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Affiliative nomads in Japan: potential sustainable tourism stakeholders in depopulated rural areas

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In Japan, the overall population is declining. Depopulation is severe, resulting in various negative consequences, particularly in rural areas. Rural communities could benefit by collaborating with people from other places, mainly urban areas. Typical examples of visitors or tourists from urban areas in these cases are referred to as “*kankei jinko*.” The more fundamental issue, however, is that many rural residents have lost confidence in their ability to live in areas with declining and aging populations. It is important to note the potential for highly mobile people from urban areas to increase the civic pride of rural residents. This raises questions about who these nomadic people, or “affiliative nomads,” are and how they interact with residents. To answer these questions, we analyzed cases of affiliative nomads in previous studies. The nomadic people showed respect for the rural areas to the residents; as a result, they were perceived by the residents as being in a stage of growth. When the nomads and residents interact, they create common values such as nature conservation and economic and community revitalization. Thus, the nomads cultivate civic pride among the residents and could be regarded as affiliative nomads. Furthermore, some coordinators bridge residents and nomads to expand their relationships with other people. Affiliative nomads may be sustainable tourism stakeholders and contribute to solving the problems of depopulated areas in Japan and other developed or emerging countries.

KEYWORDS

nomads, affiliative, shared values, indebtedness, coordinators, revitalization, depopulation, social inclusion

1 Introduction

In the modernization process, individuals typically migrate from rural to urban areas for economic value, namely increases in their human capital and job opportunities (Champion et al., 2018; de Haas et al., 2020). This phenomenon was realized in the mass migrations from rural to urban areas in emerging countries (Wu et al., 2014; Rees et al., 2017). In contrast, in developed countries, some people migrate from urban to rural areas to improve their lifestyle values, namely natural beauty, communities, and amenities (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009; Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014). Migrants gain more economic benefits in urban areas than in rural areas. Therefore, many migrants who move to rural areas for lifestyle value improvements are usually retirees (Repetti and Lawrence, 2021).

However, migrants may gain enough economic value in rural areas owing to changes in their workstyle, such as working remotely. The number of individuals availing themselves of these workstyles has recently increased, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic,

when individuals avoided crowded urban areas and migrated to rural areas in some countries (Fielding and Ishikawa, 2021; Tønnessen, 2021; Gonzalez-Leonardo et al., 2022; Kotsubo and Nakaya, 2022; Stawarz et al., 2022; Rowe et al., 2023). Individuals can realize high productivity in rural areas by taking advantage of lifestyle values such as the natural environment and amenities. They can enjoy high productivity in available and productive jobs in rural areas, such as tourism, agriculture, art, and design. They can use the internet, the access to which is the same as in urban areas. These migrants are often entrepreneurs and may expand economic value to rural areas (Burnett and Danson, 2017; Korsgaard et al., 2017; Lopez-Sanz et al., 2021). Sometimes, these migrants collaborate with rural residents to create sustainable economies and communities. However, a concern is that gaps in gains may widen among residents. Studies have focused on possible conflicts between migrants from urban areas and long-time residents in rural areas (Kalantaridis and Bika, 2006; Obikwelu et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2021).

When examining rural migration, we should also consider the frequency of migration. Individuals were assumed to obtain different jobs and lifestyles before and after migration. In the age of mobility (Urry, 2007), however, transportation technologies have decreased in price and increased in accessibility; communication technologies that connect individuals have developed; and individuals are individualistically minded and free from localities. Accordingly, work and life, especially human relationships, have become continuous before and after migration. Hence, individuals have been able to change their residence easily. As Bell and Ward (2000) suggested, we could situate tourism within the wider context of temporary and permanent population in developed countries.

This paper calls individuals who continue to move in search of favorable conditions “nomads.” Typical examples of nomads are dual-site residents or second-home tourists, who usually work in an urban area and own a vacation home in a rural area for use during holidays to enjoy the rich natural environment and amenities (McIntyre et al., 2006; Hall, 2014), and digital nomads, who move to a location that is more comfortable than their current location (Hannonen, 2020; Lacarcel and Huete, 2023). Examining the frequently mobile nomadic way of life is essential to understanding various aspects of mobility, such as the wellbeing that individuals derive from mobility and the disparities that accompany mobility (Larsen et al., 2016; Sheller, 2018).

In this paper, we examine the relationship between nomads and residents of rural areas during population decline. While there is much research on the relationship between migrants and residents, or between tourists and residents, the relationship between nomads and residents remains unclear. We hypothesize that nomads can revitalize rural areas with declining populations and other disadvantages, regardless of the possible conflicts with the residents. We regard affiliative nomads as those who build friendly, sustainable relationships with residents and cultivate civic pride among them. We analyze the relationship between affiliative nomads and residents in rural areas from the perspective of social change caused by increased mobility and identify its potential for rural revitalization. By organizing the issue from the perspective of the relationship between affiliative nomads and residents, we expect to gain insights into sustainable relationships between migrants and residents, or between tourists and residents.

Previous studies on rural revitalization have focused on revitalizing the economy and society by attracting migrants who promote entrepreneurship, or attracting tourists who consume local products (Manzenreiter et al., 2020). The residents have been envisioned as the bearers of the economy and society. We identify the potential of nomads who revitalize the economy and society but do not settle in the area. We may be able to inspect previous studies on rural revitalization from a different angle and identify future possibilities by focusing on nomads.

