) live together and depend upon each other here. It is similar to the northeastern Thais working and living everywhere in Bangkok since the 1980s. Right here, we must rely on their labor in our cultivation and community activities. The authorities may see them as alien, but I do not see it as problematic.

I would contend that Karen people's voluntary and active participation in these kinds of community work illustrates the refugees' agency and their political lives. We can no longer see refugees as vulnerable and dependent persons. Rather, they are capable of employing resources to gain access to certain rights and to solve their problem of forced displacement. The Karen discourse about their devotion to local community is a strategy of political negotiation, an interactive process where Karen refugees persuade and sanction more powerful actors for

a degree of opportunity, freedom and rights. Although Hpa-an Karen do not share ethnic or historical backgrounds with the host community, they opt to create a sense of shared responsibility for the community's well-being and development. They employ labor power as a resource in negotiating to be locally-accepted and legitimate village residents.

In short, the Hpa-an Karen refugees live in the host society not by claiming the legal and moral rights of the universal refugee protection regime, but by appropriating existing resources in negotiation with local actors for the continuity of hospitality provision. This resembles Tara Polzer (2009)'s findings on Shangaan-speaking Mozambicans in South Africa. She points out that the self-settled refugees use negotiating tactics for access to rights. They construct moral legitimacy through the invocation of ethnic identification, historical association and political allegiance. The ethnic connection enabled the Shangaan-speaking local government in South Africa to welcome and to integrate Shangaan-speaking Mozambican refugees into South African society in the mid-1980s.

### **The Ethics of Courteous Guests**

Many of the contributions made by displaced Karen to the host society have been indirectly coordinated by the Karen National League Army (KNLA—the army wing of the KNU), represented, in the Pae area, by a battalion named Kawmoora. After losing their liberated areas inside Burma, several KNU army battalions and civilian organizations moved and regrouped among the mass of Karen refugees in Thailand. They could run their operations from within Thai territory because of the

unofficial collaborative relations between the KNU and the local Thai army. After the relocation of refugee camp to a remote area in the late 1990s, many of them chose to stay around Mae Sot town and operate their missions from small offices or personal residences.<sup>8</sup> While some elder leaders stopped their role in the Karen insurgency, others keep actively working with the KNU.

My interviews with the present Kawmoora battalion commander and an ex-civilian leader of the KNU reveal that the KNU leadership plays a significant role in influencing the everyday lives of their fellow Karen, who independently live around Mae Sot valley. Both of these leaders have a great concern over the impact of the Karen presence in the local area. One of their meetings in the past led to the establishment of the Karen civilian control system in Mae Sot valley. In 1999, they set up a committee of the Karen Youth Organization or the KYO,<sup>9</sup> in order to use it as a mechanism for Karen civilian control. This was a revival of the KYO which, before that, was only a voluntary group. The commander mentioned that a new civilian administrative structure was necessary to cover the widely scattered Karen, as hundreds of Karen refugees did not move to the new camp site.

The new system was designed to have a Karen village headman in accordance with the Thai administrative village boundary. Karen residents living in a particular village were called to a meeting and asked to choose a Karen headman and village committees. Timaw, the Karen headman in Sawtika, is an offshoot of this process. Each Karen headman was required to control Karen people within his assigned boundary. Then

all Karen village headmen automatically became members of the central KYO committee. The committee has four more senior advisors, a secretariat and a vice-secretariat. Based on the 2008 KYO meeting report, there are, in total, 18 Karen villages under the supervision of the KYO.<sup>10</sup>

The KNU army wing's influence over the Karen civilian population can be said to have shifted from constituting the Karen as resistance fighters to mobilizing the Karen to act appropriately as guests. Also, its function has shifted from being a command structure for a fugitive refugee army and mobilizer of resistance against the Burmese state to a guarantor to the Thai state of the collective good behavior and loyalty of the Karen under their command. The senior advisors of the KYO are the former or present leaders of Kawmoora battalion. They used to work in the ambience of the political alliance between the Karen rebels and the Thai army. They recognize that the Thai hospitality to the Karen refugees since the 1970s has been conditional and contingent. The presence of the Karen refugees in Thailand, in these Karen leaders' minds, is guaranteed by adherence to certain standards of behavior that create trust and prolong the given hospitality.

