


Spring 2015

# The Curious Case of Solu Khumbu: A Study of the Effects of Tourism in the Town of Junbesi

Hannah Cho  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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## Recommended Citation

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# The Curious Case of Solu Khumbu: A Study of the Effects of Tourism in the Town of Junbesi

Cho, Hannah

Academic Director: Onians, Isabelle

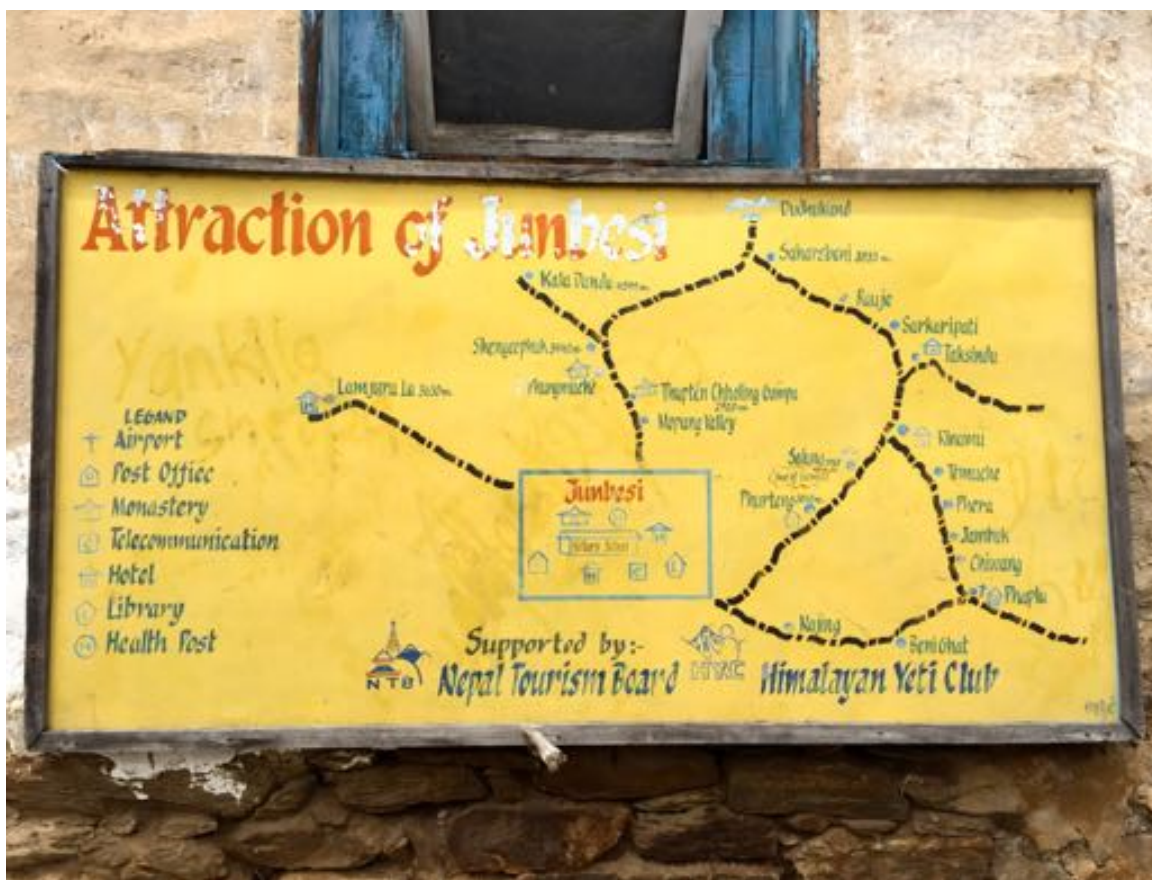
Senior Faculty Advisor: Decler, Hubert

The College of William and Mary

American Studies

Asia, Nepal, Solu Khumbu, Junbesi

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2015



## **ABSTRACT**

Before 1953, the year that Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay summited Everest, almost all Sherpas were subsistence farmers, traders, and herders. But ever since the 1980's, Sherpas have taken over the trekking industry in this region. The increase of tourism and the monopolization of this industry have altered the livelihoods of Sherpas in Solu Khumbu. However, most tourism related research on Solu Khumbu has been done primarily on upper Khumbu, which has been affected by tourism drastically differently than Solu. I will be doing a case study of how the changes in tourism have affected Junbesi, a popular agriculture based town on a major route to Everest. I conducted 7 interviews with various residents of Junbesi including schoolteachers, lodge owners, and shopkeepers. I first asked questions about what kinds of things were changing tourism over time, and then I asked specific questions on how tourism had affected agriculture, economy, the physical geography and environment, culture, labor, and education. Everyone I interviewed was on the same page about the questions of factors of change but most had different opinions about how tourism had affected the specific part of their lives. However, what I was surprised about was that reoccurring trend of nonchalance about the trend of decreasing tourism and how the village viewed the future of their economy. Their nonchalance made me examine more deeply the implications of what tourism had done to Junbesi and how the village had been reacting and using tourism in ways, that one might not originally think.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to thank all the NPR staff for supporting me throughout this venture with their enthusiasm, trust, and kindness. I especially want to thank them for answering all my questions over the horrible phone service with such patience during the earthquake. Thank you especially to Rinzi who planted the idea of going to Solu Khumbu in my and Rachel's head, and for Pala for being so cool that we could just not go to the place where he was born. I also want to thank Purba, our porter initially, but also our host, guide, and general man to bounce ideas off of. This trip could not have been done without my perfect travel companion Rachel, who never ceases to surprise and entertain me. But I also want to thank the town of Junbesi who welcomed us in and treated us like family during the earthquakes.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Sherpa people and culture**