2 Rural revitalization and expectations for nomads

We introduce the cases of nomads in Japan. Japan has been in economic stagnation since approximately 1990. The demographic structure of its aging population and the low fertility rate are causing this stagnation (Aoki, 2012). Aging and depopulation result from the concentration of young adults in the Tokyo metropolitan area, where the total fertility rate is the lowest (Kato, 2014). The population concentration trend in the Tokyo metropolitan area has not abated. The reason for this phenomenon is not an increase in migration from rural areas to the Tokyo metropolitan area but a decrease in migration from the Tokyo metropolitan area to rural areas (Koike and Shimizu, 2020). In this sense, migration in Japan differs from that in emerging countries, where migration from rural to urban areas is increasing due to economic development, and in developed countries, where migration from urban to rural areas has been observed. To counter depopulation and aging, the Japanese government has promoted projects that encourage migration from Tokyo to rural areas (Masuda, 2014).

Most rural areas in Japan have been inhabited for quite some time. Residents sometimes destroy, but usually manage natural environments, sustainably using natural resources. A sustainable relationship between people and natural environments would be impossible if residents disappeared rapidly from rural areas. Mantero et al. (2020) reviewed studies of land abandonment on forest disturbance; the risks of wildfires, flooding, landslides, and so on have increased due to land abandonment by humans. Because of depopulation in rural Japan, the number of mammal pests such as boars, deer, and monkeys has increased, causing crop damage and physical harm to humans. Mammal damage causes abandonment of agricultural land use, which in turn increases the number of mammal pests in rural areas (Enari, 2021). From this perspective, it is imperative to maintain some population of rural areas.

The government's program to promote migration from the Tokyo metropolitan area to rural areas has achieved some success. The number of members of the *chiiki-okoshi kyouryoku tai* (community-reactivating cooperator squads), which provides living and activity expenses for several years to encourage individuals to migrate to rural areas and start businesses, has increased from 89 in FY2009 to 6,447 in FY2022.¹ The number of consultations at the *furusato kaiki shien center* (center of promotion for rural residence), which provides consultation services for rural

¹ https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000873869.pdf (Authors accessed at 2024/4/15).

migration, also increased, from 3,823 in FY2009 to 52,312 in FY2022.² Many of the users of the *chiiki-okoshi kyouryoku tai* and *furusato kaiki shien center* are no longer satisfied with city life. The number of individuals migrating to rural areas to seek lifestyle values (e.g., a child-rearing environment) or economic values (e.g., entrepreneurship opportunities) has increased, which may reduce the rate of Japan's population decline. Several municipalities have successfully welcomed migrants (Zollet and Qu, 2019; Klien, 2020), and some increased the number of migrants, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fielding and Ishikawa, 2021).

However, policies to attract migrants are problematic. Few municipalities have succeeded in increasing the number of migrants, and overall, the trend of population decline in rural areas has continued (Dilley et al., 2022). Even if rural municipalities succeed in attracting migrants, Japan's total population continues to decrease, meaning if the number of residents in one area increases, the number of residents in other areas will decrease. Tanaka (2021) criticized this situation as a zero-sum population game among municipalities: one municipality wins while the other loses. Increasing the rural population is not necessarily the solution to address the negative consequences of population decline. In the age of mobility, we should consider the mobility of people irrespective of whether their residence is urban or rural, instead of analyzing transient population migration between urban and rural areas.

Rather than migrating completely to rural areas, the nomads' way of living and working, based in an urban area but maintaining ties to a particular rural area, is attracting attention in Japan. The Government of Japan, which had implemented unsuccessful efforts to promote migration from urban to rural areas, has begun to expand the number of nomads as part of its rural revitalization projects. The concept of "*kankei jinko*" was proposed in the late 2010s to capture this group's way of living and working (Tanaka, 2021). The concept has been translated in English papers as "relational population" (Qu et al., 2020), "related population" (Osanaï and Yu, 2023), or "relationship population" (Dilley et al., 2022; Morais, 2022) and has become a buzzword. However, this concept includes various types of individuals and has not been fully defined. Hashimoto (2022) proposed that the concept be divided into three main categories: long-term visitors who plan to migrate in the future, dual-site residents who travel between urban and rural areas, and urban residents who want to be actively involved in revitalizing rural areas. There are concerns that classifying these different types together will create confusion (Dilley et al., 2022) and not capture individuals who do not fit these categories. These studies tend to view individuals quantitatively, such as population, when considering how to maintain rural communities. In this paper, we use the term "nomad" to describe the autonomy and potential of nomadic individuals and their relationships with rural residents.

Our focus is on the issues of nomads who have harmonious relations with residents and contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas. We seek to shed light on the realities of nomad-like people because of our sociological interest in the identity changes that have occurred with the rise of mobility. We

also focus on the governance of rural areas. Rural communities are in decline due to depopulation and aging. The natural environment supported by communities is also becoming unsustainable. The Japanese government has proposed "society 5.0" to maintain rural communities (Rojas et al., 2021). Within such a framework, there are growing expectations for nomads who work with residents to revitalize rural communities.

Rural tourism is one of the studies that aim for sustainable development through the involvement of outsiders in rural areas. Rural tourism is a concept that includes tourism activities and resources in rural areas (Lane, 1994). Bowler et al. (2002) argued that the sustainability of rural society should be achieved by actively engaging with the outside community, rather than viewing the rural system as an inward direction and closed one. Park et al. (2024) analyzed the process of (dis)empowerment in the development of rural tourism and pointed out that each of the four processes results in both empowerment and disempowerment.