The KNU leaders have promoted two important ethical principles among their fellow Karen. The first is that Karen residents should be 'honest' and 'well-behaved' guests. The importance for the Karen to be honest individually in their behavior is emphasized to remind the KYO followers that their shelter-taking in Thailand should not cause any negative impacts to the host society. The ethics of honesty is constantly reiterated in the everyday lives of Karen civilians.

In Sawtika, this ethic is explicitly reproduced in the biannual meeting of Timaw's team of assistants. Timaw prefers to hold the meeting in an informal way—as pork curry feast. Timaw spent his own money to buy a pig. Some assistants helped to slaughter the pig. Half of the meat was used for the feast, and the other half was sold to recover some costs. About twenty men gathered at the meeting place in December 2009, most of whom were Timaw's assistants. Timaw informed them of some upcoming events and requested their assistance. After finishing his talk, he asked Pathee, one of the senior KYO advisors, to give a talk to the participants. A brief version of this speech is as follows.

We take refuge here because living in Burma is desperately tough. We can live here with the Thai generosity. As long as we behave well, respecting the Thai laws and community regulations, the host people will not see us as threats to them. Then our settlement here will be less problematic... You must keep away from any criminal offence, including drug smuggling. Otherwise your involvement in illegal activity would damage the Karen reputation of being moral persons.

Pathee's speech bluntly outlined that respect for the Thai legal system and good behavior from Karen residents are necessary conditions for the Karen to continue to obtain refuge in Thailand. He exhorted his listeners to take responsibility for upholding the good reputation the Karen collectively enjoyed in the eyes of Thai hosts by personally steering clear of crime. His speech was an attempt to inculcate into assembled members of the displaced Karen community a disposition and identity as self-disciplined guests. Pathee is an ex-chief of the Karen National

League Police (KNLP), which was a civilian organization of the KNU. The KNLP was dissolved after the battalion fell. He left the insurgent life in the late 1980s and lives as an ordinary civilian. However, Pathee still can be called upon to act as a drillmaster for standards of conduct to which, as his speech maintains, all Karen must adhere as a condition of their enjoyment of Thai hospitality.

The second ethical principle of the hospitality-taker is that Karen must contribute to the social order of the host society. An important aspect of this contribution is active cooperation with the Thai authorities in crime suppression. In one discussion with me, Chong, the current KYO vice-secretary, said that since the 1970s, the KYO has helped to solve the increasing social problems along the border. These include cases of murder, robbery, raids, narcotic smuggling and physical violence. Although the central Thai government no longer considers the Karen rebels as a close political ally on the borderland, the KYO still performs its role as a reliable partner to the host society.

In Sawtika, the imperative to contribute to social order is enjoined on the Karen villagers in a variety of mundane ways. Throughout the period of my fieldwork, I heard several times that the Thai village leaders had asked Karen men to provide their labor free of charge for the village's public affairs. The labor requests ranged from acting as security guards at community events to capturing thieves and criminals hiding in the village area, as I discussed in the previous section.



## Conclusion

The paper provides insights into the intersubjective aspects of refuge seeking and giving. Understanding how self-settled Karen refugees have obtained protection after flight requires attention to the socio-cultural dynamics between the Thai hosts and the Karen refugees. To understand how the refugees' access safety and human dignity, it is not enough to focus exclusively on the culturally singular meanings of refuge to the displaced Karen alone. Refuge actually take place within transcultural contexts. The Karen refugees' access to basic rights and protection is embedded in situated and localized social relationships. The Karen's alternative form of obtaining refuge is based on practical understandings achieved between different cultural spheres, rather than on written protocols or institutionalized refugee protection principles. The outcome provides them safety and protection, while simultaneously entailing conditional relations. Every aspect of the refuge secured by the Karen is contingent upon the transcultural (Thai-Karen) and host-guest interaction. The relationships are littered with political negotiation taking place in everyday life. The self-settled Karen refugees mobilize resources in negotiating for secure and stable village membership.