Before I came to Nepal, I thought the word “Sherpa” referred to an occupation, a job where people carried gear for trekkers going up Everest. And even after spending three weeks with Sherpas, I still did not get the full extent of what it means to be Sherpa outside of tourism, trekking, and potatoes. There are about 20,000 Sherpa dispersed in Nepal and around the world and they can be identified by their language, clothing, diet, religion, and livelihood. “Self designation was once an easy way to spot a Sherpa” but now the word Sherpa is a borrowed ethnonym for many things such as a clothing line and an occupation, so the lines have blurred.<sup>1</sup> Sherpa in the literal sense means “Eastern People” in Tibetan because they inhabit the Solu-Khumbu region of Eastern Nepal. Sherpas are of Tibetan culture and descent, speak a Tibetanoid language, and practice Tibetan Buddhism. They migrated from the Kham region in Eastern Tibet to Solu Khumbu starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and were originally traders, farmers, and herders. <sup>2</sup> And today, many still hold those original occupations however, ever since the summit of Mount Everest by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, the number of jobs have expanded in the trekking and tourism industry in Solu Khumbu for the Sherpa people.

### **Rise of Tourism**

Today, tourism in Nepal contributes 1.6 billion to the GDP and represents 19% of the total foreign exchange earnings, and tourism in general attracts 600,000 visitors a year and generated 412, 500 jobs in 2011 alone. Solu Khumbu is Nepal’s second most popular trekking area, receives 40,000 tourists, and generated an equal amount of support staff. Over the years, those numbers have been rising drastically from only 60 tourists in 1960 to 4,257 in 1975, to 10,310 in 1990 to 36,210 in 2012. This region of Nepal “has become the foremost center of mountaineering and trekking in Asia. Small scale adventure tourism links this once relatively remote part of the world with the global economy.”<sup>3</sup> Before 1953, (the year of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay summited Everest) almost all Sherpas were subsistence farmers, traders, and herders. But ever since the 1980’s when tourists and trekker started to increase and come not in only commercial expedition groups, Sherpas have taken over the mountaineering and trekking industry in this area by monopolizing and regulating the tourism in Solu Khumbu by building and managing tea houses, tea shops, and hotels along trekking routes and becoming porters, cooks, and guides. This increase of tourism and trekking and the Sherpas agency in monopolizing this industry has altered the livelihoods of many Sherpas in Solu Khumbu.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brower, *Geography and History in the Solu Khumbu Landscape, Nepal*, 250

<sup>2</sup> "Sherpa | People." Encyclopedia Britannica Online

<sup>3</sup> Stevens, *Tourism, Change, and Continuity in the Mount Everest Region, Nepal*, 419

<sup>4</sup> Sherpa, *Community-based Tourism, regional Development, and Preservation: The Case study of Sagarmatha (Everest) National Park*

## Why Solu and Junbesi

Much of the research done about the effects of tourism in the Solu Khumbu area have been done about the Khumbu region, the higher altitude area, where Everest lies and where the effects of tourism have been more drastic. And much research has been generalized as Solu-Khumbu, when in fact it is primarily on Khumbu. But according to Barbara Brower, a professor who did a comparative study of a Khumbu town and the Solu town that I will be looking at, "Here were Sherpa, yes, but not my Sherpa, not people such as I had found in Khumbu. Same names and faces, same clans and clothing, some even near relatives of friends in Khumbu. But a very different look to the place, a very different feeling in the people: a different environment and ethos. Later I discovered that Ortner had herself commented on the contrasts between Khumbu and Solu Sherpa as portrayed in the literature, on her own initial conclusion that subjective factors were at work, and in her ultimate conviction, when she too had worked in Khumbu, that "the differences are relatively real and objective, and are essentially regional difference" <sup>5</sup>

Khumbu and Solu should not be lumped together in how they are affected by tourism because of the essential regional differences. For example, "The differences in physical setting between Solu and Khumbu are striking. In Solu, the variety of possibilities for subsistence, the range of interactions with neighboring groups, the proximity to a powerful central state-all are place-dependent variables. Khumbu's altitude and isolation preclude both many of the subsistence options and the interactions with others that are part of daily life in Solu. Khumbu's setting offers a different set of options and interactions, some denied or less accessible to Solu Sherpa"<sup>6</sup> But besides the geographical differences there are "differences of land and livelihood, but also of history, economy, and social milieu: a fundamental divergence in the paths of two populations of a people who took different routes--though with frequent contact and exchange between paths--several centuries ago"<sup>7</sup> Whereas the Khumbu Sherpas maintained close contact culturally and physically to Tibet, the Solu Sherpas are closer with non Sherpa groups within Nepal, and therefore the more Hindi state based in Kathmandu.