However, as in these previous studies, outsiders do not always establish friendly and sustainable relationships with residents. The theme of building a relationship between outsiders and residents has long been a topic of discussion in the social sciences. In the next section, we summarize previous studies on the relationship between outsiders and residents and discuss some of the issues to be addressed, including the following questions: what are the motivations of nomads who have a deep connection to and a deep interest in a particular area? How are they accepted by residents?

3 Relationship between nomads and residents

Morishige et al. (2020) reviewed previous studies on the relationship between tourists and residents and classified tourists based on two axes: (1) whether they own or manage local resources and (2) whether they are aware of local revitalization. We consider tourists to be nomads in this study. We regard nomads involved in the ownership and management of local resources and those who create values to revitalize areas as affiliative nomads. Morishige et al. (2020) did not clarify how nomads transform themselves into entities that take responsibility for owning and managing the area, create value for the area, or transition to affiliative nomads.

In considering the potential of nomads to be responsible for the area, the relationship between migrants and residents can be used as a reference to some extent. In a typical rural community with few migrants, travelers, etc., residents could hardly interact amicably with outsiders. Living with a group of familiar individuals provides security and enables economic development and community maintenance (Ostrom, 1990). The close relationships of residents belonging to a community provide a sense of security for its members. Individuals are penalized for deviating from the rules. However, in such close-knit relationships, residents tend to find minorities, often discriminating against and excluding them (Portes, 1998). Migrants have difficulty entering these communities and establishing friendly relations with residents. Migrants from different cultures are occasionally subjected to negative stigma and social distance by the residents (O'Brien et al., 2023). Young migrants adopt rural living as a temporary escape from the urban areas and are not necessarily committed to staying long term (Ji,

² https://www.furusatokaiki.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/furusato_Annual-report-2022.pdf (Authors accessed at 2024/4/15).

2024). At best, migrants compromise with the residents and are positioned as marginalized residents, and they are rarely expected to realize the unique benefits of being migrants.

There may be cases where nomads who repeatedly visit rural areas to enjoy lifestyle values may deviate from local rules and have conflicts with residents. Particularly concerning are conflicts with residents regarding different perceptions of the lifestyle value of the natural environment and community. Many rural residents respect the value of the natural environment and community, and nomads also visit rural areas. However, ecotourists and natural conservationists, who usually live in urban areas and do not understand the difficulties of living in contact with the natural environment, may believe that their values represent absolute justice and unilaterally impose them on residents, resulting in conflict (Horiuchi, 2012). Residents resent that their daily activities, such as exterminating pests, are condemned as evil by urban dwellers unfamiliar with the realities of life in rural areas. Migrants with a high awareness of natural conservation and other issues form closed communities with other migrants who have the same values (Halfacree, 2012; Halfacree and Merriman, 2015). Dual-site residents have shorter stays in the area than migrants do, increasing the likelihood that dual-site residents develop antagonistic relationships with the inhabitants (McIntyre et al., 2006).

Nomads who repeatedly visit a particular area for a productive work environment (i.e., economic value) may migrate to the area. Migrants aim to creatively consume local landscapes and amenities creatively, often changing the area from where it used to be, which leads to the exclusion of traditional residents (Mitchell, 2013) and, in some cases, to the eviction of long-time residents due to increasing land prices (i.e., gentrification) (Phillips et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial migrants who take advantage of idle local resources may create a network that isolates them from many residents (Florentin et al., 2023). Even more than these migrants who have little involvement with residents, digital nomads, who have increased globally with the development of telework, may contribute to the local economy but have little involvement with residents (Hannonen, 2020), creating conflict between the nomads and residents.

Nomads involved in hostile relationships with residents can simply stop visiting. Nomads can select places to visit based on convenience and other preferences. Housing and social relationship costs of visits are more negligible for nomads than for migrants. Thus, their relationships with residents are short-lived, and the number of hostile nomads can increase. Residents have also believed that migrants can be accepted into the community as quasi-residents, whereas nomads can leave at any time. Unlike migrants, nomads can leave their homes. Residents can also ignore nomads who are only there for a short time and do not necessarily have to interact with them in a friendly manner. Therefore, we can assume the relationship between residents and nomads to be hostile or tentative.

Nonetheless, why does this occur if nomads and residents have friendly relations? We aimed to answer this research question in this paper. Answering this question is necessary because, as mentioned above, the number of nomads visiting rural areas is increasing, and their behavior can significantly affect communities.

Sustaining rural areas, especially those with declining populations, is becoming impossible without building friendly relationships between nomads and residents. Furthermore, the nomadic aspect of rural residents is strengthening. Rural residents no longer settle in an area for the long term. Due to increasing mobility, the answer to managing areas with a declining population may be reconstructing human relationships based on the premise that anyone can become a nomad rather than thinking about the dualism of migrants and residents. It is also important to have a sense of active involvement with the community, rather than simply living in the area of depopulation for revitalization. Yasumura (2006) describes a case in which residents, aware of the significance of the nature and culture remaining in the area, protected the area from development by outside capital and revitalized the area by attracting tourists. Residents should take responsibility for the area's sustainable development and have civic pride in inhabiting the area.

There are situations in which migrants positively affect their migrated area. Areas that welcome bohemian migrants with open arms and realize economic development are what Florida (2005) called "creative cities." Innovation is brought to an area when diverse individuals visit. Being an area that is comfortable for LGBTQAI+ individuals and individuals from other countries allows for diverse ideas, and as a result, economic development is possible. This finding is similar to a "city with a face," as Jacobs (1961) classically discussed. With rural Japan in mind, Sasaki et al. (2014) referred to areas that have been revitalized by the arrival of creative migrants as "creative rural villages" a modified creative city concept proposed by Florida (2005) in the context of rural Japan. Sasaki et al. (2014) introduced the activities of migrants, such as artists who can discover the value of the local natural environment and amenities from a universal standpoint.

