

LEITH, C. 2019. Challenges facing the Siem Reap tuk-tuk workforce in a changing tourism environment. In Sousa, C., Vaz de Freitas, I. and Marques, J. (eds.) Proceedings of the 2nd International conference on tourism research (ICTR 2019), 14-15 March 2019, Porto, Portugal. Reading: Academic Conferences and Publishing International Limited [online], pages 166-172. Available from: [http://academic-bookshop.com/ourshop/prod\\_6701989-ICTR-2019-PDF-Proceedings-of-the-2nd-International-Conference-on-Tourism-Research.html](http://academic-bookshop.com/ourshop/prod_6701989-ICTR-2019-PDF-Proceedings-of-the-2nd-International-Conference-on-Tourism-Research.html)

# Challenges facing the Siem Reap tuk-tuk workforce in a changing tourism environment.

LEITH, C.

2019



## Challenges Facing the Siem Reap Tuk-Tuk Workforce in a Changing Tourism Environment

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**Abstract:** Tourists have long used tuk-tuks as a convenient, cheap and enjoyable way to travel around when visiting many Asian cities. Significant changes in the tourism environment have led to challenges for the tuk-tuk workforce in some of their traditional cities of operation. This paper focuses on the tuk-tuk industry in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where an estimated 6,000 people make their living from tuk-tuk driving. Siem Reap continues to see a significant increase in tourists which is being met by investment in tourism provision including increased hotel construction and international air links. In June 2019, in-depth interviews were carried out with twenty tourism dependent Siem Reap tuk-tuk drivers. The aim of the research is to identify the recent key changes of tourism from the perspective of tuk-tuk drivers, and how these changes had impacted on their work and life. A range of changes in the tourism environment were identified including demographic changes of tourists, increased tourist use of social media and online accommodation booking, greater expectation of foreign language ability and recent market entry of tuk-tuk on-demand mobile apps. Impacts included greater periods waiting for custom, pressure to accept lower fares, general financial worries due to lack of guaranteed income, and pressure to work longer hours to the detriment of family life. Concern was expressed by participants for the ultimate survival of the city's tuk-tuk's industry. The research highlights the implications for a tourism dependent workforce in a city undergoing significant tourism development and linked economic generation. The study results suggest that it is the cumulative changes to a tourism environment rather than changes in tourist numbers which can have the greatest impact on a particular sector within a destination or city. The findings would be of use to public organisations involved in tourism development.

**Keywords:** Cambodia; tuk-tuks; tourism environment; workforce; tourism cumulative changes

### 1. Background

Tourism as a tool of economic growth has been the focus of significant academic study. Pawson et al(2018) note that tourism is seen by the Government as crucial to the economic development of Cambodia specifically. Cardenas-Garcia et al (2015), recognised that tourism growth positively influenced the economic development of all one hundred and forty four countries included in their study. However, they did note that for less developed countries, including Cambodia, it can be argued that tourism is less effective than other potential economic activities. Furthermore, it has been noted that economic growth due to tourism does not necessarily mean that all of the community will see income rise, with the poorest most likely to lose out (Zhao and Brent Ritchie, 2007.) Mao et al (2013) took a particular focus in Siem Reap and concluded that poor residents struggle to share in the positive benefits of tourism such as income and job creation. Less attention has been given to identifying how specific changes in the tourism environment caused by tourism development have impacted on the work and life of a particular workforce. This focus on a certain workforce is even more pertinent in a city which, according to all signs and statistics, has undergone rapid and economically beneficial tourism development in recent years. Krippendorf (1987) highlighted the lack of homogeneity of destination residents and, although focused on grouping and analysing residents based on their shared perceptions rather than their shared occupation, Sinclair-Maragh et al (2015) has previously suggested this clustering of groups can be important to tourism development policy makers. In their study of impacts of events specifically, Fredline and Faulker (2000) also emphasised the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of a community. The heterogeneity of the wider tourism workforce within a specific destination should also be recognised, with Baum et al (2016) highlighting the complexity of the tourism workforce due to the wide range of sectors, organisations and individuals involved in a variety of roles and levels of formality within the industry. This study does so by focusing on one cluster (tuk tuk drivers) allowing for an understanding of how recent changes to the local tourism environment have impacted on a select group.