Because of these objective differences and the existing research on Khumbu, I decided to focus on Solu, an area that has not been the primary destination for trekkers but an area en route to popular trekking routes and destinations. And more specifically, I decided to look into the town of Junbesi because not only was it one of the few Solu towns where there was any previous research on but also it used to be a popular stop by point along a major trekking route before other factors changed that. Also, on my first impression, Junbesi seemed completely oriented toward tourists with lodges everywhere in tourism board signs right in the middle of town when I was originally told that it was an agricultural town. This got me thinking about how much things must have changed since Pala, a Sherpa man who recommended this town for me to do agricultural research, was last in Junbesi.

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<sup>5</sup> Brower, 250

<sup>6</sup> Brower 254

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

## HISTORY OF JUNBESI AND TOURISM

### Pre 1980 and Agricultural Town

Junbesi is one of the earliest villages to be settled by the Sherpa Ancestors around the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and has usually been economically stable before the influx of tourism started.<sup>8</sup> Before 1980, Junbesi was relatively unchanged from how it originally started – an agricultural town that depended on farming, pastoralism, and trade. Even after the summit of Everest, tourism did not start increasing until 1980 when more solo trekkers started to come instead of commercial expedition groups that did not need lodges or hotels. People ate what they grew, which were mostly potatoes, wheat, barley, and garden vegetables. But after 1980, tourism shot up due to the influx of different types of trekkers, and because there was a demand and need of lodges, the number of lodges in Junbesi went from 1 to 12.<sup>9</sup> And currently, of the seven interviews I received, all of them agreed to the question that Junbesi was a tourist town that depended on tourism and 30 years ago, they would have replaced the word tourism with agriculture. And now it is even a government officiated tourist town when it used to be an agricultural village relatively unnoticed.<sup>10</sup> However as much as tourism plays a role in the town of Junbesi, tourism has been an unsteady force because of the many factors that have caused it to ebb and flow.

### Hillary

On May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first summited Everest; they were the first to do so and prove that it was possible to summit the largest peak in the world. Before them, two other notable expedition groups tried and failed, but it was really Hillary and Norgay who spurred the start of tourism in Junbesi.<sup>11</sup> According to Ang Chokpa, a 60-year-old lodge owner in Junbesi, before Hillary and Norgay the big commercial expedition groups that came never needed lodges or equipment because they would camp outside and bring all their stuff with them, but after Hillary was when non commercial trekkers would come and they needed things from the town along the way, creating a demand that the town started to fill, including an airport.<sup>12</sup>

### The Airport

The Lukla airport was first built roughly ten years after Hillary and Norgay's summit in 1965. The airport was originally built by Hillary to help local yak herders spur economic development in Khumbu by making it a more accessible area. Today, it is one of Nepal's most busy airports because it skips over a daylong bus ride from Kathmandu and a five-day trek for trekkers who want to hike the Everest region. Not only has this airport drastically changed the upper Khumbu region but also the

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<sup>8</sup> Downs, *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village*, 3

<sup>9</sup> Chewang interview

<sup>10</sup> Kangshi Sherpa interview

<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, *First to Climb Mount Everest: Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay*

<sup>12</sup> Ang Choka interview

Solu area as well.<sup>13</sup> Most of the Junbesi residents I interviewed claimed the airport as the main reason for the trend of decreasing tourism. They claimed that before the airport, trekkers on the way to Upper Khumbu would pass by Junbesi because it was along a major trekking route. The route used to be Kathmandu to Phaplu by bus then a 3-day walk to Ringmo that would stop in Junbesi, Piki, and Dolkun, but now it just flies over all these places including Junbesi to get to upper Khumbu faster.<sup>14</sup> Ang Choti Lama Sherpa, a Junbesi Lodge owner, claims that it decreased tourism by half. Although the Lukla airport has decreased tourism and therefore tourism revenue in Junbesi, the Phaplu airport that was made a couple of years ago has had varying effects on tourism. It has increased it in the fact that it allows the trekkers who do want to do the walk more accessibility to this region (especially trekkers who come for more cultural and religious regions), however, for the trekkers who don't want to walk it gives them more routes to fly to and from.<sup>15</sup> However, besides the fact that the airports both have affected tourism trends, it has also accomplished what Hillary set out to do – help spur development. For non-trekkers, the airport has given them an opportunity to come to this region. More schools and health posts have developed for this reason, and it helps bring professionals into the Solu Khumbu region.<sup>16</sup>

### **Maoists**

The Nepal Civil War or the “People’s War” started on February 13, 1994 when the Communist Party of Nepal (the Maoists) wanted to abolish the royal parliamentary system with a republic. But in 2001, the war took a turn when the Maoists withdrew from peace talks and started to attack police and army posts with guerilla armies in most of Nepal’s districts, affecting the rural areas drastically. The War ended November 21, 2006 but had claimed 17,000 lives.<sup>17</sup> Specifically in Junbesi, the Maoists contributed to the decline of tourists. About 10 years ago was the peak of the Maoists’ terrorism in Junbesi. They would ask money from the lodges and tourists – about 100,000 NPR from the lodges and 5,000 from the tourists for just being there – and there was no other choice but to comply because the Maoists had guns.<sup>18</sup> The Maoists also prevented Ang Choti Lama Sherpa’s husband from opening up a private dairy factory and many other business ventures by the people in the village. Not only did the Maoists drive the tourists away but also the local people. The people with money in Junbesi moved away either to another place in Nepal or out of the country. They also caused the number of young people to leave Junbesi to shoot up, causing a decrease in the Junbesi town population. But this reign of terror ended when the Maoists won the election, and they were allowed to

