

Original paper

Cultural coleopterology in modern Japan, II: the firefly in Akihabara Culture

Kulturna koleopterologija vo moderne Japoniji, II: svetlušky vo kulture Akihabara

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces six cases relating to fireflies (Coleoptera: Lampyridae) in Akihabara Culture. In general, fireflies are used to evoke a romantic and dreamy atmosphere in the world of comics, animation, and computer games. In contrast, they are sometimes regarded as possessing a deeper spiritual significance or even as sinister symbols.

ABSTRAKCIJNY

Tuta paper predstaviše šest' prikladu odnositi se k svetluškam (Coleoptera: Lampyridae) vo kulture Akihabara. Svetlušky sa objavuji vo komiku, animaci i kompjutorovih igrach ako nositele romantičnega a soniveho nastrojenje. Sut ale tož nekokdy priglednaje ako simboli glupši duhovne važnosti.

Keywords: fireflies, cultural coleopterology, Akihabara Culture, modern Japan

Introduction

In the field of cultural entomology, Japan has been in the spotlight because it has a highly developed tradition of an aesthetic appreciation for insects.¹ I focus on the appearance of insects in modern Japanese culture, particularly Akihabara Culture (*Akiba kēi* in Japanese) because this culture has considerable influence on the general public. Akihabara Culture is a generic name that encompasses Japanese comics, animations, video games, dolls, and plastic models. It is a symbol of modern Japanese art and a subculture of which Japan can be proud.

I have already given an outline of rhinoceros beetles in Akihabara Culture, which is an idol insect of many Japanese people, especially children.² In this paper, I introduce some cases relating to fireflies in Akihabara Culture.

Six cases relating to fireflies in Akihabara Culture

Hotaru as a character's name

Among the 54 Japanese species of fireflies (Coleoptera: Lampyridae), two aquatic species, *Luciola cruciata* Motschulsky, 1854, and *L. lateralis* Motschulsky, 1860 are the most popular among modern Japanese.³ These fireflies are known as *hotaru*, a word, which originally referred to the family Lampyridae.

One of the present Japanese Men's Soccer Team's midfielders is Mr. Hotaru Yamaguchi. However, *Hotaru* is usually regarded as a female name. *Hotaru* is often used as a first name for female characters in Akihabara Culture. Notable examples include Miss Hotaru Tomoe in the Japanese animation, *Sailor Moon*.⁴ Lewis & Lloyd (2003) translated this as "firefly on Earth"; however, Hotaru Tomoe correctly means "firefly and Saturn." Besides this, heroines of three computer games, *Otonari-koi-sensō*, *W. L. O. Sekai-renai-kikō*, and *Memories Off 2nd*, are

Miss Hotaru Shirakawa, Miss Hotaru Irooi, and Miss Hotaru Shirakawa, respectively.

Fireflies appearing in scenes with romantic proposals

In Akihabara Culture, there are many love stories in which a boy and a girl, being childhood friends, begin to feel attraction between each other and finally form a couple. In some computer games, the boy and girl propose surrounded by a swarm of fireflies, for romantic effect. For example, in the computer games, *Natsuiro-communication* (Fig. 1) and *Lovely Quest* (Fig. 2), a hero and a heroine who are childhood friends go on a date to the riverside in summer and begin a romantic relationship there, while surrounded by shining fireflies.

Fireflies appearing in the happy endings of romantic stories

Fireflies often appear at the happy endings of romantic computer games. For example, the computer game *Koi-no-hanitō* closes with the heroine and hero looking into the twinkling of fireflies at the riverside (Fig. 3). Fireflies often cast blessings upon lovers in Akihabara Culture.

Fireflies used as plot devices

In Akihabara Culture, fireflies are occasionally presented as creatures capable of independent thought and can be used as a device to move the plot forward. For example, in the opening scene of the computer game *Kokokara-natsuno-innocence!* a hero loses his way in the mountains. A firefly appears and guides him to the heroine, Miss Iroha Hatsuhime (Fig. 4). In this instance, the firefly is used to catalyze a romantic encounter between the two main characters.

In the last scene of the computer game *Green Strawberry*, a couple prays "let's be together forever" by a pond. Hereupon, many



Fig. 1: *Natsuiro-communication* © 2003 Terios
Obr. 1: *Natsuiro-communication* © 2003 Terios

fireflies suddenly fly around the couple (Fig. 5). It is suggested that the beetles grant the lovers' wish.

