



Cultural lepidopterology in modern Japan: butterflies as spiritual insects in the Akihabara Culture

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Butterflies are one of the most popular insects because they have diversified and colorful wings. They were probably the first insects to be collected purely for their beauty (Preston-Mafham, 2004). In the Western culture, Dicke (2004) showed that butterflies and moths are the most frequently depicted insects in Western art from 13th century till date. Hvenegaad (2016) recognized 81 insect festivals in North America through a web-based research study in 2015. Of these festivals, 49% focus on all insects. In festivals that target one group of insects, 31% focus on butterflies, followed by 4% on dragonflies and honeybees, and 3% on caterpillars and blackflies. Furthermore, Shipley & Bixler (2017) demonstrated that modern American people are generally friendly towards butterflies as revealed in an interview with 60 participants, in the age range of 18 to 50 years.

Similarly, Korean people are likely to show favorability towards butterflies in general (Hoshina, 2019). In Hampyeong of the southwestern Korean peninsula, a butterfly festival has been held every year since 1999. The festival is one of ecotourism, during which visitors observe many butterflies and flowers, learning about the natural environment and eco-friendly agriculture (Kim et al., 2008a, 2008b). Additionally, the 3D Korean animation *Larva* (TUBAn Co., 2006), in which main characters are cater-

pillars, is very popular and has been broadcasted in Japan since 2013. Moreover, the logo of a Korean airplane company, Jin Air, is a butterfly (there are no butterfly logos for Japanese airplane companies). Moreover, many butterfly-shaped accessories are sold in Seoul City (Hoshina, 2019).

What did older Japanese people traditionally think about butterflies? Dunn (2000) indicated that famous Japanese poets in the *Edo* period (1603–1868) wrote their works, *haiku*, using butterflies, dragonflies, cicadas, crickets, grasshoppers, and fireflies as their subject matter. However, Japanese people loved fireflies and singing Orthoptera¹ more than butterflies before World War II (Hoshina, 2017a, 2018b), likely due to their limited seasonal appearance. They deeply love cherry blossoms and prodigiously drink liquor around the roots of trees every spring because flowers open for only about ten days in April. On the contrary, most erstwhile Japanese people felt that butterflies, especially the common species *Papilio xuthus* Linnaeus, 1767 (the Asian swallowtail) and *Pieris rapae* (Linnaeus, 1758) (the small cabbage white), were tedious, yet beautiful, because they are multivoltine,² and adults emerge from spring to autumn (Hoshina, 2018a).

Moreover, although butterflies often appear in many worldwide mythologies (for

¹ Orthoptera is the order of insects that includes grasshoppers, locusts, and crickets.

² A multivoltine species has two or more broods of offspring per year.

example, Wyman & Bailey, 1964; Shinoda, 2018), they are not described in the Japanese myths (Hoshina, 2017b). In addition, in the oldest Japanese poetical work, *Man'yōshū* (万葉集), which was edited in the 8th century, there are no poems of butterflies (Takahashi, 1988). Furthermore, older Japanese people were uncomfortable with the extreme changes of butterflies from larvae to adults (Kozai, 2012). Thus, they generally paid little attention to butterflies before World War II.

So, what do present-day Japanese people think about butterflies? This will be discussed here, related to cultural entomology. Recently, some papers about Japanese video games included in 'Akihabara Culture' were published in a branch of cultural entomology (Kawahara, 2007; Hoshina, 2018c; Kittel, 2018; Schmidt-Jefferus & Nelson, 2018; Shelomi, 2019). Further, Kritsky & Smith (2018) in "Akihabara Culture: Toys, Video Games, and Anime from Modern Japan" provided a descriptive introduction of cultural entomology. Generally, foreign researchers thought that Japanese people traditionally have a favorable disposition towards insects (Hogue, 1987; Dunn, 2000). Therefore, some cultural entomologists may be interested in how the insects are depict-

ed in Akihabara Culture, which is a symbol of the modern Japanese culture. I have previously discussed rhinoceros beetles and fireflies appearing in Akihabara Culture (Hoshina & Takada, 2012; Hoshina, 2018c). Therefore, I have focused the discussion on butterflies in this paper.