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<sup>13</sup> Shrestha and Binai, *The World's Most Dangerous Airport? Adventure Of Mount Everest Begins At Tiny Nepal Airstrip*

<sup>14</sup> Ang Bhuti interview

<sup>15</sup> Ang Choti Lama Interview

<sup>16</sup> Ang Bhuti

<sup>17</sup> Shrestha and Binai, *The World's Most Dangerous Airport? Adventure Of Mount Everest Begins At Tiny Nepal Airstrip*

<sup>18</sup> Ang Bhuti interview



enter the multi party system with the new government that is a republic. However, the effects of what they did only hurt tourism a little but changed the demographic age make up and population of the town a lot when it was not very big to begin with.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Road**

According to the interviewed people of Junbesi, the road from Kathmandu to Salleri was built only a couple of years ago. And that road has had varying effects on tourism. Some said that it has made the trek on the route that passes Junbesi uglier, which detracts the tourists who do want to walk. And it provides another option for tourists to get to the Phaplu airport faster when in the past they would have to walk when the weather was bad near the Lukla airport.<sup>20</sup> However, similar to the effects of the airport, it has also made Solu Khumbu more assessable to tourists who want a short cut or a way to get to this region without paying the costs of an airline flight. According to Ang Bhuti, the road was never meant for tourists; the government made the road without the people's input in order to transport goods easier and faster. The government wanted to make the road before but they were concerned that it would lessen the tourists, but since the tourists were decreasing anyways, they went ahead with the construction of the road a few years ago. However, with the road, the people of Junbesi that I interviewed with noticed a change in the type of tourists that were coming. The road has made travelling to Junbesi to Kathmandu and vice versa more physically and fiscally more accessible which mean more Nepali and local tourists have been coming to Junbesi for religious reasons since there are many important monasteries in the region such as Thupten Choling monastery. There has also been an increase of foreign tourists who come to Junbesi to just see the town because its well known and to see the culture, the tourist who go for trekking go a more direct and quick route.<sup>21</sup>

Just last year, a new road was created from Salleri to Junbesi. But what is different about this road is that it was created and funded by the local people of Junbesi and the monastery. According to Junbesi's English teacher at the secondary school, Prabes, "Making the road means making the development and they got a lot of trouble. If they made the road than the tourism sector will be developed. Transportation will be started, more markets to sell fruits and vegetables, and what they need from Kathmandu will come in a Jeep." So, the people of Junbesi, driven by the monastery, made the road to increase tourism and development, and since the road was just finished, the effects of it are still to come and still to be seen.<sup>22</sup> However, according to Valerie Burris, "the completion of the road to Salleri in recent years has opened access to the area and will allow enhanced market opportunities. Since the survey was conducted, a number of households in the Kaku area have successfully cultivated organic vegetables for sale at the market in Salleri," so the effects thus far seem to be positive.

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<sup>19</sup> Ang Choti interview

<sup>20</sup> ND Rai interview

<sup>21</sup> Ang Bhuti interview

<sup>22</sup> Prabes Kakle

## **Patterns and Trends**

The thing that all my interviewees could agree on was the fact that they had all noticed the decrease in tourism over the years, some years would be higher than the last, but the general pattern has been going down. They all also agreed to the fact that Junbesi was a tourist town, a town that depended on tourism most of their revenue, and if tourism ever failed, agriculture would be the thing they would revert to. However, many of my interviewees said that they would much rather prefer tourism to agriculture even though it is less reliable because its less manual labor because one tourist generally makes more money than a harvest of vegetables.<sup>23</sup> However, many disagreed about if Junbesi could survive without tourists or not. It was about half and half, some said definitely not, Junbesi had changed permanently from an agricultural town to a tourist one but some said that although tourism brings in a lot of money, it is not necessary money it is supplemental money. The latter half said that they knew they could survive because during the Maoist attacks when there was no tourism, the town ended up being fine, which gave them confidence and assurance about the decreasing tourism.<sup>24</sup> And according to Prabes, "The number of tourists has been decreasing in numbers day by day. Not much tourists nowadays. They have been gradually changing their route by plan to upper Khumbu, they think the route is not very safe and the hotels are very expensive along the way, however Junbesi has made their household more secure by expanding and learning many things from tourists and doing other projects, the tourists have given them many ideas", so although tourism has been decreasing steadily, the future of Junbesi, its economy, and its relationship with tourism is not as steady or predictable as this trend that's been going on for years.

