

CHINESE TOURISTS IN CLASS OF THEIR OWN IN CHIANG MAI TOURS

University considers charging visitors after box-office hit 'Lost in Thailand' proves a drawcard, but leads some to fear it could be turned into a zoo **By Chaiyot Yongcharoenchai**

Chiang Mai University will this week start charging tourists to visit its campus after a series of bizarre incidents in recent weeks involving Chinese visitors who have swamped its grounds.

The university, and its tranquil lake-side surrounds, has become a "must see" destination for the Chinese after it was featured in the 2012 smash hit movie *Lost in Thailand*, which has grossed more than US\$200 million (6.5 billion baht) at the box office.

Associate Professor Rome Chiranukrom, who handles international relations at the university, said they were getting up to 500 Chinese visitors a day who were roaming the campus and disrupting the running of the university.

The intrusive behaviour included some Chinese pitching a tent near the Ang Kaew lake and writing "we are here" in paint on the ground, causing car accidents, sneaking into classrooms to take snaps of teachers and students, and, leaving a mess in the canteen.

However, the strangest misbehaviour, which is widely encouraged on Chinese travel websites, involves costume play where the visitors buy or rent a student uniform and pose for pictures. Mr Rome said on many occasions Chinese tourists in university uniforms have sneaked into classrooms and attended lessons.

Last Monday a Chinese teenage brother and sister dressed in uniforms and being photographed by their parents in front of the campus were noticed by a campus security guard who took them to Mr Rome.

Mr Rome said he informed the family it was against university regulations for non-students to wear the uniforms consisting of dark slacks or skirt, a white top and purple tie which they had purchased from a clothes shop across the road from the university's main entrance.

They were taken to a local police station and warned they could be fined 100,000 baht or face up to a year's jail under Thai laws covering university dress codes. Mr Rome said they were not charged. "The parents told me that they admired Chiang Mai University so much

and they wanted to be part of the university," Mr Rome said. "They even said that they wanted to enrol their children at the university. I saw this as a great opportunity instead of a threat. It is a good chance to publicise not only the beautiful setting of the university, but also its academic excellence."

Mr Rome said overall the university was "not too worried about the situation" and they were happy to welcome the Chinese visitors in Lanna style. The biggest problem they created was traffic mayhem on campus. "They have bad traffic manners," Mr Rome said. "Part of it is because they drive on the different side from Thailand. They have caused a lot of accidents on campus." From Tuesday, the university will start 30-minute mini-bus tours of the university charging adults 50 baht and children 20 baht.

Tourists on bicycle will be charged 50 baht for a four-hour visit or 100 baht for the whole day. Motorcycle parking fees will be 100 baht for four hours and 200 baht for the day. Cars will be charged 200 baht for four hours, and 500 baht for the day and vans 300 baht and and 1,000 baht for the same periods.

Mr Rome said volunteers would provide the tourists with information and a map. The mini-bus tour will have a guide speaking both English and Chinese. Anchalee Vittayanuntapornkul, the owner of CM Paradise a major operator of Chinese tours in Chiang Mai, said the fees would not deter the Chinese tourists.

"Are they trying to turn the university into a zoo?" she asked angrily.

"Instead of collecting fees, why don't they enforce stronger rules to control crowds? I've never heard of any university in the world collecting a fee just to go inside. Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai is much more beautiful than CMU, but they don't collect fees to go to visit the campus."

She said Chiang Mai University would gain a reputation for being selfish and greedy and the city's reputation for being a cheap, friendly destination would be tarnished.

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"If they can afford to come all the way to Chiang Mai, they can afford to pay 50 baht to go in the university," she said. "The Chinese tourists are not stupid. This will not stop them from coming to visit the campus."

Mr Rome denied the university was trying to fleece the tourists.

"It is not that we are trying to make the money out of the tourists," he said. "But there are some operational fees for the bus, five tour guides and the map. We are trying to make this more organised and prevent further problems created by the Chinese tourists."

According to tourism research by the university, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand has more than doubled from 1.7 million in 2011 to 3.5 million last year.

A recent social media survey by the university's Academic Centre and Creative Local Development conducted on Feb 4-10 with 2,220 respondents found widespread negative opinions about the impact of Chinese tourists on Chiang

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**ANCHALEE
VITAYANUNTAPORNKUL
TOUR OPERATOR**

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