BUTTERFLIES AS SOULS

In the ending of a Japanese TV animation, *This Ugly yet Beautiful World* (この醜くも美しい世界, romanized as *Kono Minikuku mo Utsukushii Sekai*; by Gainax), in 2004, a scene of numerous red butterflies was shown, representing souls of all lives before birth, flying into the universe from Earth.

In a Japanese animation movie, *A Silent Voice* (映画 聲の形, *Eiga Koe no Katachi*; by Kyoto Animation), in 2016, the soul of the heroin's grandmother transformed into a white butterfly after her death and flew to the heroin in order to see her again in the funeral ceremony (Miyanoshta, 2019).

Cafe Stella to Shinigami no Chou (喫茶ステラと死神の蝶, *Kissa Stera to Shinigami no Chou*; by Yuzusoft) went on sale in 2019,



Figure 1. Aoi Sorakado and a butterfly; © Visual Arts/Key.

which is a romantic fantasy graphic novel. One of the main characters, Kōsei Takamine, is run over by a car and dies soon after the start of the story. However, he can turn back the clock to before the traffic accident through a strange power of a blue butterfly. Subsequently, a deceased female appears before him and explains that blue butterflies are human souls and dangerous for the world. Therefore, he decides to support her in collecting butterflies.

Summer Pockets is a popular romantic graphic novel released in 2018 (by studio Key). The novel is set in a small rural island. The hero, a boy named Hairi Takahara, comes to the island from a large city during a summer vacation and meets a shrine maiden girl, Ao Sorakado. On the island, shining whitish strange butterflies fly about a mountain at night. These butterflies represent incarnations of the memories of people who died with regret. She searched for butterflies having memories of her older twin sister, Ai, who is in a death-like state (Fig. 1). Hairi begins to look for butterflies with her.

BUTTERFLIES AS SPIRITUAL MEDIUMS FOR WOMEN TO RELEASE MAGICAL POWERS

A series of action games, *Samurai Warriors* (戦国無双, *Sengoku Musō*; by Koei), is set during the Japanese Civil War in the 16th century, and its first product went on sale in 2004. Players operate military commanders, or their wives or sisters, aiming to defeat the opposing army. One of the popular characters, Nōhime, is a voluptuous and mysterious lady who is called “a butterfly accompanying her husband, like Satan”. She usually fights by using long claws and sometimes releases many purplish-red butterflies to initiate explosions that kill many enemy soldiers (Fig. 2).

Hisahide Matsunaga is a character in the animation *The Ambition of Oda Nobuna* (織田信奈の野望, *Oda Nobuna no Yabō*; by Studio Gokumi and Madhouse), which was broadcasted in 2012 and set in the Japanese Civil War period in the 16th century. She is half-Japanese, a witch, and a lush and mysterious girl. She can suddenly teleport from a faraway place, accompanied by many golden-yellow butterflies, to confuse her enemies.



Figure 2. Nōhime in *Samurai Warriors 4-II*; ©Koei Tecmo Games.



Figure 3. Yukina Shinjō in *Manatsu no Yoru no Yuki Monogatari*; © Ex-One.

A graphic novel, *Manatsu no Yoru no Yuki Monogatari* (真夏の夜の雪物語; by Ex-One), went on sale in 2011 and is a romantic fantasy graphic novel. The heroine, Yukina Shinjō, is a *yuki-onna*, which means a beautiful snow fairy filled with much love, a famous Japanese traditional monster wearing a kimono. She releases many frozen pale butterflies that freezes the whole town in the end of the story (Fig. 3).

In this way, butterflies often become spiritual mediums in order to charge magical powers released by female characters in the Akihabara Culture.

BUTTERFLY FLIGHT IN THE DREAM WORLD AND CONNECTION TO THE REAL WORLD

In the Blackfoot tribe of North America, there is a myth in which butterflies are spreaders of sleep and dreams (Cherry, 2005; Prischmann et al., 2009). In the Akihabara Culture, butterflies are often given a similar role. A graphic novel, *Natsu Yume Nagisa* (ナツユメナギサ, by SAGA PLANETS), went on sale in 2009 and is an emotional romantic graphic novel. Its story is

set on the Eternal Summer Island existing in a dream of the heroine, Ayumu Nanase. Many blue butterflies fly laughing in a low voice all over the island. These butterflies are souls that invite humans into her dream. In the end, she sees her deceased lover in her dream, and a cloud of butterflies disappears entering into her body (Fig. 4).