## **AGRICULTURE**

"Producing food is the basic activity of all Sherpas; every Sherpa, even one involved in business, has at least a small plot to work, and this supplement feeds the family even when there is no money."<sup>25</sup> Agriculture has been an essential part of Sherpa life every since they settled in the Solu Khumbu region, and still is an essential part of Sherpa life today whether they use agriculture as a supplement or a business. "Small scale farming fulfills a basic need of most households, which is food security. They are self sufficient in terms of seeds, organic fertilizers, and tools."<sup>26</sup> And "given that the staple diet of the respondents consists of cereals and potatoes, it appears that on average enough of these crops is produced to fulfill the dietary needs of the average household."<sup>27</sup> And before the influx of tourists, the same staple crops have been grown for years. "Because of the diversity of agro-ecological conditions, households grew a wide variety of crops. All grew millet, maize, and

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<sup>23</sup> Ang Choti interview

<sup>24</sup> Kangshi Sherpa interview

<sup>25</sup> Burris, *Sustainability of Small Scale Farming in a Mountain Region: Case Study of the Khaling Rai Population of the Solukhumbu, Nepal*, 4

<sup>26</sup> Burris, 19

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

potatoes on dry outward sloping bar terraces in the summer. Winter crops were wheat and barley. Because of the altitude most of the land was not suitable for the cultivation of rice. Vegetables were grown in gardens and were for household consumption only.”<sup>28</sup> However, most of the interviewees I talked to mentioned a change in agricultural lifestyle or changes in their agriculture due to tourism. For example, Ang Choti Lama Sherpa used to work on a farm before she started the lodge. She was a housewife who worked in the field while her husband worked in Kathamandu. She said the work was very hard and long, but she never considered it a job because “everyone does it.” But now, she runs the lodge with hired help but still maintains the farm even though it is significantly smaller. What Ang Choti does instead since she is so busy with the lodge is that she hires workers from other close by villages to farm in exchange for free board (and also education at the local school) and a small return of the grains they harvest. But she still uses the farm as a backup plan for when tourism is low. When tourism is high, she focuses on the lodge, but when tourism is low she pays more attention to the farm and plants the vegetables herself. Ang Choti said this change in life with tourism and agriculture is pretty much standard for all lodge owners, and all lodges hire young help except for one out of the twelve lodges in Junbesi.<sup>29</sup>

Other changes in agriculture that locals contribute to tourism are changes in ideas of how to grow and expanding ideas of what things can be grown. For example, ND Rai, the local science teacher at the Junbesi Secondary school said that Junbesi didn’t need tourism anymore because of the new innovative things people were doing with agriculture such as growing kiwis, medicinal herbs which make a lot of money, and apples – many things people have learned either from tourists or by growing abroad.<sup>30</sup> Also, Kangshi Sherpa, the owner of one of the two trekking shops in Junbesi, has new ideas about organic agriculture that she wants to try out. She said that she wants to sell to Kathmandu because that is where people, especially tourists, are getting more conscious about organic farming, health, and food. And it is especially relevant in Solu because their growing and soil is good, and Kathmandu’s is not good because of the pollution. She and her husband want to organize a farmer’s union or collective to grow and sell this type of berry that is good for pickling and good with pork. She called it a “tingle berry” because it tingles when you eat it. She said it is native to this land and grows on trees by itself. She also wants to do this with oats, vegetables, potatoes, and white beans.<sup>31</sup>

Other changes in agriculture due to tourism include the introduction of apples, which were apparently brought by an American botanist, and now apples chutes are sold at the market every year. The farmers in Junbesi have also started to plant crops such as carrots, cabbage, celery, lettuce, and other greens because apparently tourists wanted these kinds of foods so the farmers grew them.<sup>32</sup> The role of agriculture in the lives of the people in Junbesi seems to be a constant,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ang Choti interview

<sup>30</sup> ND Rai interview

<sup>31</sup> Kangshi Lama interview

<sup>32</sup> Gelmu Sherpa interview

however the importance of the role seems to ebb and flow similar and relatively to the role of tourism.

## ECONOMY

In Junbesi there are about 45 households (not all are occupied year round), 12 have lodges, and the rest have other jobs such as health post officers, teachers, and farmers. But before Junbesi was like this, its economy depended primarily on agriculture, pastoralism, and trade. Junbesi used to be a lot colder and there used to be a lot more yaks. Cheese was big and people were porters who carried grain to Tibet and other places, however the closing of the Tibet border didn't really affect things, and still everyone is a farmer now in some capacity. However, with each interview everyone seemed to have a different opinion of how the economy and their own economic situation changed, and much was dependent on their occupation. For example, Ang Bhuti's economic situation became significantly better when she opened up the lodge 25 years ago. Before the lodge, she just farmed, but now she runs the lodge by herself while her husband makes extra income as a trekking guide. But in the non-tourist seasons, she relies more heavily on the farm, and the farm also consistently feeds the family and her lodgers. However, for her tourism is not necessary because she can survive on her animals and farm, but tourism greatly helps. Not only does it help the lodges but also the local farmers and other people in the community because when tourists come they not only need lodging but also extra equipment, food, etc. But when the tourists don't come the lodges don't buy things from farmers, and tourists don't buy from the shops.<sup>33</sup> But originally lodges were not opened because Junbesi needed them, they were opened because the tourists needed them, Junbesi's economy has been economically sound since the people I interviewed could remember, and even now with the decline it is still sound.

