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Hybridising counterurbanisation: Lessons from Japan's kankeijinkō

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the discourse and material manifestation of *kankeijinkō*, a phrase used in Japan to describe, primarily, highly mobile groups of urbanities who make regular visits to the countryside. Drawing on Japanese grey literature, secondary data analysis, national-level policy reports and exploratory fieldwork in the northwest of Japan, we argue that the concept of *kankeijinkō* offers a view of rural mobility quite different from more established views of counterurbanisation, at least in the way that it has been captured in the global north. As a concept, *kankeijinkō* invites us to move beyond simple and binary taxonomies of migration and settlement, and destabilizes the notion of rural vitality as being linked to rural populations that are spatially fixed and bounded. Further, the promotion of *kankeijinkō* in policy discourses in Japan has the potential to support new hybrid, fluid and place-based rural lifestyles that contribute to an interconnected global countryside. On the other hand, the discourse of *kankeijinkō* might privilege certain modes of rural mobility and being, circumscribing the potentialities of these mobile groups.

1. Introduction

Japan is highly urbanised with 92% of the population classified as 'urban' (World Bank, 2023). However, Japan's population has been falling at an increasing rate since 2008 (Boyd & Martin, 2022) and has been characterised as 'super-aged' (European Parliament, 2020). Population decline is particularly striking in Japanese rural areas, with a significant number of villages and settlements in Japan predicted to disappear completely (Matsuda, 2014), and many others face a range of challenges as tax incomes decline; elderly care costs increase; and the numbers of users and customers for vital services decline (Matanle & Rausch, 2011).

In the context of this demographic shrinkage, there has been a heightened interest in counterurbanisation as both a material phenomenon observed on the ground (Klien, 2020; 2022; Odagiri et al., 2015; Takahashi et al., 2021) and a policy discourse in which migration to the countryside is rendered as a means to tackle rural decline (Dilley et al., 2022). Despite the attention being paid to rural in-migration – Klien (2020) for example focuses on the accounts of young rural in-migrants – data suggest, certainly pre-pandemic, that this is not a dominant trend, and that Japan has witnessed only limited and spatially fragmented consumer-led counterurbanisation (Dilley et al., 2022). This stands in contrast to the 'migration turnaround' witnessed particularly in the US and UK at different periods (Champion, 1998, p. 256).

This paper focuses on *kankeijinkō* [関係人口], which has been promoted through a range of policies that aim to increase and strengthen urban-to-rural flows (see: Prime Minister's Office of Japan undated; Ando et al., 2022). We view *kankeijinkō* as form of counterurbanisation, albeit a form of counterurbanisation caught up in the particularities of Japan's social, economic and political context, and ask: how is *kankeijinkō* constructed and understood within policy circles; what is the evidence for *kankeijinkō* as a material form of mobility on the ground? Who are these *kankeijinkō* populations, and what activities do they engage with? And, in the context of the broader special issue in *Habitat International* (Gkartzios & Halfacree, 2023), what can *kankeijinkō* add to the academic discussion of counterurbanisation?

The term *kankeijinkō* has been awkwardly translated into English as 'relationship population' (see for example: Morais, 2022, p. 473), and denotes, in the most common framing, a group of highly mobile individuals who regularly visit the countryside (Teraoka, 2020). Understood to be on a spectrum of attachment and commitment to their adopted rural area(s), *kankeijinkō* have been rendered within policy

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discourses as a means to inject energy and vitality into declining rural areas through engagement with 'revitalisation' projects, voluntary work, employment, remote working, hobbies and consumption thus providing a (transient) source of human resources needed for rural development (see for example: Cabinet Office undated a).[1] The promotion of *kankeijinkō* appears to indicate a recognition in Japanese policy circles that urban-to-rural migration needs to be understood (and indeed promoted) in more differentiated terms that go beyond simple taxonomies of movement and settlement, as frequently found in rural studies scholarship (e.g. Halfacree 2012; Mitchell, 2004; Šimon, 2012; Karsten, 2020; but see also notions of 'temporary' counterurbanisation discussed by Halfacree 2012, 2017). The policy discourse of *kankeijinkō* also signals an implicit admission that there is a need to move beyond the goal of rural population recovery and the associated idea that large-scale permanent relocation down the urban hierarchy in itself will foster rural vitality (Inoue et al., 2022). In this way, the concept of *kankeijinkō* seems to destabilize the notion that rural vitality is linked to unidirectional urban-to-rural mobilities or populations that are spatially fixed and bounded (see also: Bosworth, 2010; Bosworth & Atterton, 2012), reframing the future of rural Japan in terms of groups and individuals that are *continuously* transient and mobile. *Kankeijinkō* thus potentially not only subverts notions (and implicit valuations) of stasis and stability (Cresswell, 2010, 2021; Sheller & Urry, 2006) that are often embedded within dominant (western) cultural and political constructions of rurality (Bell & Osti, 2010; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014, p. 327), but also 'sedentarist understandings of migration' (Halfacree, 2012, p. 213) in which rural mobilities (particularly counterurbanisation) are often framed in unidirectional and temporally bounded terms, giving rise to a sense of movement being terminated by a 'sedentarist finality' (ibid: 213) rather than an open-ended process.

This paper contributes to the literature by, first, documenting the evidence for *kankeijinkō* in Japan; and, second, by exploring the conceptual resonance between the terms counterurbanisation and *kankeijinkō*, we aim to diversify global understandings of counterurbanisation by examining mobility practices, experiences and imaginations beyond the anglosphere (Gkartzios, 2018). This is particularly salient for three reasons. First, while *kankeijinkō* has been discussed in the Japanese academic and policy literature (Matsuda, 2020; Odagiri, 2018; Tanaka, 2017) – which we explore later – there is little literature in English that touches on this topic (although see: Inoue et al., 2022; Teraoka, 2020; Morais, 2022). Second, the recent COVID-19 pandemic, while not the focus of this paper, has bolstered Japanese policy measures aimed at supporting those looking to temporarily, or permanently, migrate to rural areas. These measures have arguably sought to capitalise on and reinforce: shifting migration patterns during the height of COVID-19 (see: Fielding & Ishikawa, 2021, p. 8); a shift in working practices to online; an increased interest in alternative work practices (e.g., workations); and an apparent heightened interest amongst young Tokyoites for rural living (Cabinet Office, 2022). This apparent increase in interest in rural lifestyles is of particular note as it lends weight to arguments that there is an ongoing shift in the construction of the rural in Japan away from post-war modernist framing of the countryside as backwards and valueless (see: Dilley et al., 2022; Gkartzios et al., 2020; Moon, 2002). Third and finally, rural population decline is becoming an increasingly important issue beyond Japan, particularly in Europe (see for example: ESPON, 2020; Wirth et al., 2016). Indeed, Japan's status as an exemplar of population decline has meant that a number of international (for example: European Parliament, 2020; Hong & Schneider, 2020) and national policy arenas (for example: Atterton et al., 2022) as well as research projects (for example: Murakami et al., 2009; Qu & Zollet, 2023) have turned their attention to Japan to understand whether Japanese policies and approaches could provide valuable international lessons not only in terms of re-population but also in managing the impacts of population shrinkage and ageing.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we revisit the literature on counterurbanisation, after which we provide a brief overview of demographic shrinkage in rural Japan and the promotion of urban-to-rural mobilities within Japanese policy discourses. We subsequently present the methodology of this work. We then explore the discourse of and evidence for *kankeijinkō,* situating our analysis within Japan's broader demographic and policy context. We argue that *kankeijinkō* offers a hybrid view of rural mobility quite different from more established views of counterurbanisation. Further, we suggest that the promotion of *kankeijinkō* in Japan has the potential to support hybrid (rural and non-rural; local and global) lifestyles that contribute to a global countryside and wider rural and regional development. However, there is a danger that the discourse of *kankeijinkō* privileges certain modes of being for rural migrants, putting pressure on individuals to 'contribute' to rural development.

