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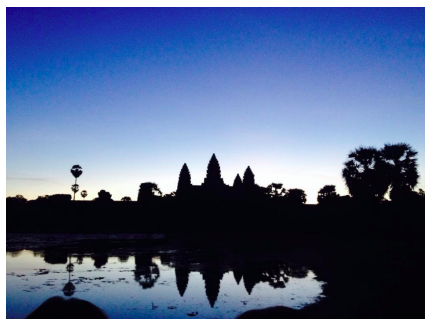
## Lessons from Minh, a Cambodian Tuk-Tuk Driver

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by Sophia Ng

A few months ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Minh, a tuk-tuk driver from Siem Reap, a popular tourist destination in Cambodia. Upon my encounters with Minh, I came to understand Minh as a man of few words, but a man full of experiences, wisdom, and resilience.



I met Minh in November of 2013 when a few friends and I embarked on a five-day trip to Cambodia. We arrived at our hostel in Siem Reap around midnight, and were quickly approached by a tuk-tuk driver who promised a great travel and tour package for our time in Siem Reap. Minh was persistent, but not aggressive. He spoke English fluently, and was friendly, so we hired him on whim. He promised to pick us up at 5 AM the following morning to show us the sunrise over Angkor Wat.

As a 20-year old from the United States, I could never imagine myself traveling through Southeast Asia, a region of the world marred with political strife, high poverty rates, and a relatively recent history of genocide. My understanding of Cambodia was rather limited. Much of the history I had learned came from my

peers in university, rather than from my coursework. My peers, some of whom were daughters and sons of Cambodian refugees, expressed the many educational, economic, and social disparities that stemmed from Cambodia's history. For example, in the United States, many Cambodian households face issues of poverty and excessive high school drop-out rates. According to White House data, 29.3% of Cambodians in the United States are in poverty and 35% of Cambodian populations in the United States do not complete high school. Given these statistics in the United States, I could only imagine what sorts of issues and difficulties exist in Cambodia. I had heard rumors from past travelers that Cambodia was a dangerous country, and that poverty, human trafficking, and theft amongst tourists was rampant. Coupled with my assumptions of Cambodia's dark history, I expected the worst and planned many back-up plans for the trip.

Minh eased these fears. As a native Cambodian, he provided a personal story to my understanding of Cambodia and its history. Minh enhanced our awareness about Cambodia. As Minh became incredibly reliable and helpful as our tuk-tuk driver and tour guide, we felt more comfortable and safe in Cambodia. We tried to avoid the extra touristy restaurants, and opted to eat at open-air markets. In essence, we only ate what Minh would eat, and constantly asked him for recommendations for food. Over dinner one evening, we asked him about his background—his family, his personal history, and his goals. We first asked him where he had learned English, as he spoke very fluently and at ease. He said he learned English in Vietnam, where he had fled to when the Khmer Rouge took control in the 1970s. He added in that while he survived the genocide by fleeing to Vietnam, his family did not. Rather listlessly, Minh mentioned that the Khmer Rouge killed his mother, and he had assumed that death was also the fate of most of the rest of his missing family.

Minh's story touched us. Moreover, matched with Minh's strength, kindness, and reliability, it was difficult to imagine the painful history of his family and Cambodia's past. As a tuk-tuk driver, Minh was spirited and hardworking. Despite the heat and humidity, he never took a break from driving the motorbike that carried the tuk-tuk trailer—even when he drove us an hour out of town to Kbal Spean, an archaeological site, during the hottest time of the day.

On our last day, we learned that Minh had a teenage daughter who loved to read. He aspired for her to attend university and to continue improving her English. On the topic of English, I asked Minh how many languages he was able to speak. Minh proudly said six—English, Khmer, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Teochew (a Chinese dialect). Minh's fluency in six languages was impressive, and I wondered how valuable his that multilingual ability was in today's globalizing world.

In Cambodia, the tuk-tuk industry is undoubtedly a competitive field given Cambodia's spike in tourism. Tuk-tuk drivers spend long, late hours in front of guesthouses, hostels, and hotels in search of a customer. During high season in Siem Reap, the flat rate to hire a tuk-tuk for the day is usually about \$12–15. For Minh, this fee was the equivalent of 10 hours of hard work: persistent advertising and negotiation upon our arrival at the bus depot in order to get us to accept his services, early morning pick-ups and late night drop-offs at our hostel, tour guide services throughout the



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Siem Reap regions, and transportation in the hot, hot, heat. For me, this fee bought me an invaluable lesson in strength, resilience, and hope.



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