Chewang, a man who works outside of Junbesi but grew up in it and frequently comes back to visit said how people with lodges make significantly more money than people without, But its is because of the people with lodges that migrant workers have farms to work on and shops have people to sell too. He also mentioned how if tourists don't come than people already installed their kids in Kathmandu just in case so the kids won't suffer because they will have other things to rely on like an education. But the people without lodges or other non-farming jobs need to supplement their farming with other jobs like going abroad to work. He said if they don't they could survive but they would be extremely financially insecure. The breakdown of the town he gave was 49 families. 12 have lodges, 5 do seasonal labor and farming, and the rest do farming and other migrant labor, but he doesn't think any families do primarily farming.<sup>34</sup>

However, the owner of Everest lodge, one of the oldest lodges in Junbesi said that people who have been doing lodges primarily for a while can't go back to agriculture. So, if tourists don't come, those people will probably go abroad for

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<sup>33</sup> Ang Bhuti interview

<sup>34</sup> Chewang interview

work. She also said, “tourism is more important because tourism is like planting a seed for them now. Tourism caused the health post, the school, and scholarships and sponsors for children.”<sup>35</sup> So, the effects of tourism on the economy and the importance in the economy varied from person to person, however, despite its varying interpretations all seemed to agree that it is a major impact on their economy and livelihood.

## **PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENT**

Most of the people I interviewed agreed to the fact that trash and pollution are increasing, but they owed it to the local people and not the tourists. Ang Choti said there were a lot more plastic water bottles but it wasn't from the tourists, and Kangshi Sherpa said it's the Nepalese who litter not the foreigners. And, the materials to build the guesthouses and the labor to build them are all local. Everything is found in Junbesi for the guesthouses, and the things that are not are from Salleri. The local English teacher stated, “The tourists have taught the people to make dustbins and whatever they eat they have taught the people to throw away in the dust bins. Tourists have categorized the different things, which are disposable and not disposable, and they have taught the people that. But the people do not believe that and they do not follow that. If tourist is walking along the way and he sees disposable plastic he shows the people that he picks it up and puts it in the dustbin, and the people are watching him.”<sup>36</sup> So it was pretty unanimous among the interviewees that the tourists were definitely not detrimental to the environment. But despite what they had said, it is hard not to see the gaps in the forests on the mountains from forestry, the amount of septic tank toilets in the lodges that the locals did not use, and the trash of imported goods on the road.

## **CULTURE**

As with most of the topics, there seemed to be a variety of opinions on how local culture has been changed or not changed by tourism. Some people like Pemba Sherpa, a trekking shop owner, think that tourists help preserve the culture because since many tourists come to Junbesi to see an authentic Sherpa culture it incentivizes them to keep and maintain it. He said, “Tourists like our culture. So, it is important for us to preserve our culture. If tourists are coming here, we have to show our culture. if there are no tourists than our culture cannot be preserved. The tourists help preserve our culture.”<sup>37</sup> And along a similar line was the English teacher who said, “Sherpa people are really tough and difficult people. They don't like to change their religion and customs I think. But you may not affect their religion and customs even me also. They love to sow and share their religion and customs with other people. They are also fully devoted to their religion they would

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<sup>35</sup> Gelmu Sherpa interview

<sup>36</sup> Prabes Kakle interview

<sup>37</sup> Pemba Sherpa interview

not change their religion.”<sup>38</sup> But many of the woman I interviewed said how their children and other kids were becoming more Westernized and forgetting their culture. They were more into Western music, wearing more Western styles such as pants and shirts instead of Chukpas, and eating more Western foods such as pastas, cakes, soft drinks (Western tastes are now on Lodge menus which affects what kids and families eat too).<sup>39</sup> But it also seems as if the Junbesi people are taking active measure to retain their culture and learn from tourists like emphasizing festivals to teach their culture to their kids and visitors, and encouraging their children to speak with the tourists to learn English.<sup>40</sup> However, the English teacher in Junbesi had a different approach to how tourists were affecting the culture. He said, “Tourists are the hidden and open secret. Tourists of course make the local people more civilized, they might not have known how to use the toilet, tourists have taught them how to use the toilet. What type of food we should drink, what type of water we should drink, tourists told them that. The staff here has been here for over 35 years, and they informed me that when tourists come in this village the people use to see them surprisingly but they watched and whatever the tourists used and whatever they threw out the people would go there to watch and learn, that was the situation in the past but it is not like this anymore. Now we are similar civilized people because you make them civilized.” But he was the only one to take this approach to tourist influence.

A negative impact on culture that was mentioned was how craftsmen and therefore their trade were disappearing because of the tourists. Tourists who come see the craftwork of Junbesi take back the artists to their own countries before they teach anyone else about their trade, which is why certain types of woodwork and architecture are forever lost in Junbesi. Even though people view change in culture in different ways, almost everyone mentioned how Junbesi was “not as bad as Khumbu”. Everything negative they said about Junbesi was negated with how exacerbated it was in Khumbu.<sup>41</sup>

## **LABOR**

“Livelihood sustainability is modified by the accelerating process of change manifested by population growth, deteriorating natural environment, migration, and the development of external linkages. While temporary migration (transhumance and seasonal porter work) has always been a livelihood strategy for mountain people, permanent migration has become a growing phenomenon of mountain regions.”<sup>42</sup> Labor migration has always been a phenomenon of the Solu Khumbu region, and patterns of late have been interesting due to factors such as tourism, the changing economy, and globalization in Junbesi. It seems as if more and more young people are leaving the town to work abroad or in the city as tourism and therefore job opportunities decrease and the level of education increases.