2. Background

2.1. Mobilities and counterurbanisation

The literature on counterurbanisation is vast but it is worth acknowledging some key points across more than five decades of research (see: Halfacree, 2008; Stockdale, 2010; Gkartzios, 2013). First, there is not a single and ubiquitous counterurbanisation trend occurring globally (McManus, 2022). Counterurbanisation has many different facets and speeds, and is intrinsically connected to local meanings and definitions of rurality (which also vary greatly globally, see: Gkartzios et al., 2020), as well the historical context of urbanisation and industrialisation. Early counterurbanisation research, for example, contributed to the construction of the countryside in opposition to the city. If the city was associated with crime and the 'rat race', it was the countryside that offered the contrary and a (perceived) better quality of life which matched the interests of the urban middle classes, a view that was itself linked to the 'rural idyll' (see for example: Halfacree, 1993, 1994). Such binary views were later challenged, with scholars commonly referring to the 'counterurbanisation story' (Champion, 1998) and situating counterurbanisation as only one component of broader 'messy' rural mobilities (Stockdale, 2016). Studies have also highlighted how the 'rural idyll' is by no means universal and is often pronounced in more urbanised and industrialised societies (Scott et al., 2017), and indeed previous work (e.g., Dilley et al., 2022) has suggested that Japan is considerably different in that regard from other urbanised societies, with the countryside often constructed in backwards and parochial terms (Gkartzios et al., 2020).

Research globally has highlighted many different drivers of counterurbanisation ranging from (positive) representations of the rural to economic motives (termed 'displaced-urbanisation' by Mitchell, 2004), as well as convenience; employment opportunities; and family (irrespective of idylls; see for example: Karsten, 2020; Nielsen, 2022). Whatever the complexity of 'counterurbanisation stories' across different contexts, studies have evidenced differentiated mobilities to the countryside – or, broadly areas perceived as 'more rural' – reflecting a wider shift towards understanding 'place' in terms of networked and mobile populations (Cresswell, 2006; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Urry, 2007). This work on mobilities suggests that counterurbanisation as well as broader rural mobilities (e.g., lateral migration, international migration, etc.) are driving forces for a constant (re-)making of rural places. As such, they give rise to new politics of place and hybrid

[1] The term 'revitalisation' [活性化] is common in academic and policy discourses in Japan. It is often linked to a broad range of initiatives and projects that are orientated towards increasing the social, economic or cultural potential of rural places and thus corresponds to the broader notion of 'rural development' in English. We recognise the issues involved in using such terms, but we want to keep consistency with how such terms are used in Japan (and in scholarly translations). For a more in-depth discussion see Qu and Zollet (2023).

meanings of rurality (e.g., Woods, 2011), and point to new ways in which counterurbanisation can support aspects of rural development (e.g., Bosworth & Bat Finke, 2020). This highlights the importance of all forms of mobilities, irrespective of distance, temporality or motivation in the 'counterurbanisation story'. Indeed, Milbourne (2007: 385) argues that, in addition to unidirectional movements, there is a need to recognise the importance of a range of mobilities in the constitution of rurality, including:

> […] journeys of a few yards as well as those of many hundreds of miles; linear flows between particular locations and more complex spatial patterns of movement; stops of a few hours, days or weeks as well as many decades […]

Different methodological frames have been employed to study counterurbanisation across different scales (for example across national, regional or local scales) and across different cultural contexts. Demographic research usually focuses on large scale surveys and census data in an effort to uncover urban-rural 'turnarounds' drawing on aggregate urban and rural (i.e., binary) population and settlement size changes (e.g., Fielding, 1982). However, following the cultural and mobility turns in rural studies, more research has focused on the lived experience of counterurbanisers, drawing on local case studies – irrespective of aggregate population changes – through qualitative research methods (e.g., Rivera, 2007). That means that counterurbanisation has been studied both in areas in which migrant populations are significant, and also areas that do not fit the narrative of an urban-rural 'turnaround' but are characterised by 'pockets' of urban in-migrant populations. Much research also acknowledges that an individual's 'counterurbanisation story' is often not in fact 'completed' with their relocation to a rural destination, but is in fact an often an open-ended event as part of their life course (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012; Stockdale & Catney, 2014). Indeed, households might relocate again and again, and across different types of settlements giving rise to diverse forms of (open--ended) semi-permanent and temporary rural mobilities (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014). Such diverse rural mobilities suggest a 'heterolocalism' (Halfacree, 2017), embracing multiple 'moorings' (Hannam et al., 2006), rather than the traditional belief of having a single and permanent home.

Halfacree's notion of 'dynamic heterolocalism' (drawing on Zelinsky & Lee, 1998) has a particular relevance to studying *kankeijinkō* because both concepts are rooted in the idea that people identify with multiple places and in numerous ways, both symbolic and material (through housing for example (see: Gallent, 2014)). Such 'heterolocal identities' have been explored in western literature through second homes (for example in the case of Norway, see Halfacree, 2011), and offer a challenge to permanent-temporary dichotomies as well as views of counterurbanisation as relating to an uni-directional and permanent relocation to the countryside (Halfacree, 2012). Hence, Halfacree (2012: 218; see also Halfacree, 2010; 2011; 2014; 2017) has called for a broader 'imagination' of counterurbanisation, one that accounts for more transitory rural mobilities and habitation types acknowledging the multiples ways the city and the countryside are entangled and in constant transformation. We thus approach *kankeijinkō* as sitting within (and indeed adding to) this 'broader imagination' of counterurbanisation. However, as discussed later, what makes *kankeijinkō* of note compared to those experiences in the west is the articulation of such more transitory forms of counterurbanisation in policy discourse.