Recent years have seen significant growth in tourism in Cambodia as a whole, but more specifically in the city of Siem Reap, due to its close proximity to the Angkor temple network. The national growth, and predicted future growth, is evident from a number of indicators as outlined in table 1. The importance of Angkor to the overall Cambodian tourism industry is illustrated by growth in visitor numbers and revenue. In 2016, visitor's to the Angkor Temples contributed USD\$2.4 billion to Cambodia's economy (WTTC, 2017). It is further demonstrated by the number one global Tourism Landmarks ranking given by TripAdvisor in 2018 (TripAdvisor, 2018).

**Table 1:** Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2012-2028 (World Travel & Tourism Council)

<b>Performance Indicator (Real 2018 Prices) (KHRbn)</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018 (Estimated)</b>	<b>2028 (Forecast)</b>
<b>Direct Contribution to GDP</b>	9,329.6	11,276	11,583	12,671	13,209	23,422
<b>Direct Contribution to Employment ('000)</b>	999.5	1077.8	1089.5	1191.2	1241.5	1854.3

## **2. Methodology**

Over a four day period in June 2018, 20 semi structured interviews with tuk- tuk drivers took place in Siem Reap. The interviews were facilitated by the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA), a working group established in 2015 with the aim of promoting rights and living conditions of its members who work within the Cambodian informal workforce (IDEA, 2017). The decision was taken to pay the participant's for their time during interviews to reflect potential lost earnings. There is a move in some qualitative research to provide monetary incentive for participation and this is seen as acceptable in some situations, although should be clearly stated within the research process (Head, 2009). A consideration of the research was the need for accurate translation at all stages of data gathering. Research has noted that instances of translation and interpretation within academic studies is not always made clear (Squires, 2009; Temple and Young, 2004). For the purposes of this study a local interpreter/translator was hired. To ensure the credentials of the contracted interpreter/translator several of their previous clients were contacted for testimonials (Squires, 2009). As an extra step to ensure accuracy of translation, a sample of recorded interviews were translated by another Khmer national and accuracy was confirmed. (Woo and Twinn, 2004).

## **3. Discussion**

The research identified five broad areas of recent change which, from the perspective of interviewed tuk-tuk drivers, had impacted on their working lives to some degree.

### **3.1 Tourist Demographic Changes**

All participants commented on the changes to tourist numbers and demographics – specifically changes in nationality of tourists visiting Siem Reap. A majority claimed that international visitor numbers had in fact decreased in the city, which conflicts with the reality of significant year on year increases in recent years. (WTTC, 2018) However, some participants went on to reflect that it was fewer tourists making use of tuk-tuks rather than an actual decline in visitor numbers overall, while one commented that he realised that tourist numbers were increasing but it was becoming harder for drivers including himself to find clients. These views lead onto a change which most of the interviewees believed was having a significant impact on their level of business. It was apparent to them all that the nationality of visitors was undergoing a considerable shift. Generally, it was felt that there had in recent years a drop in visitors from Western countries, and a rise in visitors from Asian nations; particularly China. As shown in table 2, the most significant change in visitor numbers is indeed linked to different rates in growth of particular countries and geographical regions. The global growth of international tourist numbers between 2010 and 2017 was 114%, and the figure for the Chinese market specifically was 652%. The growing importance of the Chinese market is recognised by the Cambodian Governments wider “China Ready” strategy which includes a target of two million Chinese tourists annually by 2020 (Black, 2018).

**Table 2:** Cambodia International Visitor Numbers (Kingdom of Cambodia Ministry of Tourism)

Country of Residence	2010 (number and % share of total international tourists) (Leisure tourist only)	2012 (number and % share) (Leisure tourist only)	2015 (number and % share) (Leisure tourist only)	2016 (number and % share) (Leisure tourist only)	2017 (number and % share) (Leisure tourist only)
China	138,012 5.92%	281,669 8.56%	596,737 13.88%	709,436 16.07%	1,038,444 20.80%
Europe (as a whole)	463,096 19.87%	560,584 17.05%	672,703 15.65%	724,627 16.41%	795,568 15.94%
Americas	182,850 7.85%	193,987 5.9%	285,601 6.64%	331,396 7.51%	353,042 6.73%