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<sup>38</sup> Prabes Kakle interview

<sup>39</sup> Ang Choti interview

<sup>40</sup> Gelmu Sherpa interview

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Burris, 10

However, the level of uneducated work migrants coming in, especially from neighboring villages and the terai region, are increasing. More and more young people are leaving because there are more education opportunities because the people in Junbesi can afford to send their children to school in Kathmandu from tourist revenues, and many young aren't coming back because the only work in Junbesi is farming and tourism. But many are also going to more tourist heavy places to work such as Lukla and other places in Khumbu because of the decrease in tourism in Junbesi.<sup>43</sup> As the English teacher said, "Sherpa people love to abroad or following the tourists in trekking or abroad. They do not give up the jobs if tourists leave but they will give up agriculture. They go to Kathmandu and try to get in contact with the tourists, but if they stay they have to depend on agriculture."<sup>44</sup>

An example of how labor movements have affected livelihood and people in the instance of the Yak Herder, one of the few in this Solu region. The yak herder I interviewed has herded yak his whole life alongside his father and grandfather who had done it too. But this year is his last year with yaks because he is no longer able to care for all of them. In previous years and generations, it was manageable but now with all the young people gone there is no one to hire and no manpower. He said he started to really notice this about 10 years ago because all the young people were gone to Kathmandu to get an education and they were not coming back because they were going to places with higher paying jobs, not Junbesi. So next year he is going to sell all his yaks and start a local shop either in Junbesi or a different nearby village.<sup>45</sup> Although labor migration has always been a thing, the increased revenue that tourism bring has brought an increase in labor which has had other chain affects to different parts of the culture and economy.

## EDUCATION

From all the interviews collected, it is unanimous that tourism has had a positive impact in education for the village. The headmaster of the Junbesi Secondary School has educated this first generation, in the headmaster's time, it was rare to get an education, and this is very much an effect of tourism. Not only does the money from tourism that families make go towards sending their kids off to Kathmandu to get an education but also tourists who visit tend to sponsor children and donate money to the schools.<sup>46</sup>

Tourists are also setting up organizations to send kids to school in Junbesi. For example, Brenda Hutchinson is a schoolteacher from Denver who has donated money to the Junbesi Secondary School over the years. Her money has funded the computer lab, the computers, and several scholarships. Another man named Peter, from Canada who once came to Junbesi as a tourist has also given many scholarships to the Junbesi children to study in Kathmandu and has helped build a

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<sup>43</sup> Ang Bhuti interview

<sup>44</sup> Prabes Kakle interview

<sup>45</sup> Yak Herder interview

<sup>46</sup> Prabes Kakle interview

student hostel. Both are pledging to give more in the next coming years.<sup>47</sup> And the schools and hostels have a symbiotic relationship with tourism because the more tourism increases the more money gets funneled into education and the more education increases the more tourists because they want to see the kids and schools they donated to.

The English teacher also thinks that tourists make students more academically focused because students tend to think “they do not think going to school is compulsory because they have seen their elders doing the same job without any education. They have done many things and seen many things without education.” However, “It is the greatest thing that the kids care about education and the tourists did that. The tourists are establishing schools and telling the importance of education... Tourists have given them the idea of the importance of education and the people who leave to Kathmandu and abroad come back and tell the village that education is important too.” He also said that tourism has made kids more interested in learning English. And because of the tourists, the health post appeared (from the Australians), tourists started donating to the monastery for meditation, and the library was donated. However, the downside of the increased education is that it makes people more likely to leave causing all the literate people to be gone from Junbesi.<sup>48</sup>

## **FUTURE PREDICTIONS**

There are many factors at work that have been changing Junbesi, a relatively small town in Solu Khumbu, including globalization, development, and tourism. How all these factors and will come to play later to change the future of Junbesi is undetermined however, some of the people of Junbesi have some predictions. From the interview I received it seems as if Junbesi is leaning towards agriculture for their future., and not tourism.

Ang Choti:

“Organic farming in Kathmandu is becoming more popular, and the potatoes here are the best. People are thinking about coming back and using the land again, hiring workers, using the new knowledge and making farms better and more profitable. So, agriculture might increase because of the need for organic agriculture. In the future, it might revert to agriculture because tourism is already decreasing and not reliable. People will start thinking about agriculture more, and Junbesi will be more agricultural than tourism.”<sup>49</sup>

ND Rai:

“Junbesi will not change to bring tourists because the local people aren’t too concerned about tourists. They are planning further agriculture. They have agricultural plans but not tourist plans. In the future, Junbesi will focus on

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<sup>47</sup> ND Rai interview

<sup>48</sup> Prabes Kakle interview

<sup>49</sup> Ang Choti interview



agriculture not tourists. Also, they are growing local herb called Chiraito. It is medicinal and a lot of it is being exported to China. People are growing new things. Nepal is exporting 11% of the demand of Chiraito to China, the demand is very high. Chiraito, kiwi, and apples will make a lot of money, a lot of possibilities in agriculture because the land is so fertile and we have the jungles. Population will increase because of agriculture. Tourism future is grim for Junbesi because people want to get to Khumbu faster. But 3 years ago, tourism was more important than agriculture.”<sup>50</sup>

But I think that the future of Junbesi will always hold agriculture and tourism close to heart, but the future is in neither. I think the fact that most of the younger generation is getting educated in Kathmandu and are going to college is going to bring about something unexpected that no one will be able anticipate.