Finally, we should acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of continued research on counterurbanisation due to increased mobilities in rural areas often linked to the perception of rural places as safer and healthier (Denham, 2021; González-Leonardo et al., 2022; Tammaru et al., 2023). We thus situate our examination of *kankeijinkō* against the backdrop of this recent renewed interest in counterurbanisation and calls for greater attention to (often open-ended) rural mobilities (see also Gkartzios & Halfacree, 2023). In Japan, similarly, COVID-19 has been part of the backdrop to a reported increased interest in urban-to-rural migration (e.g., McCurry, 2022) and it is to Japan, Japanese demographic changes and policy responses, we turn next.

2.2. Japan: rural depopulation

Japan's demographic shrinkage is well documented with recent figures indicating that the country's population fell by almost two million (127 million to 125 million) between 2015 and 2021 (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022) and predictions suggest that by 2060, Japan's population will fall by almost 40 million to 86 million (Cabinet Office undated b). This shrinkage is tied to a birth rate that has been below the rate of replacement for almost 50 years (Statistics Bureau of Japan undated a) as well as demographic ageing, with those over the age of 65 representing 29.1% of the population in 2021 with this number predicted to grow to 35.3% by 2040 (Statistics Bureau of Japan, undated b).

While depopulation and ageing are phenomena that are now being seen across large swathes of Japan, rural areas are at the forefront of this demographic change, with many remote areas having experienced precipitous population decline and ageing to the point that a significant number of villages and settlements are in danger of disappearing entirely (Matanle & Rausch, 2011). Indeed, the majority (51%) of all municipalities are now classed as *kaso chiiki* [過疎地域] or 'depopulated areas' (Koizumi, 2022), with 20,372 (32.2%) of villages in these areas in an advanced state of ageing (i.e., over 50% of their residents are aged 65 or over) (MIC, 2020, p. 5).

As with Japan as a whole, depopulation and demographic ageing in rural areas can be linked to a falling birth-rate and increasing life-expectancy in the post-war period, but these drivers of population decline have been exacerbated further by net negative rural out-migration (Matanle & Rausch, 2011). The history of migration within Japan is, however, complex, and there are periods in which rural out-migration patterns have appeared to slow (particularly during the oil crisis of the 1970s) or even reverse as seen in 1994 – a period of time significant for the collapse of the bubble economy in Japan (see Fig. 1; also see Cabinet Office, 2019; Ishikawa & Fielding, 1998).[2] Later however, as the economy recovered in the early 2000s, net-migration out of the regions and into Tokyo and the other two largest conurbations resumed – a trend underpinned by a relative lack of quality employment and education opportunities in the more remote areas of Japan (see Fig. 1; also: Matanle & Rausch, 2011, p. 90; 108).

More recently, in 2021, the population of Tokyo, for the first time in 26 years, fell (Kobayashi, 2022; Statistics of; Statistics of Tokyo, 2022a; 2022b). Analysis by Fielding and Ishikawa (2021) highlighted an apparent reduction in migration to and an increase in out-flows from Japan's capital. For Fielding and Ishikawa (2021: 8) the COVID-19 pandemic had driven a 'remarkable reversal' of earlier trends, and had spurred a 'sudden loss of attractiveness of Tokyo … in favour of remoter rural regions'. Indeed, media reports were quick to link movement from the capital and this apparent reversal of migration trends to changes in values amongst the residents of Tokyo (see for example: McCurry, 2022). This link was perhaps not unfounded, with a survey by the Japanese government highlighting an apparent increased desire, especially amongst people in their 20s, to leave Tokyo for other regions (Cabinet Office, 2022).

2.3. Promoting rural mobilities in Japan

Despite the apparent shifts in migration patterns during the pandemic (particularly in 2021), Saito, 2021: 91) prediction of Tokyo's 'bounce back' after the pandemic appears correct, with the population having returned to 2019 pre-pandemic levels (Statistics of Tokyo,

[2] The 'bubble economy' is a name given to sharp rise in Japanese land and stock prices between the early 1980s and 1990s.

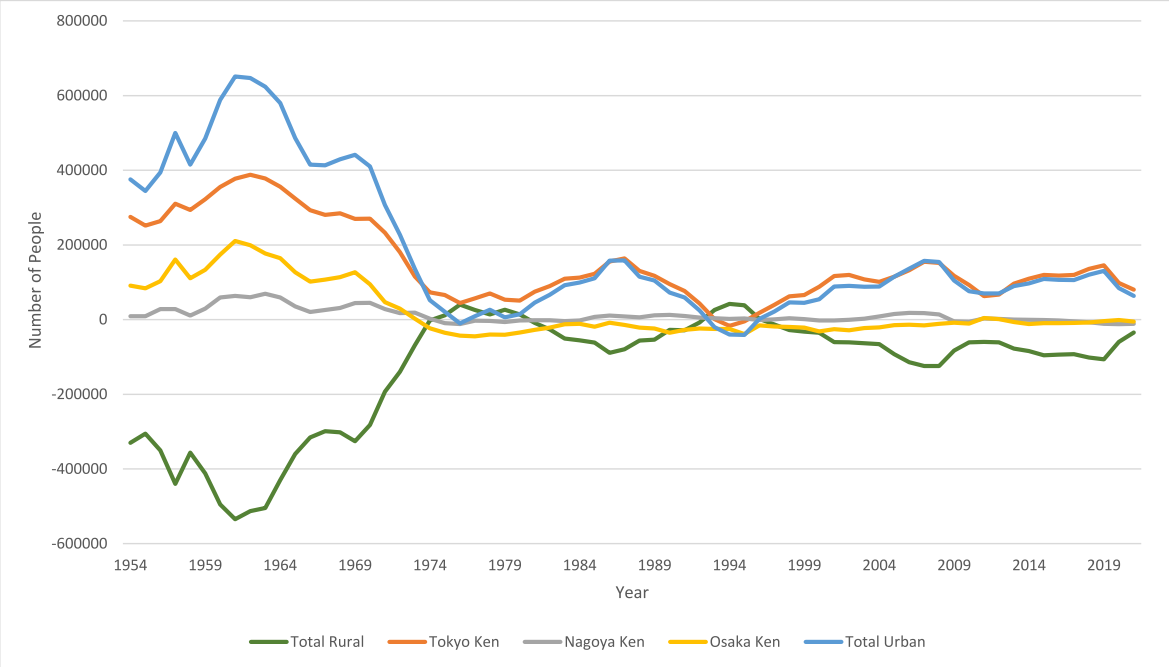

Fig. 1. Net-migration for selected urban and rural areas. Notes: Compiled by the authors using data from the Japanese e-Stat, the portal site of Official Statistics of Japan. 'Ken' refers to larger urban conurbations. 'Total Rural' refers to all other areas outside of Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka ('Total Urban') conurbations.