This informal refugee system supplements the notion of refugee protection with a contingent mode of hospitality and refuge-seeking. I do not wish to claim that it offers the best possible solution for Karen refugees. My intention in this paper is to examine a particular example of the diversity of existing forms of refuge. There is no single way of refuge giving-and-taking. We can find different modes of sanctuary around

the world. The notion of refugees did not just emerge with the legal enactment of the Refugee Conventions after World War II. The domain of hospitality and protection for people fleeing persecution has always been with us and appears in multiple ways, beyond the modern and institutionalized refugee care system. Throughout the paper, I have tried to make the informal mode of refuge tangible as an actually existing alternative to the formal international refugee protection system. Documenting this alternative modality shows that people in exile have different ways of addressing the experience of displacement and goes a way towards demystifying the monopoly held over refugee care generally known as the universal refugee protection system.

## Endnotes

- 1 Correspondence regarding this paper should be addressed to: prasertra@yahoo.com. I am grateful for comments and suggestions by both anonymous referees and Dr.Philip Taylor for stimulating discussions.
- 2 A monthly update of refugee camp populations on the Thailand-Myanmar border is available at <http://www.tbtc.org/camps/populations.htm>
- 3 The village name is a pseudonym. The population figure is roughly estimated. It is difficult to find the accurate number since all non-Thai families seem to have some members working elsewhere when I did my fieldwork in 2009.
- 4 The latter group of children attended migrant learning centres that are financially supported by international charitable organizations.
- 5 I do not wish to describe these various tactics here due to concern for my informants' property security.
- 6 The KNU or the Karen National Union is the Karen insurgent organization fighting against the Burmese government.
- 7 The Thai term for village is moo-baan, which means a group of houses within a physical place. People living in a moo-ban are called chao-baan (villagers).
- 8 The relations between the Thai army and the Karen army are sometimes in tension. With pressure from the central Thai government and the Burmese government, the Karen army leaders are forced to leave Mae Sot and are barred from coming back (Irrawaddy March 17, 2009). However, I find many of them could come back and secretly work as they could in the past.
- 9 Hereafter I use the term KYO in this study specifically to the one under the auspices of the Kawmoora Battalion commander.
- 10 Most of the Karen villages use the Thai village boundary as their working scope, with the exception of two sites which are private working places where Karen are employed as permanent workers.

## References

- Ager, Alastair, and Alison Strang. 2008. "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21 (2):166-191.
- Black, Richard. 2003. "Breaking the Convention: Researching the Illegal Migration of Refugee to Europe," *Antipode* 35 (1):34-54.
- Campbell, Elizabeth H. 2006. "Urban Refugees in Nairobi: Problems of Protection, Mechanism of Survival, and Possibilities for Integration," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19 (3):396-413.
- Crisp, Jeff. 2004. "The Local Integration and Local Settlement of Refugees: A Conceptual and Historical Analysis," In *New Issues in Refugee Research: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*.
- Grundy-War, Carl, and Elaine Wong Siew Yin. 2002. "Geography of Displacement: The Karenni and the Shan across the Myanmar-Thailand Border," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 23 (1):93-122.
- Harrell-Bond, Barbara. 2002. "Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 24 (2002):51-85.
- Hovil, Lucy. 2007. "Self-settled Refugees in Uganda: An Alternative Approach to Displacement?," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20 (4):599-620.
- Jacobsen, Karen. 2001. "The Forgotten Solution: Local Integration for Refugees in Developing Countries," In *New Issues in refugee Research: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*.
- Mae Sot District. 2009. *Data on Mae Sot District*. (in Thai).
- Malkki, Liisa H. 1995. "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24:495-523.

- Polzer, Tara. 2009. "Negotiating Rights: The Politics of Local Integration," *Refugee* 26 (2):92-106.
- Smith, Merrill. 2004. "Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Right, a Waste of Humanity," *World Refugee Survey 2004*, 38-56.
- Thawngmung Ardeth Maung. 2008. *The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends*. Policies Studies no. 45 (Southeast Asia), East-West Center, Hawaii University.
- Weber, Max. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: Oxford University Press.