Although their work did not focus on Chinese tourists, Becken & Gnoth (2004) highlighted the links between nationality and preferred travel style. It was believed by participants in this current research that Chinese tourists booked all their travel through Chinese tour operators and did not want to use tuk-tuks. This reliance on Chinese agents to book most aspects of the trip, including local transport, has been previously highlighted (Nasolomampionona, 2014; Heikkila and Peycam, 2010). However others including Xiang (2013) have suggested that there is a growth in independent travel among Chinese tourists linked to a desire for self-development and achievement through travel experiences. Others within the Cambodian tourism industry have also recently commented that the changing nationalities of tourists is as important as changes to tourist numbers when considering the impacts on tourism revenue (Southern, 2017). Chinese tourists were seen as spending longer in Siem Reap and go to the nearby Angkor Temples and other Attractions throughout their stay; however they travel on pre-arranged group tour busses. European tourists were more likely to use tuk-tuks but very often covered the Temples and other attractions over a shorter period – often within one day. Several drivers said they often agreed a fare with European tourists for two or three days but at end of the first day the tourist would say that they had seen everything they wanted and only pay for that day. In all such situations it appeared the driver would accept the situation, and reduced fee, with minimum of argument.

This research did not focus on demographics specifically so little attention was given to analysing the changing behaviour of the backpacker segment of visitors to Siem Reap. Backpackers can be considered as a longer term visitor to Siem Reap as the Angkor Temples have long been on the South East Asia backpacker route. From the researcher's own observations, discussions with tourism workers across a range of sectors and the views of the participants of this study, it is evident that much of the tourism development of Siem Reap, particularly in terms of nightlife, has expanded and altered greatly. Although it can be argued that much of this development has taken place in order to meet the needs of a growing and more varied tourism market, it is suggested that it may also reflect the demands of a changing backpacker sector. Several participants commented that it was tourists who they referred to as backpackers who were most likely to complain, negotiate on price most determinedly and fail to keep to agreed bookings and arrangements.

### 3.2 Foreign Language Requirements

Limited abilities in speaking foreign languages was identified as a problem by the interviewed drivers. A number of studies have previously shown the links between language proficiency and earnings. (Morrow, 2017; Budria et al, 2017; Yao and van Ours, 2015) Morrow (2017) looked specifically at links between English language ability and earnings of a range of tourism workers, including tuk tuk drivers, in Siem Reap. Morrow (2017) concluded that in the case of tuk tuk drivers, level of English proficiency had some, though not a direct influence, on earnings levels of tuk tuk drivers. However, the need of such workers to be friendly, talkative and knowledgeable in order to attract visitors was recognised. Morrow (2017) states that the low level of English ability and the relative high level of income in comparison to other tourism sectors in the city limited the ability to make a direct link between level of English and level of earnings. However, the most recent research here has indicated that other recent changes have made the level of language proficiency more important, and

those tuk tuk drivers who lack the abilities, or confidence, in languages do suffer financially. Several stated this as their main reason for being in some degree of relationship with one or more hotels, as it did not require them to communicate directly with potential customer. This was despite the fact, working with a hotel would result in lower level of income. The actual transactional model between hotel and tuk-tuk driver varied but would involve one or more of the following – driver paying a monthly fee to the hotel, paying a commission on each booking facilitated by hotel or the hotel taking a booking fee; which would usually be between 40%-50% of total cost charged to the guest. Many drivers commented that their lack of fluency in foreign languages – particularly English and other European ones – made them reluctant to approach tourists at the most popular tourist zones in the city such as “Pub Street” which is an area of bars, cafes and restaurants and the nearby Night Market; both of which attract vast numbers of tourists at all hours, especially in the early evening and into the night. This corroborates previous findings of Mao et al (2013). The ability to learn English specifically was stated by several drivers when asked what one change would make their job easier and more profitable. Heikkila and Peycam (2010) have previously highlighted the need for investment in education and skills development for the local population of Siem Reap. Only one participant believed that learning Chinese would be an advantage; which perhaps reflects the view that currently Chinese tourists are infrequent users of tuk-tuks.