2022c) and in-migration increasing (Japan Today, 2023). Yet, it is in the context of these historic and more contemporary migration patterns, that we may better situate the Japanese government's aim to increase human flows from the main urban centres to the more remote regions of Japan (Dilley et al., 2022; Takahashi et al., 2021). Indeed, promoting new flows of people into regional areas was a key aim of the 2014 Regional Revitalisation Strategy. More recently, it was reported that the government was seeking to balance net-migration to Tokyo from the regions by 2027 (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 2022).

Such attempts fall in line with the notion of 'idealised counter-urbanisation' (Dilley et al., 2022), a phrase used to denote a policy discourse in which urban-to-rural mobilities are positioned by policy-makers, NGOs and academics as a way to tackle the moribund state of rural areas in Japan. In this vein, Dilley et al. (2022) and others (Atterton et al., 2022; Feldhoff, 2011; Klien, 2020; Murakami et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2021) have highlighted a range of schemes and initiatives that have explicitly sought to increase urban-to-rural mobilities, often supported by an argument that there is an 'excessive' concentration of human and financial capital in the metropolitan areas of Japan, particularly Tokyo (see for example: Cabinet Office, 2019).[3] Less directly, a range of activities including 'rural experience' programs [*inaka taiken* 田舎体験] and state-sponsored art festivals in remote and rural areas aim to foster an appreciation of rural living and to encourage urban-to-rural mobilities (Gkartzios et al., 2022). There is also the *furusato nōzei* [ふるさと納税] initiative, a tax contribution scheme where non-residents are able to designate part of their tax contributions to a particular rural location (Rausch, 2020). It is in this context that we turn to the methods of this paper.

3. Methods

This paper seeks to address three interrelated questions: 1) how are *kankeijinkō* constructed and mobilised in policy discourses; 2) what is the evidence for *kankeijinkō* as a form of mobility on the ground, who are they and what do they do; and finally, 3) how do *kankeijinkō* compare with the predominantly western discourses of counterurbanisation? Empirically, this paper draws on a review of grey literature, policy documents, and works produced by academic and development practitioners; secondary analysis of public data; and exploratory fieldwork conducted by the authors.

With regard to the secondary data, we present our analysis of raw data from a survey of over 140,000 respondents carried out by the Japanese Ministry of Infrastructure, Land, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) in 2020 (available at MLIT, undated a). This analysis was carried out using the software package JASP 17.1. We also elucidate this data by drawing on the accompanying report written by the Lifestyle Diversification and *Kankeijinkō* Panel (LDKP, 2021), of which one of the authors of this paper was a key member. To our knowledge, this report remains unexplored in Anglophone literature. We filter and add nuance to this data by drawing on discussions that the authors have had with rural migrants during qualitative fieldwork which has involved a small number of exploratory unstructured interviews and discussions in the north western prefecture of Akita over the last six months. These do not add up to a substantial empirical component in our present paper, but we still feel it is important to include as they offer some critical insights.

Before turning to the next section, we must acknowledge the complexity of language – and language politics – in the research process, particularly as the project involves significant engagement with policy discourses and data (available only in Japanese) and their subsequent translation in English (Gkartzios et al., 2020; Müller, 2021). Given our aim to position the discourse of *kankeijinkō* within the more western narrative of counterurbanisation, we have collaborated as part of a symmetric research team, involving both Japanese and non-Japanese researchers, all of whom having worked and conducted fieldwork in Japan. Original terms used and translated in this paper from Japanese are also given in the original language in brackets.

[3] This concentration is argued to have led to range of urban pathologies including: increased vulnerability to disaster; high cost of land, rent and housing; long commutes and future issues around health and elderly care services (Cabinet Office, 2014).

4. Results

4.1. Promoting kankeijinkō

In the context of rural demographic decline (see sections 2.2 and 2.3), the Japanese government has been promoting *kankeijinkō* ['relationship population' see earlier] (Ando et al., 2022). The origins of this term have been linked to a number of scholars (see: Hashimoto, 2022) but it was arguably popularised by the author Terumi Tanaka (Teraoka, 2020), who defined *kankeijinkō* as 'a group of people, who for various reasons, have a connection to rural areas. For example, those who visit rural areas regularly, or buy locally produced goods and even if not physically present … can play a role in revitalisation' (Tanaka, 2017, p. 8, translation by authors). It is important to note that *kankeijinkō* are understood to incorporate those who 'contribute' to rural areas 'remotely' either through monetary contributions (i.e., buying local goods or the *furusato nōzei* tax system (see earlier)). However, what makes the discourse of *kankeijinkō* intriguing is that *kankeijinkō* are often rendered as situated on, and progressively moving up, a 'staircase' or spectrum of commitment (see Fig. 2) from those that buy local goods, to those who undertake regular visits and, 'moving up a level', engage in volunteering and finally hybrid (i.e., local/non-local) residency, a last step before more 'permanent' settlement (see for example: MIC undated a; Odagiri, 2018; Tanaka, 2017, pp. 59–61). In this way an emphasis (and valuation) is placed upon urbanities that make regular visits and have physical and long-term connections to rural places. Indeed, it is clear that Tanaka (2017) envisages *kankeijinkō* as largely originating from urban areas, hence sitting comfortably with some form of (less--than-permanent (see Halfacree, 2012, 2014)) counterurbanisation.[4]

For Tanaka (2017), a key consideration is that Japan's population as a whole is falling; thus, encouraging permanent in-migration from other locations potentially represents a zero-sum game (p. 246). Hence, *kankeijinkō* offers an opportunity to invigorate rural areas without needing to engage in population trade-offs between multiple areas (p. 7). Further, *kankeijinkō*, much like permanent residents, could contribute in multiple ways to local development: by helping build place attachment; increasing recognition of local brands; encouraging inward investment; and also, generating and mobilising new ideas, knowledge and networks (Tanaka, 2017).

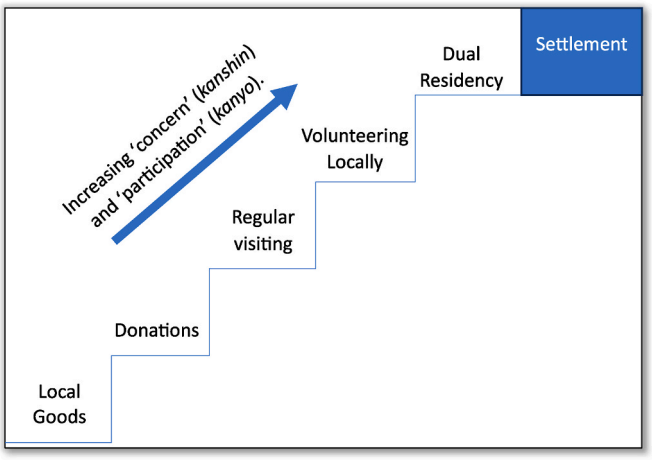

Fig. 2. The 'Staircase' of Commitment. Notes: Adapted from and based on Odagiri (2018: 15) and Tanaka (2017: 61).