Unlike migrants, nomads will not settle in a rural area and have less contact with residents than migrants. Nor are they likely to join neighborhood associations. However, the relationships between nomads and residents are not necessarily fragile. If nomads attempt to consume or create a lifestyle or economic value in a rural area, their relationships with residents will be denser than those of migrants who rarely communicate with residents. Nomads' involvement in these communities is expected to provide residents with a network that transcends regional boundaries. Nomads can also bring information and opportunities to residents that they may not have been aware of or may have taken for granted; such characteristics may be viewed as bridging social capital that overcomes the adverse effects of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2001). To keep rural communities sustainable, residents are expected to take civic pride in their community (Kusakari et al., 2018). Nomads can discover the value of an area from a new perspective. If the migrants shared their discoveries with the residents, these shared values could foster civic pride among the residents. We can regard such nomadic people as affiliative nomads who sustainably contribute to the rural community.

4 Methods

The examples we have presented are primarily from the latter half of the 20th century, when nomads were a minority.

However, the population is becoming increasingly nomadic. Thus, reexamining the relationship between nomads and residents in the 21st century is necessary.

In what follows, we present examples of affiliative nomads and demonstrate why they have become affiliative nomads in terms of their purposes and relationship with residents. Hostile or tentative relationships are assumed between residents and nomads; in some cases, the two have friendly relations. However, this was the case in the 20th century, when there were few nomads, and settled residents were numerous. In the 21st century, mobility is increasing, nomads are growing, and residents are becoming nomadic. In such an environment, it is essential to clarify under what conditions friendly relations can be established to consider the mobility era of the 21st century. In building a friendly relationship, what kind of initiatives were carried out by the residents or nomads? How did the nomads or the residents respond to these initiatives? What was shared in the process of building the relationship? The following section will analyze these questions based on four case studies and find commonalities. We then try to elucidate the conditions under which the relationship between nomads and residents becomes friendly and sustainable, and the nomads become affiliative nomads.

The research conducted by the authors to date has been based essentially on interviews and participant observation. Please refer to the references cited in the respective sections for detailed research results.

5 Affiliative nomads in practice

5.1 Students for field work studies

To avoid the concentration of young adults in the Tokyo metropolitan area, the Japanese government has implemented projects allowing universities to promote regional student learning. Students are expected to discover the challenges and attractions of the targeted areas and to become involved in the areas after graduation (Horiuchi and Takahashi, 2016). Many universities offer fieldwork studies as a pedagogy and issue credits required for graduation. Some university students who initially participated in fieldwork studies now voluntarily participate in projects unrelated to their university classes, from creating sightseeing maps and videos to publicizing local attractions and creating and selling new products using local specialties. During these activities, they interact with residents, who benefit from communication with the university students.

One of the authors (SH) conducted interviews in 2021 with 16 final-year students and graduates from a private university in Osaka, the second-largest urban area after Tokyo, who had engaged in fieldwork studies in rural areas of the Kansai region. More than half the interviewees were from Osaka and other urban areas. Because interviewees had rarely visited rural areas, they experienced culture shock regarding, for example, the lack of cell phone reception or insect infestations. However, they could relate to the rural residents and conduct fieldwork studies. These experiences led them to repeatedly visit the area or other rural areas after graduation. Some interviewees were originally from rural areas and had enrolled in a university in Osaka. They disliked

their rural hometown because there were few job opportunities. However, after learning about the challenges in rural areas, the students began to think they could make the most of their abilities there. Many worked in urban areas after graduation, but they began to use their experiences to revitalize rural areas or to develop careers that would allow them to return to their rural hometowns. Thus, visiting the area as a university student prepared them for continued involvement in the area as nomads or immigrants (Horiuchi, 2022a).

Next, SH conducted interviews in 2022 with 40 final-year students and graduates from seven universities who engaged in fieldwork studies in rural areas of the Kansai region. Many worked in urban areas while visiting rural areas and some worked in rural areas where they had studied or in their hometowns. Some questioned their lifestyle of working hard in urban areas and quitting their jobs, while others became entrepreneurs in rural areas. They were aware that their potential could only be realized in rural communities, and they attempted to make the most of it or to further develop it. They met some adults in the rural areas they visited. The adults were entrepreneurs in agriculture and hospitality, such as restaurants and tourism, which is possible in rural areas, contributing to rural revitalization. Many of these adults had worked in urban areas when they were young and moved to rural areas to become entrepreneurs after developing certain competencies. These adults were models for the graduates to create their careers in later life (Horiuchi, 2023).

For the interviewees introduced here, their motivation for fieldwork studies was likely their academic work and to build a record of achievement for job hunting. However, as they became involved in the rural community, they visited rural areas repeatedly, regardless of their studies or employment-seeking activities. During their university activities and subsequent experiences after graduation, they made mistakes and were nevertheless accepted by the residents. The graduates repeatedly visited the rural community and became affiliative nomads with friendly relationships with the residents.

5.2 Migrants to preserve traditional culture

Ishigaki Island is located in the southwestern part of Okinawa Prefecture, in the southwest end of Japan. The island has an area of 229 km² and a population of 47,637. Although the population of Japan is declining, the island's population has slowly increased. The Shiraho District is in the southeastern part of Ishigaki Island. It has a population of approximately 1,600, beautiful coral reefs along the coast, and a strong traditional culture, including traditional village landscapes, rituals, and ceremonies.