### **3.3 Competition from Location Based Apps**

A specific recent change to the working environment highlighted by many drivers was the influx of competition from location based transport “apps” which follow the “uber2 business model. There are a number of such entrants within Cambodia, with PassApp being mentioned by several participants. As well as being linked to app based booking platforms, these new competitors were seen to be cheaper, modern and safer versions of tuk-tuks which were more appealing to those tourists who would previously have used more traditional tuk-tuks. It has been suggested previously that this emerging model is attractive to tourists as it removes the need of haggling over fare with drivers (Logan. 2017). Participants felt that they were excluded from employment with such companies due to their lack of technological confidence, foreign language abilities and concern over financial costs. These views differ from those of a leading location based company (Grab) which claims to support existing drivers to leave traditional tuk-tuk driving and join their organisation’s service (Black. 2018). The founder of another such company (PassApp) states he wants traditional tuk-tuk drivers to embrace the new technology as an opportunity or watch as their current occupation disappears (Spiess, 2018). One participant reflected on how tastes change. He said that previously tuk-tuk’s were popular with tourists and seen as *famous way to travel in Cambodia*. He now felt that the modern versions such as PassApp vehicles were seen in the same way by current tourists. However, another suggested the Government should take proactive steps to ban these companies as he felt they were unfair to existing tuk-tuk industry. This participant was unable to elaborate further as to why he considered them unfair competitors however his views do share commonalities with concerns over the general growth of location based transport models in cities throughout the world (Knight, 2016).

### **3.4 Social Media and Online Booking**

Many of the younger participants commented on the importance of social media as a means of finding clients. Several had a facebook page and they encouraged customers to leave reviews and comments as they felt this would help attract future clients. However, there was no clear evidence provided as to how successful this was as a marketing tool. This is perhaps unsurprising due to the sheer number of available tuk tuks, the informal, unplanned nature of tourist’s use of them, the low cost (and the negotiating strength of the customer) involved and no great level of danger or safety concern which would otherwise perhaps encourage tourists to base choices on existing reviews and recommendations.

However, despite the lack of evidence and the factors outlined here, many of the participants felt that online presence was important and several of the older drivers believed that their lack of success in gaining customers was linked to their lack of social media and online presence. A further complication here for tuk-tuk drivers is the differences of online social media platforms which can be accessed by Chinese nationals.

Another closely linked issue was commented on by two of the older participants. They stated that previously they would meet customers at the bus station who had no accommodation booked. A source of revenue involved recommending a hotel and on delivery, they would receive a small commission from the property. As most tourists, of all demographics including backpackers, now booked online in advance this additional revenue stream no longer existed to any great extent. The loss of these supply side revenue streams has been noted in similar contexts in other cities (Dahles and Prabawa, 2013). This change is recognised as valid

however, from the researchers own experience it is felt that this change predated many of the other ones raised, and it is therefore perhaps not as relevant when analysing the impact of recent cumulative changes to the tourism environment. The time of this particular change can perhaps be dated by the fact it was the two longest serving drivers (fifteen and eighteen years) who it raised it.

. A final point here though is that it is important to note that all the changes identified here are continually developing at various rates of pace and in different manners, so no changes should be totally negated when considering the impact.

### **3.5 Increase in Number of Tuk-Tuk Drivers**

Although there was a general recognition that there had been an increase in numbers of tuk-tuk drivers alongside the growth in tourist numbers, this did not appear as a major concern to research participants. There are now estimated to be 6000 tuk-tuk drivers within the city, many of whom have been attracted from other regions due to the economic possibilities linked to rising tourist numbers (IDEA, 2018). There was an overall acceptance that everybody needed to work for a living, and a reluctance to blame this influx of new drivers for the fall in their own revenue and client numbers. No drivers admitted to any conflict or bad feeling between drivers; and several referred to *good or bad luck* linked to how successful they were on a daily basis rather than linking business levels to increased driver numbers specifically. Indeed, there seemed a high degree of group solidarity within tuk tuk drivers in the city as a whole, as previously found in groups of informal workers (Trupp, 2015).

### **3.6 Impacts of Cumulative Changes to Tourism Environment**

The impacts of these cumulative changes on tuk-tuk drivers specifically are perhaps not overly surprising. All participants indicated that their revenue had been significantly reduced in recent years; and the drivers linked this revenue reduction with some, or all, of the changes to the working environment highlighted above. In simple revenue terms, it is recognised that research took place during the tourism low season where tuk-tuk drivers would expect reduced revenue. However, the research did indicate a significant reduction in revenue – both in low and high season. Quoted figures did vary (all in USD\$), however \$3 - \$7 in low season and \$10 - \$15 in high season was the range which compared to the recalled levels of \$10-12 low season and up to \$35 high season of only two to three years ago. These figures were collaborated with IDEA and were all seen as representative of the current and recent situation. While discussing financial changes, many drivers highlighted that as well as revenue falling, associated costs such as fuel and maintenance of vehicles were rising. Furthermore, all drivers claimed to owe money to banks and micro-finance institutions. Every driver interviewed admitted that they worried more about their financial situation now than they had two to three years ago.