The concept of *kankeijinkō* and the 'staircase' of commitment have subsequently been replicated and modified by a range of authors, groups and institutions including the Japanese government. Consequently, the definition and understanding of *kankeijinkō* has shifted since 2017. Tanaka (2017) argues that *kankeijinkō* was first clearly articulated in Japanese government documents in a report published in April 2017; and later the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications' *Kankeijinkō* Portal – a website dedicated to promoting and encouraging *kankeijinkō* – came to define *kankeijinkō as* 'neither [permanent] migrants nor those who come for sightseeing, but points to people who are connected to rural areas for various reasons.' (MIC undated a). In this way *kankeijinkō* should not be considered a static or clearly defined concept (Noda, 2022); indeed, it seems to have evolved *ad-hoc* as part of a shifting policy narrative about the appropriate ends and means of rural policy.

An important evolution can be seen in the spatial connections which are deemed to count under the term *kankeijinkō.* In Tanaka's (2017) book it is clear that urbanities making repeated visits to rural areas are a key component of *kankeijinkō,* although the possibility and value of rural-to-rural connections are also recognised (p. 247). The fact that counterurbanisation constitutes the dominant underpinning of *kankeijinkō* is reflected in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC undated b) *Kankeijinkō* Portal. Here pictures of archetypal Japanese rural areas and rice paddies are interspersed with pictures and interview excerpts of men and women from some of the central prefectures of Japan, with an invitation to find one's *furusato* [ふるさと], a term that can be translated as 'spiritual home'. Here, again, *kankeijinkō* is rendered as a form of 'idealised counterurbanisation' (Dilley et al., 2022) grounded on nostalgic and affect laden representations of the rural (Ito, 2019; Robertson, 1988).

In this vein, one of the first surveys undertaken by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) in 2019 focuses on the residents of the three largest urban conglomerations in Japan (Nagoya, Osaka and Tokyo) and examines their relationship to other places (MLIT, undated b). This focus fits with a boarder problematization, within Japanese policy literature, of the concentration of the Japanese population in urban areas, especially Tokyo (see for example: Cabinet Office, 2019; MLIT, 2014). Yet this common rendering of *kankeijinkō* as inhabitants of big cities visiting rural areas has been critiqued for circumscribing the possibilities of rural mobilities. Indeed, Ito (2019) argues that characterising *kankeijinkō* as a population of urbanities – and effectively as counterurbanisation – misses the critical role that rural-to-rural mobilities could play in contributing to rural vitality, mobilities that are often underpinned by kinship ties. However, a later survey by the same ministry conducted in 2020 (see: MLIT, undated a), seems to have broadened their approach with sampling being conducted across Japan. Indeed, in the final research report, *kankeijinkō* are rendered as individuals who may have main residences in either rural or urban spaces, and make repeated visits or overnight stays to urban and (multiple) rural areas (LDKP, 2021, p. 9). Such a characterisation of *kankeijinkō* belies a view of urban-rural relations in binary and static terms and resonates with a rendering of rural migration as multi-directional and 'messy', incorporating a range of (hybrid) urban and rural mobilities (Stockdale, 2016). To dig a little deeper into *kankeijinkō* we now turn to the 2020 MLIT survey.

4.2. Kankeijinkō data

The survey carried out in 2020 by the Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and the accompanying report written by the Lifestyle Diversification and *Kankeijinkō* Panel (LDKP, 2021) sought to quantify the extent of *kankeijinkō* in Japan. They reveal a highly complex set of connections and mobilities to, from and between urban and rural areas. Indeed, 41,269 (27.9%) of those sampled indicated that, before the COVID pandemic, they had a connection to an area outside

[4] An example of this is that Tanaka (2017) suggests that *kankeijinkō* can be understood as a reverse *sankin kōtai* (p. 56), a system in the Tokugawa period in which lords from Japan's regions spent alternative years in Edo, the then capital of Japan. See also Matsuda (2020).

their place of residence which was not related to mundane daily activities, nor commuting for work or education. These connections were diverse, including: online virtual exchanges; monetary contributions via crowdfunding and the *furusato nōzei* initiative; and, material mobilities through repeated and regular visits for a diverse array of reasons including volunteering, participation in events, or returning to one's (family) home for *Obon* or New Year's celebrations (see below for a more detailed overview of activities).

On the basis of this survey data, the Lifestyle Diversification and *Kankeijinkō* Panel (LDKP, 2021) constructed a binary typology of *kankeijinkō* with respondents being split into: '*visit kankeijinkō*' [訪問関係人口] (18.4% of Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka sample/16.3% of other area sample), i.e. those *kankeijinkō* who have a physical connection to other areas through visits (see also Fig. 3 for a further breakdown); and '*non-visit kankeijinkō*' [非訪問関係人口] (2.6% and 2.2% respectively), i.e. those *kankeijinkō* who have a connection through monetary or virtual means. The Lifestyle Diversification and *Kankeijinkō* Panel (LDKP, 2021) argued that by extrapolating from their sample, the data indicated that 8.6 million residents of the Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya conurbations could be classified as *visit kankeijinkō* and with 9.7 million *visit kankeijinkō* located in other regions.

We have utilised the '*visit/non-visit kankeijinkō*' dichotomy in order to examine the profiles and connections of *kankeijinkō*, referring below to 'areas of connection' as the places that *kankeijinkō* regularly visit or contribute to. It is important to note here that while empirical research on counterurbanisation commonly focuses on rural residents who migrated from urban areas (however defined), the focus of our *kankeijinkō* analysis is a sample of people who have *connections* to rural areas, irrespective of their residence (either within the major urban conurbation of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya, or outside this conurbation).

Regarding the location of areas of connection in relation to place of residence, for those classified as *visit kankeijinkō* and living within Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya, almost half of the areas of connection (48.5%) were outside of these three major urban conurbations.[5] For those living outside of the Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka areas, 33% of their areas of connection were located within these three main conurbations, with the remaining 67% of areas of connection being outside these three main urban conurbations. Digging into this further, of those *visit kankeijinkō* living in the three urban conurbations who had a connection with areas outside these conurbations, roughly 52% of these areas of connection were 'urban' with the majority of remaining areas being 'rural' (46%).[6] For those residing in areas outside the three large conurbations, the equivalent results regarding the location of areas of connection were roughly 60% in 'urban' areas and 39% in 'rural' areas. Together this data suggests that while the areas of connection for many of those classified as *visit kankeijinkō* were located in the three largest conurbations of Japan or in other urban areas, a significant proportion of areas which were repeatedly visited, particularly for those who lived in the Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya regions, were in fact 'rural'. We focus our analysis on these *visit kankeijinkō* to rural areas outside of the Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka areas below disaggregating our analysis by area of residence as needed. We take this focus for two reasons: 1) as an attempt to mirror the main policy discourse in which mobile populations (particularly urbanities) are seen to play a key role revitalising rural areas; 2) to draw out *kankeijinkō* as a material manifestation of counterurbanisation as broadly understood.