One of the authors (MM) interviewed in 2022–2023 with Shiraho migrants. The migrants originally came to the district in search of tropical amenities, such as frequent diving, or because they yearned to live on southern islands. In many cases, they first started living in the central part of the island, where commercial facilities are concentrated, and later moved to Shiraho District.

Ishigaki Island has many traditional festivals and performing artists. Shiraho District is one of the villages on Ishigaki Island where many traditional cultural practices have been preserved.

Many of these traditional festivals and rituals limit participants to long-time residents or the individuals they invite. In this sense, migrants are different from residents; thus, migrants always feel a sense of guilt. However, many migrants do not necessarily want to be involved in the same activities as long-time residents, but they are attracted to the traditional festivals and rituals to watch the long-time residents' participation. Despite feeling guilty about their status, the migrants do not desire to be liberated from such a position.

Additionally, migrants have a greater sense of urgency than old residents regarding whether the increasing number of immigrants in the district will transform traditional culture. Notably, with the opening of the new Ishigaki Airport in March 2013 in Shiraho District, tourists and migrants increased. The number of tourists visiting Ishigaki Island in 2012 was 835,519; in 2019, it was 1,630,852, doubling in 7 years. Some tourists walk around the district in bathing suits and make noise at night. To accommodate the increase in the number of tourists, the number of lodging facilities in the village has also increased. Specifically, the number of guesthouses and other lodging facilities owned by nonlocal residents has been increasing, and some vacant houses have been turned into lodging facilities without residents' notice.

In response to these changes, some migrants who manage lodging facilities thought that it would be impossible to balance daily life and tourism if the situation remained the same; thus, they created a booklet to communicate their ideas about Shiraho District. This booklet (1) does not list prohibited items, (2) uses fictitious characters, and (3) has a creative design. The booklet communicates the district's way of thinking in an easy-to-understand manner, and tourists are considered "supporters of Shiraho." It aims to create harmony between tourists and residents (Morishige, 2023). Furthermore, to prevent vacant houses from being converted into accommodations without the owners being aware of it, the migrants plan to survey the actual condition of vacant houses.

In response to those migrants who strive to preserve the traditional village landscape and rituals of the district, some old residents no longer consider them migrants but rather fellow residents. However, many migrants seek to maintain their "outsider" status despite establishing affiliations with the old residents. Shiraho migrants feel guilty about not being locals, but they moved to Shiraho District because they admire the traditional culture preserved by the old residents. Hence, migrants maintain affiliative relations with residents.

5.3 Artists for art projects

Art projects based on contemporary art are being carried out in depopulated areas of Japan. Artists use vacant houses as exhibition places for their products and old-fashioned streets and the lives of the residents as materials for their art. By bringing in artists in this manner, vacant houses can be revitalized, and workshops for residents can be successfully established. Some criticize these projects as exploiting artists (Kim, 2019), but what are the artists' attitudes?

The population of Nara Prefecture, the ancient capital of Japan, peaked at ~1.45 million in 1999 and has been declining since then, with a population of ~1.3 million in 2022. One of the most serious problems caused by this depopulation is the increase in the number of vacant houses. For example, 100-year-old houses are highly valued as cultural assets and would generally be tourist attractions. However, the lack of management has led to a growing crisis as these valuable assets are abandoned and lost. A project called "Hanarart," in which artists are invited to vacant houses for a short time to exhibit their works of art, has been implemented since 2011 under the sponsorship of various community development groups. One of the authors (SH) observed and interviewed residents and artists from 2013 to 2015. For the artists who participated in the project, they were provided a venue to expand their artistic possibilities. For artists who could not earn a sufficient income from art alone and had few opportunities to present their work, the projects provided a place to present their work, even if the payment was small. Their activities became their careers, and many later received awards and jobs. Through their activities, vacant houses were sometimes revitalized as cafes, and some artists who exhibited there took up residence (Horiuchi, 2017).

The project continued after COVID-19. Although the theme changed to a sustainable environment and the location changed, the concept of contemporary art that uses vacant houses has not changed. Vacant houses were used in the areas involved in the project. Artists have also become repeatedly involved in these areas.

Some artists who participated in Hanarart found new bases in the nearby inner-city area of Osaka. One such area is the Baika-Shikanjima District, which has been undergoing development as the site of Universal Studios Japan, which opened in 1999. The main venue for the Osaka Kansai Expo scheduled for 2025 is being constructed nearby. Nonetheless, time has passed without any development in the area. Old buildings remain in the area. Some artists had begun to live there, availing themselves of the cheap prices and convenient transportation to businesses. Through their connections, many artists have begun to make art in the area. For them, the area was the preferred location for their ateliers, studios, work, and daily lives because of its proximity to the city center and low cost of living. SH conducted participatory observations and interviews with individuals in the area from 2018 to 2020. Artists visited and engaged with residents in Nara and Osaka and other areas, including abroad. The artists used their art to revitalize the area, including socially vulnerable individuals, intergenerational exchanges, or attracting new migrant artists. Their art activities had a downtown character and deterred gentrification (Horiuchi, 2022b).

Since 2022, after the COVID-19 pandemic, a flea market called "Buy By Bye Markets" involving artists and residents has been held several times in the area. The project aims for sellers and customers to consider what they can do to create a sustainable world and a healthy physical and mental life. The flea market has seven keywords: zero waste, reuse/recycle, sustainable, alternative, wellbeing, walkable, and spend-shift. It is open to anyone who agrees with the concept.