### CONCLUSION

It is interesting to take a case study examination at how tourism can affect and irrevocably change a small border town on the way to Everest. However, what is even more interesting to see is how the town didn't let tourism control their future and take their agency but instead have used tourism to benefit them without fully depending on it as an economic crutch. Junbesi has managed to do what many undeveloped towns in Solu Khumbu and Nepal have not, to be resilient and flexible with the changes happening in their village and Nepal without losing their identity.

At this point, Junbesi has used tourist revenue to ensure them of a secure future without tourists, by securing educations for their children and by adapting and taking advantage of the new knowledge tourism brought in to improve their town. What I would like to highlight about this research is how not to underestimate the agency and power local people have over their own towns and lives against such shaping powers such as tourism and globalization. I am curious to see the future of Junbesi and Solu Khumbu because of the rapid development happening, the changing political scene of Nepal, the recent Earthquake that has struck this area, and the resiliency of the Sherpa people. But judging from the past, Solu and the Solu Sherpa will be able to ride the tide of whatever floats their way.

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<sup>50</sup> ND Rai interview

## METHODOLOGY

The majority of this research was done through interviews with the people of Junbesi because there was almost no published research about this specific town. My interviewees included 9 people: 3 lodge owners, an environmentalist who worked outside of Junbesi, a yak herder, 2 teachers, 2 shop owners, however not all interviews were as extensive as I would have liked. I also would have liked to interview more people and get a better variety of occupation in my interviewees but my time in Junbesi was cut short.

Most of the time, I had to use a translator, to speak with the people since most were older and couldn't speak English very well. My translators were Sophie, a Newari woman who was living in Junbesi with her English husband and Nima an 18-year-old Sherpa girl who was on holiday but goes to school in Kathmandu.

The questions I asked first were about the factors of changes in tourism, which Ang Bhuti and Ang Choti Lama were very helpful with because not only had they lived through them but they were very systematic when telling me the factors that went on over the past couple of decades. With those two extensive interviews, I was able to ask questions that are more pointed to the not so old interviewees and get a good idea of the history of Junbesi in general. Then the more systematic questions I asked were about each section of livelihood that seemed to crop up in conversations a lot and were a big part of life such as agriculture, economy, the physical geography and environment, culture, labor, and education (I would have included religion but that has changed little to none). A lot of these interviews were trial and error because the more I found out, the more questions and better questions I had. But the answers were not as standard as I would have liked them to be because some people had significantly more knowledge in some areas and little to none in others –such as the teachers. But overall, all my interviewees had no problem opening up and talking about it, which made conversations very fluid and easy.

There were very few obstacles during my research. During the first two weeks when I was in Mopung, getting to Junbesi was a bit of a hike (around an hour) and continuously rainy so I didn't get as many interviews then as I would have liked. And when I was in Junbesi access to interviewees was great until the earthquake happened. But the people in Junbesi were very open and very willing to talk about their town.

My porter, host, and guide for the first two weeks, Purba, was a great reference point about what kinds of questions to ask and who to ask because he had grown up just outside of Junbesi and had gone to school for a while.

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEWS

1. Yak Herder, age 35, April 17, 2015
2. Chewang, environmentalist, age 52, April 19, 2015
3. Ang Bhuti, owner of Ang Chokpa Lodge, age 60, April 20, 2015
4. Ang Choti Lama Sherpa, owner of Sherpa Lodge, age 52, April 20, 2015
5. ND Rai, science teacher at Junbesi secondary school, age 32, April 24, 2015
6. Gelmu Sherpa, owner of Everest Lodge, age 26, April 24, 2015
7. Kangshi Sherpa, owner of trekking shop, age 37, April 24, 2015
8. Prabes Kakle, English teacher at Junbesi secondary school, age 25, April 28, 2015
9. Kangshi Sherpa, owner of trekking shop, age 35, April 28, 2015

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- The changing roles of women in the economy and society because of tourism – many women in Junbesi run their families lodges by themselves because their husbands are often abroad or doing trekking, and it seems as if they have a lot of economic power and influence in the village because many men are gone
- Role of animal husbandry and how its changed due to tourism in the Khumbu – so much prior research to this but the research is pretty dated
- How massive expedition dumps are affecting the environment at base camps and the role of recycling and waste management– something my host mentioned to me
- The role of Sherpa youth clubs – they are everywhere and seem like a big part of society
- New ways of getting oil – my host has a huge oil machine in the jungle that makes expensive oil from pine needles. It causes a lot of deforestation and is barely regulated. He and his brother are one of the few who are trying out this venture in the area.

What I wish I had realized during my research about tourism is the drastic differences between Solu and Khumbu. If I had really wanted to study what I had sought out for I should have gone to Khumbu because tourism effects are a lot more exacerbated there. However, I am glad I ended up in Junbesi because Solu is often overlooked as a place that has changed due to tourism, and interesting things are happening there (it is also a lot warmer and more accessible).