Examining the profiles of *visit kankeijinkō* with connections to rural areas outside of the Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka areas, 56% were men, while women accounted for 44% (N = 6921). This compares to 46% men and 54% women who answered they have no connection to other areas. Of these *visit kankeijinkō*, the largest proportion were in the 30–39 age bracket (24%), although there were noticeable proportions of women in the age brackets of 18–29 (22%) and 50–59 (23%). Considering that only 17.4% of the Japanese population as a whole in 2022 is in the 30–44 age group (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022), this would suggest that *visit kankeijinkō* are more likely to be young in comparison to the population as a whole. Overall, the data implies that *visit kankeijinkō* to rural areas outside of the Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka areas were often in younger age categories, with men being over-represented. With regard to employment, the largest proportion of these *visit kankeijinkō* were company employees (38% for men and women combined), although there were some noticeable differences between men and women. Particularly, 23% of these women *visit kankeijinkō* were housewives (corresponding figure for househusbands was 0.9%) and 21% were part-time employees (comparative figure was 4% for men). While these employment figures arguably reflect the dominant division of labour in Japan (see: Shirahase, 2017; Heinrich & Imai, 2021), overall the data resonates with work that has highlighted an apparent increasing prevalence of younger (between 20 and 45), highly mobile individuals in Japan's rural areas who balance a range of commitments in multiple locations (see: Klien, 2020; 2016).

What are these connections or commitments exactly? Table 1 unpacks what these *visit kankeijinkō* do and how they spend their time in their areas of connection. Looking at Table 1, for those that visit rural areas outside of the Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka conurbations, activities related to consumption, hobbies, or family were most prominent; however, small but noticeable proportions included activities related to volunteering, development or entrepreneurial activity (e.g., creation of new businesses, preservation activities or town/village 'renewal' projects). Indeed, in Akita in the northwest of Japan, in-migrants and temporary residents have been involved in and have led the establishment of various businesses (from accommodation to consultancy), restaurants, small farms and art galleries and have been a driving force behind a number of restoration projects – including old houses and community facilities. There are perhaps two further striking aspects of Table 1. First, the figures for both residents of the three conurbations of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya and all other areas are striking similar. Second for both groups, while respondents noted a range of activities, roughly 48% of responses indicated the second most effort or time was expended on doing 'nothing special' suggesting that these rural mobilities are both purposeful and prosaic. The survey data also suggests that the connections to rural areas have continued over a noticeable amount of time with the majority (66%) of connections to these areas outside of the three main urban conurbations for *visit kankeijinkō* having been established five years ago or more. Furthermore, 27% (the largest proportion) of rural areas of connection were visited several times a year, although for those who lived outside of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya areas, 23% of rural areas of connection were visited several times a month or more, with the majority (54%) of visits lasting either one night (27%) or between two and four nights (28%).

The data presented in Table 1 suggests that a noticeable number of individuals across Japan regularly visit, if not actively engage in development or 'revitalisation' processes in rural areas outside their normal place of residence. And while the proportion of connections that revolve around local initiatives and development activities may be small, research has shown elsewhere that rural in-migrants can contribute positively to rural development (Bosworth, 2010; Bosworth & Bat Finke, 2020; Qu & Zollet, 2023), in-part by linking exogenous and endogenous resources and networks (Bosworth & Atterton, 2012). Hence, the activities and presence of *kankeijinkō* taken together and across a large number of areas could have a significant impact in rural

[5] Respondents could have multiple connections to different areas, and could submit up to three responses to the survey. Thus, figures do not necessarily relate to percentage of respondents, but as in this case, can indicate percentage of areas of connection.

[6] Using the classifications provided by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, we define 'rural' here as those areas which were deemed to be either 1) 'City (within city boundaries but forestry and agricultural area)'; 'Suburb (residential)'; 3) 'Suburb (periphery/agricultural and forestry area)'; 4) 'Farming, fishing and mountainous villages'.