The artists introduced here repeatedly visited abandoned areas of Nara or Osaka. Some of them immigrated there to make their art. The experience of expressing themselves uniquely through their

involvement with the residents was valuable, even if a small fee was required. There were times when they had problems with the residents regarding the method of expression. In the long term, however, the vacant houses that had been abandoned were reused, art events were held with the participation of residents, and the artists promoted reconciliation with the residents. Through these activities, the artists became affiliative nomads.

5.4 Long-term visitors for community engagement

Kushiro is in eastern Hokkaido Prefecture in northeastern Japan. The city's population was 165,077 in 2020. The population peaked at 227,234 in 1980 and has declined since then. Kushiro is one of the coldest cities in Japan, with an average daily maximum temperature of 21°C during summer (July–September). In FY2022, the number of long-term visitors to Kushiro was 2,267, and the total number of days spent in Kushiro was 23,726.

Such long stays and migration in pursuit of an ideal living experience is called “lifestyle migration” (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009), based on the premise of permanent residence in the destination country. However, because migration pursuing an ideal lifestyle does not necessarily involve permanent residence, it is neither tourism nor migration and is considered a “gray zone” (Williams and Hall, 2000). Benson and O’Reilly (2009) considered “lifestyle migration” as a way of searching for a comfortable living environment, encompassing categories such as seasonal and temporary migration.

Generally, long-term visitors seek benefits such as spending the summer in a cool environment and staying temporarily. They are rarely interested in community activities such as creating vitality and liveliness in the area. In Kushiro, however, some long-term visitors participate in volunteer activities such as riverside cleanups and marshland restoration, organize local festivals with residents, and participate in local circle activities, contributing to community development.

One of the authors (MM) interviewed long-term visitors in 2018 and 2019. Exposure to the kindness of residents and city office staff is one of the triggers for visitors to participate in community activities. Long-term visitors are unfamiliar with the areas they visit and are anxious about living in such areas. In Kushiro, however, residents and city office staff provide various types of support to alleviate the concerns of long-term visitors. Visitors told MM, for example, “The owners of the stores I visited for shopping and the individuals I met at the circle were all very personable and welcoming.” “Local individuals who live nearby visited me and taught me many things, and we have a close relationship as a family,” and “During my long-term stay, I was able to visit the circle three times per month. I never felt that I was looked at as a stranger from the beginning.” Many comments from long-term visitors indicate their appreciation for the kindness and warmth of the residents (Morishige et al., 2020).

Long-term visitors also praised the city office staff, for example, “City office staff are very kind to long-term visitors, and they come up with plans based on the stories of long-term visitors” and “The first city office staff and real estate agent I met were kind and polite,

so I decided to buy an apartment here” (Morishige et al., 2020). Long-term visitors come to Kushiro for the cool climate. They did not assume that the residents and city office staff would provide them with warm support before they started their long-term stay in the area. This sense of security they experience during their long-term stay is a factor in making repeated visits to Kushiro. Thus, long-term visitors have become attached to Kushiro, with some spending the winter season in Okinawa and having some attachment to their respective areas, including their home base. This is evidence that the distinction between migrants and nomads is blurring.

One of the reasons why city office staff are so attentive to long-term visitors is that Kushiro aims to increase their number. To do so, the city must understand the needs of long-term visitors. Thus, the staff has begun focusing on forming “touch points” with long-term visitors. In business administration, touchpoints are the contact points between customers and companies. Touchpoints throughout the process from prepurchase to postpurchase are important in managing the customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). By developing various projects in response to the needs of long-term visitors, such as introducing rental properties, arranging cultural circles, providing opportunities to participate in festivals and volunteer activities, and creating opportunities for exchange between long-term visitors and residents, a close relationship between the two parties has been established. This trend can be observed not only in the activities of city office staff but also in the activities of residents, creating opportunities for exchange between residents and long-term visitors.

Residents also benefit from exchanges with long-term visitors. Many long-term visitors choose Kushiro after comparing it with other places to stay, including overseas, and they have visited other areas. Residents and city office staff members said, for example, “Talking with long-term visitors who have more experience is a valuable and enjoyable experience,” and “Long-term visitors know a lot about Kushiro that we don’t know.” Kushiro was selected because their visitors’ comparisons with other regions promote civic pride. Kushiro’s declining population benefits from the success of long-term visitors.

The involvement of long-term visitors in the area is a small part of community development. Long-term visitors’ participation in local activities contributes to revitalizing Kushiro, which is only a temporary place for them to stay. Residents also enjoy interacting with these long-term visitors, and an affiliation between the two groups has been established.

6 Discussion

In the previous section, we examined four case studies in which residents and nomads established friendly relations. Each case had unique local conditions and nomad attributes. However, the four cases share three points: (1) residents and nomads shared the same values, (2) nomads felt indebtedness toward residents, and (3) coordinators bridged the gap between residents and nomads. Accordingly, the nomads in the four cases became affiliative nomads who established sustainable friendly relationships with residents. Hereafter, we discuss our findings regarding these three points.

6.1 Shared values

Nomads were initially involved in the targeted areas to take advantage of the lifestyle value because of a comfortable cost of living and climate, the economic value of increasing their human capital, or both. They were simply repeat tourists who consumed without taking responsibility for maintaining or creating the sources of the values they gained. However, they realized that a relationship with the residents is required to sustainably use the resources in the areas they visited. With the cooperation of residents, they began to discover attractive local resources, disseminate them in maps, videos, new products, communicate with residents (4-1), and create booklets to protect local values from mass tourists (4-2). As the nomads build relationships with residents in this manner, they developed feelings of failure and guilt. They became aware that they are only temporary visitors, and began to feel reserved toward the residents. Although the nomads seemed to be taking actions such as communicating the area's attractiveness and protecting their livelihoods, they understood that they could stay there for a short time and were not responsibly involved in the management and future of the area. Residents shared the value created by these reserved nomads because it was not imposed. The art projects and flea markets were attended by nomads and residents, deepening their friendships (4-3), and the nomads began to share with residents the charms of the community that even the residents were unaware of (4-4). This way, nomads created shared value with residents.