The nature of tuk tuk driving as an occupation in almost all cases means that work is not guaranteed. This is the case for all the drivers participating in this research. Even those who are in some degree of business relationship with hotels or tour operators have no guarantee of work on a daily basis. This situation has several consequences. Several drivers noted that it was not uncommon, particularly in low season, to go through a day with no clients and therefore no income. One commented that he used to regularly get ten customers a day if he desired but it is now difficult to get three a day. All drivers claimed to regularly agree fares with prospective clients which they considered very low but the alternative was perhaps turning down potentially the only client of the day. These factors lead directly to a consequence for family life, which is seen as part of wider life-domain satisfaction (Woo et al, 2015). Previously Ridderstaat et al (2016) concluded that economic growth of a destination did not seem to improve overall quality of life of local people. Almost all participants stated they very rarely took a day off as they felt they couldn't afford to miss an opportunity to find a client. Many expressed degrees of sadness and regret that they felt forced to choose between work and family due to the low level of income and the lack of guarantee over income levels. All agreed that a guaranteed level of income would have a positive impact on their situation; including allowing for clearer financial planning and family time.

## **4. Conclusions**

This narrow focused research emphasises that the link between rapid tourism development and impacts on front line tourism workforce is a complex issue. This initial research has identified several current changes which the tourism environment currently at play in Siem Reap. It could be argued that some of these changes are more important than others according to the perspective of the drivers interviewed for this research with, for example, the increase of Chinese tourists and the growing competition from location based transport apps. However, the key finding of the research is how a particular array of changes has a cumulative impact on a

specific sector of the tourism workforce in a given city. Tuk-tuk drivers in Cambodia appear as a sector of the tourism workforce which exist on the margins of the tourism industry with little structured, legitimate place within this framework, but still economically heavily reliant on the industry. They are a marginal group which had previously prospered relative to other tourism focused workforces in the city. However, due to the cumulative impact of recent changes to the local tourism environment, now face significant challenges including reduced income, longer working hours, financial stresses and impact on family life. Some of the participants added to previous findings by Parsons and Lawreniuk (2016) by recognising that there was more money coming into Siem Reap through tourism, but poorer groups within society did not get to share in this. Of the drivers interviewed, four suggested that tuk-tuks was unlikely to be a viable occupation within a year or two due to the factors outlined here, and they suggested that tuk-tuks may cease to exist as a form of transport in the city. This prediction is perhaps extreme and overly pessimistic however it does indicate the level of concern which the workforce has about the future of the industry. Although beyond the scope of this research, the question can be asked as to what cumulative impact these very same changes have had on other sectors within Siem Reap workforce and wider society. It is suggested that the changes would differ, perhaps significantly, depending on the sector which is under study.

## **5. Future Research**

It is intended that follow up research will take place in Siem Reap, initially to carry out a wider, more comprehensive audit of recent changes in the tourism environment as it is recognised that a limitation of the previous research was it only identifying changes directly impacting on tuk-tuk drivers. Following this audit, the next stage will be to analyse the cumulative impact of these changes on several specific groups. Such groups are likely to include independent tour guides, small hotel owners and local tour operators. The ultimate aim of the proposed multi-stage research is to understand how the cumulative changes in a given tourism environment impact in different ways on specific tourism reliant groups in a destination. It should also be possible to identify which specific changes impact across several groups and therefore perhaps require greater level of attention.

It is proposed that those involved in tourism development and its impacts should consider the value of identifying then managing the impacts of changes to the tourism environment. This proposal requires that future destination development focused research goes beyond identifying problems in terms of economic impact studies. As previously stated by Spenceley and Meyer (2012) it is important to also create drivers which can change problems once identified. The model here aims to link impacts to specific groups within a destination; while also identifying those impacts which affect across groups.

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