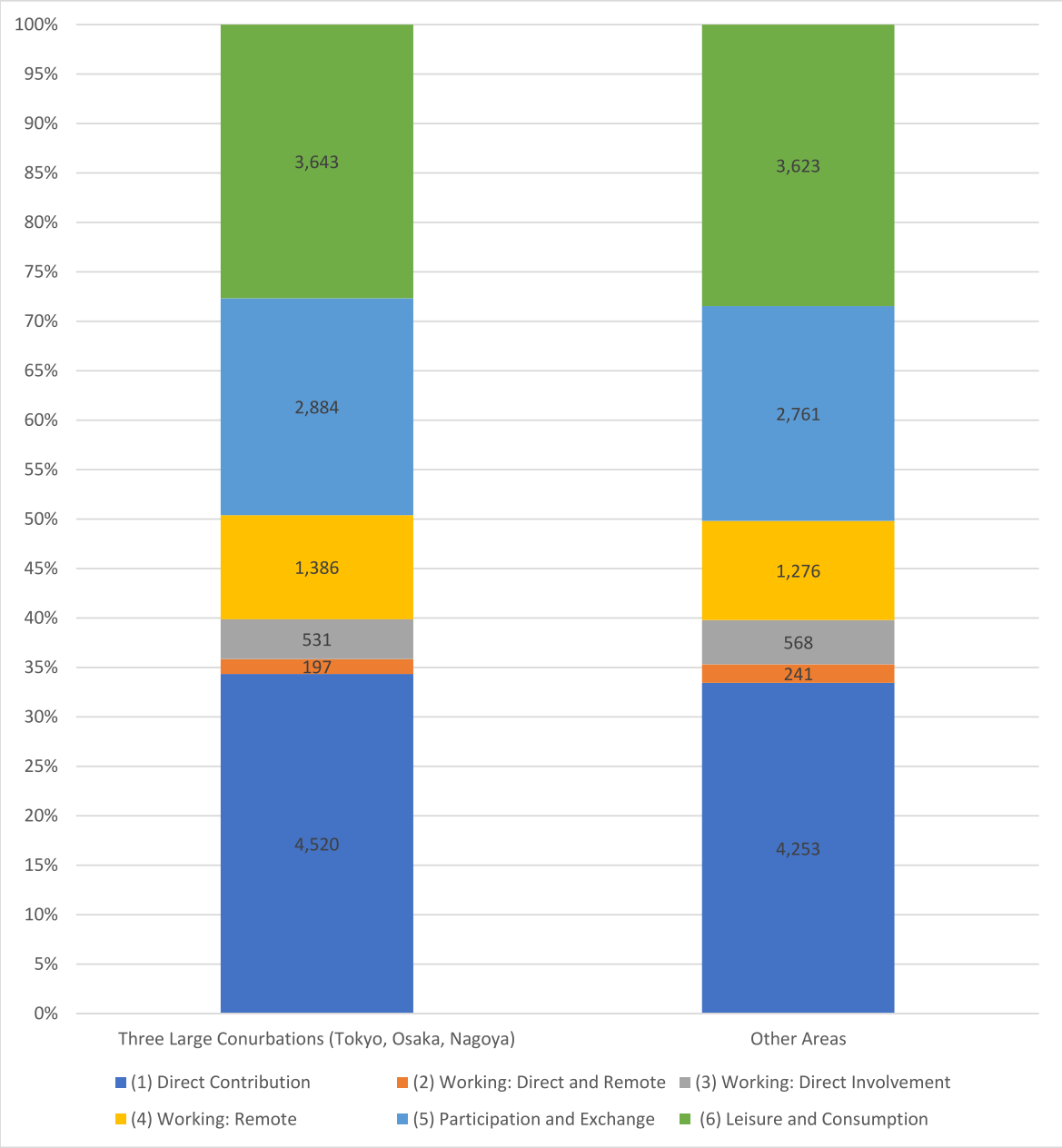

Fig. 3. Percentage of *visit kankeijinkō* by type and by place of residence before COVID-19. Notes: Counts included. Compiled using raw data set by MLIT (undated a). Definitions of *visit kankeijinkō*: 1) includes involved in creation of businesses; volunteering or conservation of local resources; 2) includes involved in a company or primary sectors locally and also undertakes main employment outside the area of connection; 3) includes working locally (as a side job) or involvement in primary sectors locally; 4) includes those whose main employment is outside the area of connection; 5) includes exchanges with local people or participation in events; 6) includes culinary activity, or participation in hobbies but no involvement in employment, development projects or volunteer activities.

Japan. Indeed, data suggests that while *kankeijinkō* do not necessarily progress to more 'permanent' settlement, there seems to be a positive population dynamic with areas with noticeable numbers of *kankeijinkō* also having large numbers of settled in-migrants (LDKP, 2021).

This data then points to the way in which *kankeijinkō* can be understood as both a socio-spatial phenomenon, in the sense that it relates to a group of people who are connected to other places (physically, virtually and symbolically), and at the same time an idealised policy construct (see discussion earlier on 'idealised counterurbanisation') that moves away from a 'sedentarist understandings of migration' (Halfacree, 2012, p. 213). In this sense, *kankeijinkō* is not simply naming a migration phenomenon observed on the ground, but as a policy discourse potentially helps foster and support a broader understanding of habitation and belonging in the countryside (Cresswell, 2010). More than this though, *kankeijinkō* as a policy discourse, especially a culturally-bound counterurbanisation policy discourse, supports differentiated approaches to the issue of rural decline, as across Japan various initiatives are being adopted to encourage temporary forms of mobility to rural places. As already noted earlier, government and other actors in Japan are investing in shared workspaces, 'workation' facilities and other initiatives to attract footloose individuals (see: Abe, 2020; Yoshida, 2021). Perhaps most interesting, following a shift in guidance from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2017) some rural schools are beginning to welcome students from other prefectures temporarily, allowing school attendance records to be transferred back to the original schools once the students return. Such innovations are not only supported by the discourse of *kankeijinkō*, but also serve to bolster the material manifestations of *kankeijinkō*.

Table 1
Percent of activities most and second most effort by residential area before COVID-19.

Most Effort		Second Effort		Activity
Three Urban	Other Areas	Three Urban	Other Areas	
2.3	2.2	1.4	1.6	Proactive engagement in projects or communities emerging from local meeting hubs
2.2	2.7	1.7	2.0	Involved in a 'village renewal' [*muraokoshi*] or 'town renewal' [*machiokoshi*] projects
1.5	1.9	1.3	1.4	Involved in the creation of a new business
2.3	3.2	1.5	1.8	Local volunteering
1.5	1.6	1.2	1.1	Involvement in common resource management
1.0	1.2	1.0	1.1	Involvement in local preservation activities
1.7	2.4	1.1	1.0	Involved or work in local business/industry (side job)
3.7	4.4	3.0	3.0	Involved in agriculture, forestry or fisheries (including agriculture for own consumption)
1.0	1.1	1.0	1.3	Involved in activities to revitalise local shops
1.0	1.4	1.5	1.3	Involved with local markets
5.9	6.0	4.9	5.2	Enjoying communication and building links with local people
3.3	3.7	4.2	3.8	Involved in festivals or rural experience programmes
2.7	3.1	1.4	1.9	Involved in education or learning
8.9	6.9	7.7	6.1	Purchasing food, drinks or goods (local speciality products) while in the area
15.1	13.4	5.7	5.1	Involved in hobbies or enjoying local atmosphere
1.2	1.3	1.1	1.2	Involvement in rural and farming experience programmes
6.4	9.0	2.6	2.7	Telework
6.5	7.8	3.7	4.3	Access to services, or purchasing goods for daily life.
22.3	17.1	2.9	2.9	Visiting/caring for family or relatives or family grave
NA	NA	1.0	0.5	*Furusato nōzei* (tax contribution initiative)/ Crowdfunding
NA	NA	1.1	1.2	Order local speciality goods regularly
NA	NA	0.1	0.2	Undertaking work remotely that benefits the area
0.0	0.0	0.6	0.8	Involvement via online/SNS
NA	NA	0.6	0.8	Interactions with local community: receiving support
9.4	9.5	47.7	47.6	Spend my time doing nothing special
100%	100%	100%	100%	Total

Notes: Figures correspond to activities (in percentages) to which *visit kankeijinkō* contributed most and second most effort. Compiled using raw data set by MLIT (undated a) with some original categories combined. Data relates to *visit kankeijinkō* with connections to rural areas outside of the three conurbations of Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka. 'Three Urban' refers to residents of Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya areas before the pandemic (N = 5820 areas of connection). 'Other Areas' refers to those resident outside the conurbations of Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya (N = 6482 areas of connection).

Kankeijinkō, then, both facilitates and names a range of hybrid, complex and open movements to, from and between urban and rural spaces, giving credence to the stories of multifarious and complex forms of open-ended movement between places that have been relayed to us during time spent with rural in-migrants. Indeed, the migrants we have spoken to in Akita have given us accounts of leaving jobs located in the main conurbations of Japan, spending time abroad and in different rural areas and regional cities across Japan, coming to Akita for short periods, or indeed settling more permanently, but with an eye to moving again in the future.