Residents may feel psychologically superior to the nomads, who feel inexperienced and indebted to them. The residents had more knowledge and experience about the natural environment and community than the nomads and could advise the visitors. Residents could also accept the nomads' failures. The residents, who had lost confidence in continuing their lives in the depopulated areas, began to regard the nomads as in a stage of growth. In addition, when the nomads genuinely expressed the beauty of nature and the kindness of the residents, the residents took pride in the area they had protected.

In some cases, residents gained short-term benefits from their interactions with nomads, such as the products created by nomads; in other cases, medium- to long-term benefits were created by improving lifestyle or economic values. However, the most significant benefit for residents was the satisfaction of having their civic pride enhanced by accepting the nomads. In the four cases in the study, residents were significantly pleased with the growth of nomads in the long term, even if problems occurred while accepting the affiliative nomads.

Nomads and residents share the same values and collaboratively create and maintain the values, which are the reasons for the friendship between the two groups. The nomads viewed the residents as great adults who accepted them. Through these experiences, they created values that they shared with the residents. This attitude was accepted by the residents and increased their civic pride. Thus, the nomads became affiliative nomads. If this type of relationship is sustained, even if the residents do not accept the nomads in the short term or if there are problems, the residents will accept the nomads in the long term. Thus, the existence of affiliative nomads needs to be dynamically understood.

The tourism phenomenon is a contact with different cultures not only for tourists but also for residents. Tourists who have little relationship with residents and arrogant attitudes make residents feel threatened that their community will be taken over, and they have a bad impression of them (Horiuchi, 2012). The residents could be highly satisfied with tourists who respect the residents. The focus of this study is not on tourists, but on the nomads who repeatedly visit the area. Nomads do not simply value local resources, but rather develop a modest attitude toward them. By observing this process, residents will find greater satisfaction. Affiliative nomads and residents can manage and defend the area cooperatively from the negative effects of outside capital or mass tourism (Gocer et al., 2024). From this perspective, it will be necessary to re-evaluate the previous studies on tourism.

6.2 Indebtedness

Affiliative nomads imagined their growth regarding their relationship with residents through their interactions. In urban life and work, affiliative nomads often have higher salaries and human capital than rural residents. However, the situation is reversed regarding knowledge and other aspects of rural activities. For example, university students participated in few community activities (4-1). Some traditional rituals and ceremonies were only open to residents, not migrants (4-2). Artists felt gratitude and a sense of debt to the residents who visited them as guests at art events (4-3). Long-term visitors felt gratitude to city office staff and residents who responded in kind (4-4). Thus, the affiliative nomads realized that they were outsiders and felt indebted to the residents, which is why the residents were able to accept them as the stage of growth.

The perceived growth of affiliative nomads not only increases the residents' civic pride but also moderates the power balance between them. Residents asked for help from affiliative nomads because the former were unable solve local issues alone. If affiliative nomads have too much power, residents will lose the ability to manage the area by themselves. The greatest benefit to the residents, civic pride, will decrease. In such cases, the relationship between residents and nomads will eventually break down because nomads will also gain few benefits through communication with residents. Maintaining a balance from which affiliative nomads can benefit from their involvement with residents is necessary to expand nomads' human capital and improve residents' civic pride.

Nomads can choose the community they belong to because of increased mobility, whereas the possibility of being deprived of their community has increased. Bauman (2000) argued that in today's liquid society, individuals who have lost their place of origin are insecure as they attempt to find a place to belong. In the cases we have described, many nomads could not fully contribute to society in their residence. In this sense, they had unfulfilled feelings in their daily lives. However, they were somewhat satisfied with their expected roles in the communities in which they became involved. Recognition from the residents was a short-term reward, and the activity searching for that reward was a growing source of human capital for the nomads. Affiliative nomads searching for a

recognized community are not necessarily socially immature young adults in a growth stage. The nomads may have an identity of belonging to multiple communities. In doing so, we could consider a social identity that would overcome Bauman’s argument.

Such affiliative nomads can be viewed as eudaimonic consumers, happy to improve society by being active (Huta and Ryan, 2010). However, nomads who temporarily stay in an area can only achieve so much for the community, making them reserved and leading to their affiliative relations with residents. Studies of volunteer tourism have also suggested that tourists should imagine their imagined growth by which they can sustainably engage with the community and develop harmonious relationships with the residents (Sin, 2009; Mostafanezhad, 2013; MacDonald, 2022). In the age of mobility, we may have hetero-local identities by contributing and being involved in multiple regions in small ways. In the four cases, nomads likely had multiple identities, particularly in the case of students who did fieldwork studies in different areas (4-1) or long-term visitors who selected more than two sites to visit (4-4). Dilley et al. (2023) suggested that relationship population (*kankei jinko*), which has been the focus of much attention in Japan in recent years, should not be viewed as a counter-urbanization of migration from urban to rural areas, but rather as a movement of people who have hetero-local identities. This became possible owing to high mobility.