Fireflies impersonating female characters

An American chemistry teacher, William Elliot Griffis (1843–1928), invited to Japan in 1871, was interested in old Japanese fairy tales and published them in English after his return to America.⁵ One of the stories, "The fire-fly's lovers," features a firefly as a princess of an insect kingdom at the moat of a castle.⁶ The story continues as the firefly princess receives marriage proposals from a red dragonfly, a stag beetle, and so on. However, she refuses to accept their proposals. Finally, she marries a firefly prince who inhabited a neighboring kingdom (Fig. 6).

In some Japanese fiction, fireflies are regarded as an embodiment of femininity and, in some cases, fireflies can reincarnate into women. For example, in a romantic computer game *Fluorite Memories*, a hero

falls in love with a heroine, Miss Mikoto Katase, and they spend a short summer together (Fig. 7). However, in the unhappy ending, it is revealed that Mikoto is, in fact, a reincarnation of a firefly, and she dies at the end of August.

The spiritual significance of fireflies

Ancient Japanese people regarded fireflies as a personification of the human soul.⁷ This traditional thinking is not unique to Japan but can also be found in China and South East Asia.^{8,9}

It follows that, in Akihabara Culture, fireflies are sometimes treated as spiritual insects. In the computer game *Sorairo*, a hero and a heroine Miss Hanako Shinohara enjoy an adventurous summer vacation and hunt together. They arrive at an old bombproof shelter used during World War II and discover a swarm of fireflies there (Fig. 8). In *Sorairo*, fireflies are implied to be the souls of people who died in air raids.



Fig. 2: *Lovely quest* © 2012 HOOKSOFT.

Obr. 2: *Lovely quest* © 2012 HOOKSOFT.



Fig. 3: *Koi-no-hanitô* © 2015 WHITESOFT ALBINO.

Obr. 3: *Koi-no-hanitô* © 2015 WHITESOFT ALBINO.



Fig. 4: *Kokokara-natsuno-innocence!* © Clochette.

Obr. 4: *Kokokara-natsuno-innocence!* © Clochette.



Fig. 5: *Green strawberry* © 2010 LOVER SOUL.

Obr. 5: *Green strawberry* © 2010 LOVER SOUL.



Fig. 6: An illustration of “The fire-fly’s lovers” (Griffis, 1923).

Obz. 6: Obrazok iz “Světluščin ljubovnik” (Griffis, 1923).

Hotarubi-no-shôjo is a bizarre “story game” set in *Hotarubi-jima*, which means “Lighting-of-fireflies Island.” At *Hotarubi-jima*, a strange rite of revival of the dead is practiced. Here, fireflies are depicted as evil spirits that can travel to and fro between Earth and the Underworld (Fig. 9).

Conclusion

In general, fireflies are a symbol of courtship in Japan. The majority of Japanese people admire the surreal atmosphere brought about by the flickering of fireflies. Riversides that fireflies inhabit are popular dating spots in early summer for modern Japanese people. In the world of comics, animations, computer games, and so on, fireflies represent love and celebration, especially for young couples, though they may sometimes be seen as embodying deeper spiritual values or may even have sinister connotations.

However, the actual body of fireflies is seldom shown in Akihabara Culture. More often, the author only depicts the luminescence emitted by fireflies. There are exceptions, however. For example, at the end of the computer game *Hotarubi-no-shôjo*, a realistic portrait of a firefly is shown (Fig. 10). Fireflies play only a side role, and they are employed as devices by screenwriters to produce a romantic and dreamy atmosphere. They are far from being characters in their own right.

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Fig. 7: *Fluorite memories*
© 2010 Pam Soft Co., Ltd.

Obr. 7: *Fluorite memories*
© 2010 Pam Soft Co., Ltd.



Fig. 8: *Sorairo* © 2009
Nekoneko Soft.

Obr. 8: *Sorairo* © 2009
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Fig. 9: *Hotarubi-no-shôjo*
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Obr. 9: *Hotarubi-no-shôjo*
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Fig. 10: *Hotarubi-no-shôjo*
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Obr. 10: *Hotarubi-no-shôjo*
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