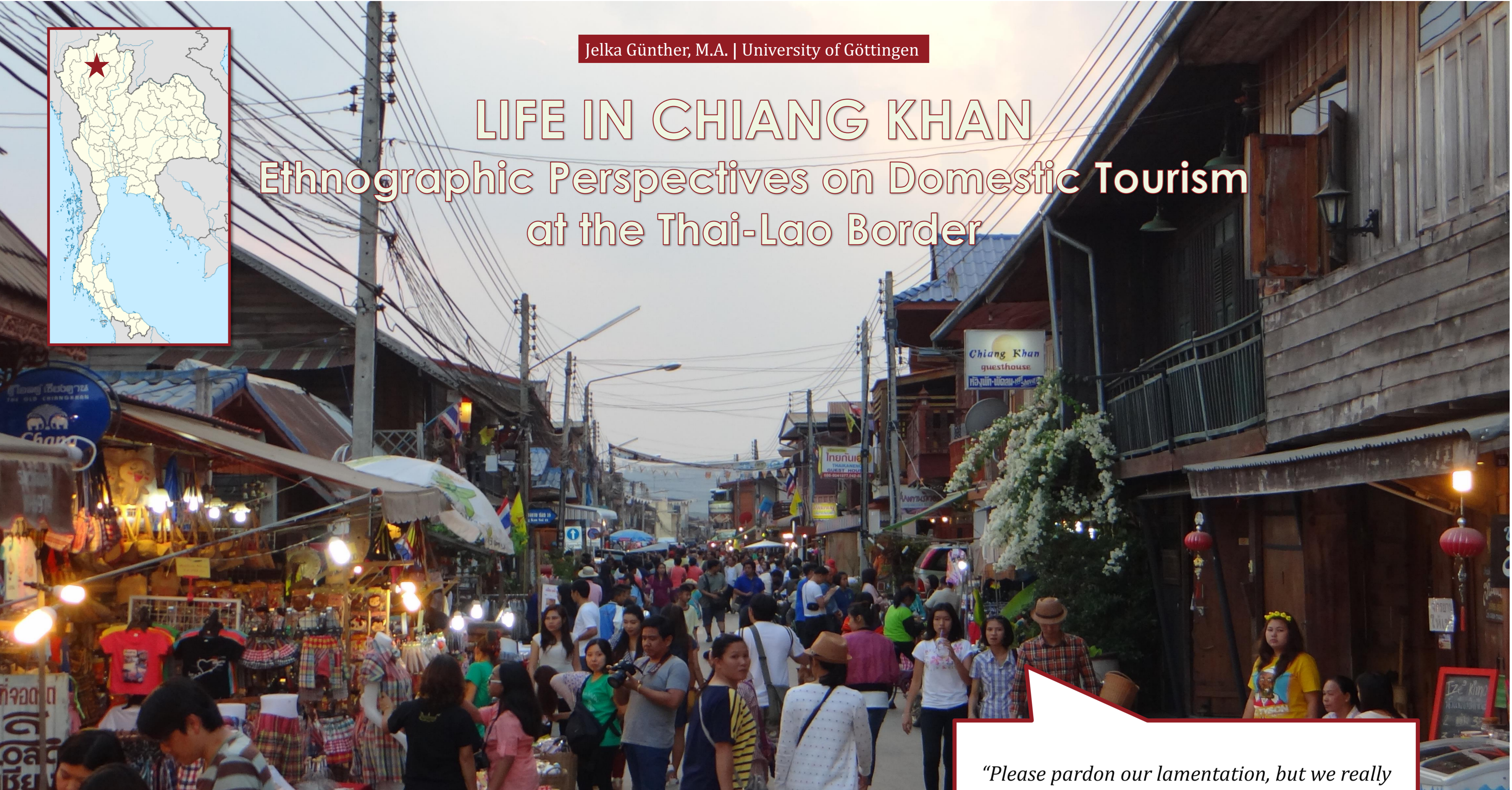


LIFE IN CHIANG KHAN

Ethnographic Perspectives on Domestic Tourism at the Thai-Lao Border



“Please pardon our lamentation, but we really miss the old Chiang Khan. Virtually overnight, what was once a sleepy little-known riverside town full of traditional timber houses became a trendy destination for Thais, and now tour buses arrive daily. That said, it's far from ruined and we still think it's a good place to visit: it's just no longer great. The photogenic views of the river and the Lao mountains beyond are still there and things remain fairly peaceful in the daytime, before the evening shopping stampede begins.”

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thailand/loei-province/chiang-khan>

ABSTRACT

Only recently has tourism studies acknowledged the rising significance of non-western tourism. As for tourism in Thailand domestic tourism has long been neglected in favor of the international Western visitor. Legacies of aristocratic travels, improved infrastructure, state promotion including heritage policies and the commodification of local culture have encouraged leisure travel especially but not exclusively among the Thai urban middle classes. A few studies have indicated how this pursuit of *sanuk* (fun) correlates with notions of Thai-ness, with domesticating regional or ethnic otherness or with consumption of modern identities making Thai domestic tourism a field worth of further inquiry.

This anthropological study based on a one year period of fieldwork in Chiang Khan, a small Northeastern Thai town, aims at an ethnographically thick description of dynamics that lead to and accompany the flourishing of a former border market town within the Thai domestic tourism market. Key themes of analysis are explicated below with reference to urban-rural dynamics that surface as domestic tourism sheds light on urban aspirations for an idealized countryside.

FOCUS: Imaginations of the Urban and the Rural

- **Consumption of Thai modernities:** tourists' consumption of a rural past and of Thai traditions in the countryside
- **Nostalgia and the politics of appearance:** the authentication and commodification of the countryside
- **Mobilities:** urban-to-rural migration and domestic tourism
- **Regionalization and distinction:** distinguishing tourist behaviour as urban habits

ZOOM IN: THE BUDDHIST ALMS GIVING CEREMONY

A frequently used example by villagers illustrating the changes that Chiang Khan underwent since it evolved into a popular tourist destination is the almsgiving ceremony. Every morning tourists get up to join in what promotional material frame as traditional way of life in Chiang Khan: Alms giving offering only sticky rice to the monks is figured as unique within Thailand, only sharing this tradition with UNESCO World Heritage Centre Luang Prabang.

With the arrival of the tourists who originate from other parts of the country and are therefore familiar with slightly different ways of merit-making offering only sticky rice is increasingly seen as endangered practice that needs to be preserved. Food, flowers, money, sweets and water find their way into the alms bowls as it is given practice for example in Bangkok. Young girls dressed in short pants or couples taking the Buddhist ritual as just another scenery to pose for photos are likewise construed as clash between urban lifestyle and villagers moral order.