6.3 Coordinators

In the four cases presented in this paper, some residents acted as coordinators between nomads and residents. Many coordinators were also immigrants: migrant entrepreneurs (4-1), migrant accommodation providers (4-2), and migrant artists (4-3). City office employees were not migrants but sympathized with migrants (4-4). Nomads developed affiliative relations with the residents because of the help and understanding of coordinators. Some residents have a local address but little connection with the local economy and society. Others frequently leave the community but are deeply involved in the local economy and society; this group could be candidates for coordinators.

Coordinators could connect residents and nomads because they are nomadic. Owing to their high mobility and sympathy with other nomads, the coordinators are likely to attract urban residents and contribute to revitalizing the local economy and society. Because they are also nomadic, they understand nomads’ growth beyond their immature state through community activities.

Because they are residents, they can also understand the civic pride of other residents interacting with such nomads during the growth stage. Perhaps the coordinators benefit most from the interactions between nomads and residents. Because coordinators are embedded in their chosen location, they derive the most pleasure from the area’s revitalization.

Social capital stimulates economic and social activities, not only in urban areas (Florida, 2005) but also in rural areas (Sasaki et al., 2014). Social capital requires close ties within the community, as well as coordinators who connect people with different groups. Coordinators are stakeholder of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2001). However, there has been a lack of clarity about who are these coordinators. We may regard tourist guides as the coordinators who bridge residents and tourist (Cohen, 1985). Future research should be conducted to understand how the coordinators work for affiliative relation between nomads and residents.

We should reconsider social relations in the age of mobility. Traditionally, the public sphere is the foundation of democracy, where membership is somewhat fixed, and political activity is considered honorable (Arendt, 1958). However, now that individuals are more mobile and their values are more diverse, social recognition through honor-seeking political activities, such as running a neighborhood association, has decreased. Instead, nomads and residents are involved in various actions such as collaborative entrepreneurial activities and projects, which will be the place for political activities. As mobility increases, the nature of social recognition will also change. It should include those who are immobile due to a lack of resources and opportunities. Further research is necessary to determine the types of coordinators required to include immobile or disabled people socially.

7 Conclusion

Based on previous studies and the authors’ recent data, this paper examines the potential for nomads to become affiliative nomads by reviewing our fieldwork studies in rural Japan. Affiliative nomads are those who maintain sustainable relations with rural residents in depopulated areas. They engaged with rural residents and came to share values and a sense of indebtedness to the residents, helping to increase the civic pride of residents. Furthermore, the presence of coordinators played an important role in helping affiliative nomads maintain good relationships with residents. Previous studies of sustainable tourism have discussed the importance of ethical tourists to the residents.

TABLE 1 Conditions and processes under which nomads becomes affiliative for each case.

Section	Nomads	Shared values	Indebtedness	Coordinators
4.1	University Students	Findings on natural beauty and local products	Failures in community activities	Migrant entrepreneurs
4.2	Migrants	Findings from traditional cultures	Not being responsible for the locality	Migrant accommodation providers
4.3	Artists	Used vacant houses and flea markets	Arts are not enough livelihood	Migrant artists
4.4	Long-term visitors	Unrecognized attraction points in the area	Kindness of residents and city office staff	City office staff

However, few studies have analyzed their relationship with residents from the perspective of sustaining rural areas beyond the tourism framework.

Table 1 summarizes the four cases. The inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) nomads and residents cocreate values shared by both sides; (2) nomads imagine their stage of growth, which allows them to feel reserved and residents to have civic pride; and (3) coordinators between nomads and residents should be the residents with sympathy toward nomads. In each case, the conditions for establishing affiliative nomads were fulfilled. Although what we have presented in this paper is an extract from the four case studies, we posit that it is a tentative hypothesis worth testing in further research.

Areas with declining populations generally offer few economic opportunities; therefore, individuals leave these areas. Therefore, revitalization projects have been developed to attract factories to create jobs or build large leisure facilities to attract tourists and create jobs. However, outside capital can leave the area for its own interest (Morishige, 2014). Outside capital has also been a reason for the destruction of the environment and communities. With globalization, areas with shrinking populations must use their own resources to maintain a sustainable economy and society. Cases of maintaining sustainable economies and societies across regional boundaries have been reported (Manzenreiter et al., 2020; Ganseforth and Jentzsch, 2022). The residents had been assumed to keep and manage the resources of the area. However, as the population continues to decline in rural areas, there is a shortage of resources managers. Affiliative nomads are not tourists who passively use the local resources, but tourists who actively protect the local resources and promote sustainable tourism. From this perspective, new possibilities for sustainable tourism can be found. In this context, we expect that affiliative nomads could connect rural and urban areas. Affiliative nomads can contribute not only in Japan but also in other areas with declining populations.

International research on sustainable tourism has focused on how residents could protect the region as commons from destruction by tourists (Briassoulis, 2002). This study presents affiliative nomads as the stakeholders who are responsible for managing resources in depopulated rural areas. We may also regard not only the tourists but also the residents could be the affiliative nomads in the age of mobilities. We are required to refresh our vision to grasp society to manage the rural resources as commons.

This paper discusses the potential of affiliative nomads based on a case study of depopulated areas in Japan. To generalize the findings of this paper, it is also necessary to collect case studies from other depopulated areas around the world for comparative analysis. This requires specific quantifiable indicators, which we have summarized in Table 1, namely “shared values,” “indebtedness,” and “coordinators.” However, these three may not be the only important indicators. The socioeconomic and

geographic conditions in which the area is located may also affect the relationship between nomads and residents. Identifying, collecting, and comparing these indicators will be the subject of future research.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The study following research ethics guideline provided by Japanese Association for Social Research. The participants provided their consent to giving their information in this study.

Author contributions

SH: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MM: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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