Yet there is a danger here. While the concept of *kankeijinkō* has been broadened to recognise a range of urban-rural mobilities and activities, the underlying rationale is that *kankeijinkō* have the potential to help tackle the moribund state of rural areas across Japan. Here, the dominant policy discourse of *kankeijinkō* potentially privileges what might be termed 'direct contribution' *visit kankeijinkō* (see: LDKP, 2021) – i.e., those deemed to contribute directly to the vitality of other places (commonly through entrepreneurship, voluntary work or revitalisation activities). And indeed, it is arguably possible to discern an implicit valuation of certain modes of being in the common pictorial representation of *kankeijinkō* as being on a 'staircase' of commitment (see Fig. 2). Here, questions can be asked if this dominant rendering of *kankeijinkō* serves to broaden responsibilization processes, witnessed in Japan (Avenell, 2009; Love, 2013; Ogawa, 2004) and elsewhere (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000), placing a disproportionate obligation on mobile groups and in-migrants for rural vitality. Indeed, much like the respondents in Klien's studies of rural in-migrants in Japan (Klien, 2019, 2020), we have heard accounts of pressure, either perceived or self-generated, to be 'creative', 'innovative' and 'entrepreneurial' and contribute to localities in particular ways. One Akita in-migrant for example described how she felt like she was packed in a box of expectation, a box that she herself had created while another temporary migrant noted that she had felt pressure to make an impact locally, and would compare herself against what she perceived to be a highly successful entrepreneurial in-migrant.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we approach *kankeijinkō* as a culturally bound discourse and practice of counterurbanisation. We first sought to sketch out the contours of the policy discourse on *kankeijinkō* – a discourse that continues to evolve and grow in importance (see: National Planning Association, 2023) – highlighting the way it has shifted and morphed as it has been taken up by different actors. We have argued that the concept of *kankeijinkō* resonates with calls to move away from 'sedentarist understandings of migration' (Halfacree, 2012, p. 213) and acknowledges the 'messiness' of rural mobilities as it draws attention to open-ended movements, and the way in which people may have multiple 'moorings' (Hannam et al., 2006). As a policy discourse *kankeijinkō* thus recognises and promotes a 'dynamic heterolocalism' (Halfacree, 2012, 2017), as evidenced by the staircase of commitment (Fig. 2) which both values and highlights the symbolic and material connections people can have to multiple rural places (Halfacree, 2010, 2012). *Kankeijinkō* thus constitutes a distinctive policy construct that embraces 'the different scales, directions and temporalities that characterise population movement in rural areas' (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014, p. 329).

We have also sought to document the evidence for *kankeijinkō* as a material form of (less-than-permanent) counterurbanisation (Halfacree, 2011, p. 2012; 2017), with our analysis of data collected by the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. It Is interesting to note that this data is orientated towards understanding the areas to which people are *connected* through various activities both in material and symbolic ways (and with areas of connection being multiple across the urban-rural continuum). The data suggest that noticeable numbers of Japanese regularly visit, and engage in a range of undertakings from leisure and other consumptive activities, to development processes and 'revitalisation' initiatives often across multiple rural areas. In fact, other recent analysis has suggested that there are 1.5 million 'direct contribution' *kankeijinkō* (i.e., those who volunteer or take part in local development processes) based within the three largest urban conurbations in Japan who have connections outside these urban areas (Odagiri, 2022).

While we suggest that the discourse of *kankeijinkō* has broadened to acknowledge and account for multifarious and open-ended mobilities to, from and between rural and urban spaces, at the heart of *kankeijinkō* is the notion that mobile urban populations can play an active role in sustaining rural areas in Japan as the population continues to fall and thin. In this way we propose that *kankeijinkō* can be understood as another form of 'idealised counterurbanisation' (Dilley et al., 2022), one that suggests a 'loss of confidence in population recovery and the search for a new population measure to replace the traditional concept of

resident population' (Inoue et al., 2022: 3). As such the discourse of *kankeijinkō* embeds the view that rural vitality in Japan (and indeed elsewhere, see also Halfacree, 2017) need not be dependent on static and bounded (and growing) populations, nor uni-directional migration.

What can *kankeijinkō* offer then to wider counterurbanisation scholarship? While most scholars would agree that there is no single and ubiquitous definition or practice of counterurbanisation, most theoretical and empirical understandings of rural mobilities have emerged from western, and usually British and North American contexts (Gkartzios, 2013). *Kankeijinkō* works to disrupt this hegemony which has a value in itself (Müller, 2021), but more critically *kankeijinkō* also adds to understandings of rurality in line with more nuanced and 'heterolocal' conceptualisations of mobility (drawing on Halfacree, 2012; 2017). *Kankeijinkō* helps problematise the binaries often implied by the term counterurbanisation – i.e., unidirectional movements across one urban origin and one rural destination – adding a notion of a multiplicity of origins and destinations across an urban-rural blurred continuum, further alluding to the 'messiness' of rural mobilities (Stockdale, 2016). Rather than a scholarly exploration, *kankeijinkō* represents an actual policy aspiration that, on paper at least, aims to value multiple forms of mobility in line with the original ideas that underpinned the mobility turn in social sciences (Sheller & Urry, 2006). As such, *kankeijinkō* as both policy discourse and material phenomenon adds a layer of complexity to accounts of counterurbanisation by drawing attention to multiple layers of commitment and care for rural places; and suggests the need to value local engagement and regional exchanges, irrespective of whether the primary residence is in the locality or not. As such, it brings into the policy landscape groups that can easily be ignored (e.g., non-permanent residents) and it seeks to value (and support) their contributions.

Kankeijinkō further invites us to examine the constitution of rurality amongst what Bell et al. (2010: 216) term 'constituencies of the rural'; but constituencies that are hybrid and not simply a network between local and extra-local communities (as per neo-endogenous development thinking, see also Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019). What we mean here is that through *kankeijinkō,* the local and extra-local are hybridised and constantly re-made and this offers new ways to imagine and support hybrid (rural and non-rural; local and global) lifestyles in the global countryside that contribute to wider rural and regional development. Hence, *kankeijinkō* as policy discourse has the potential to support hybrid and open-ended lifestyles that contribute to a networked global countryside (Woods, 2007) and wider rural and regional development. On the other hand, we note that there is also a danger that the discourse of *kankeijinkō* privileges certain modes of 'heterolocal being' in the countryside, and broadens responsibilisation processes beyond local and existing residents in ways that that may circumscribe the potentialities and possibilities of transient and mobile groups in rural places. There is thus a need for continued critical engagement with both the discourse and practice of *kankeijinkō* in the context of its rural development claims.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Luke Dilley: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Project administration. **Menelaos Gkartzios:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision. **Shogo Kudo:** Resources, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Tokumi Odagiri:** Resources, Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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