The TV animation series *Sister Princess*, by Zexcs Inc., was broadcasted in 2001. The main characters included one elder brother and twelve younger sisters that loved him very much. One day, one of the sisters, Aria, lost a ribbon, which was a present from her brother, and wept over it. She saw a tree spirit changing into an elderly gentleman and looked for the ribbon with him. Just then, a green butterfly appeared before them and took them to a dream world. Once they found her ribbon, they returned to the real world.

Akai Ito (アカイト, by Success Corporation) is a horror graphic novel that went on sale in 2004. The heroine, Kei Hatō, is an ordinary high school student. However, she is targeted by an *oni*, a traditional Japanese devil, because her blood is a favorite dish for *oni*. Her cousin, Yumei Hatō, became a disembodied soul ten years ago,



Figure 4. Ayumu Nanase in *Natsu Yume Nagisa*; © SAGA PLANETS.

gained overwhelming magical powers, and has been guarding Kei from oni until the present. Yumei appears as many pale butterflies in Kei's dream to inform her of the approaching dangers.

Hapymaher (ハピメア, *Hapimea*; by Purple Software) is a strange graphic novel that went on sale in 2013. The main character, Tōru Naitō, always suffers from a night-

mare. One day, he meets a mysterious girl, Arisu Toriumi, in his dream. She can appear in the dreams of various people. A strange love story between Tōru and Arisu begins. Her ornament is blue butterfly-shaped (Fig. 5), and a bluish butterfly slowly flies around in the opening movie of the game. The butterfly is a representation of the strange dream world.



Figure 5. Arisu Toriumi in *Hapymaher*; © Purple Software.

BUTTERFLIES TRANSPORT HUMANS TO DEATH LANDS

Saint Seiya (聖闘士星矢, also known as *Knights of the Zodiac* in some places) was a popular Japanese comic book in the 1980s and had a Greek mythology motif. In its story, a butterfly called *fairy* was sent by a god of the underworld, Hades, to keep watch over holy soldiers under the goddess Athena. However, a villainous soldier, Papillon, under Hades, released many butterflies and tried to force Athena's soldiers into the underworld with these butterflies.

Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly (零. 紅い蝶, *Zero: Akai Chou*; by Tecmo), released in 2003, is a horror video game where the main characters are the sisters Mayu and Mio Amakura. They see a few red butterflies in the dark forest and are directed to an accursed village by those butterflies, in which a series of murders occurs and many evil spirits ramble about (Fig. 6). Players control the sisters and aim at escaping safely from the village.

Tasogare no Folclore (黄昏のフォルクローレ; by Citrus), released in 2019, is a bizarre graphic novel set during the Japanese modern monarchical period (1868–1945). The heroine, Supika Otohe, is a beautiful girl from a very rich family; however, she seldom takes a meal and mainly absorbs men's energy for her survival. Most men die soon after they are deprived of energy by her. In the opening movie of the game, a blue and gaudy butterfly weirdly flies around, while sometimes getting caught in a cobweb. The butterfly is a representation of Supika who drives men to death.

WEIRD BUTTERFLIES FLYING IN THE DARKNESS

Butterflies fly about, sometimes forming a large group, in the dark magical world of Japanese animations and video games, although most butterflies usually fly in the daytime and do not form large groups in the real world. *Oni Uta* (鬼が来たりて、甘えさ



Figure 6. The Amakura sisters in *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly*; © Tecmo.

せろとのたもうた, *Oni ga Kitarite, Amaesasero to Notamouta*; by 130 cm) went on sale in 2003 and is a strange romantic graphic novel. The main character, Akito Mimasaka, is the heir of a shrine, who is stabbed and killed by a thief soon after the start of the story. However, an *oni* princess, a traditional Japanese devil, which is enshrined at the shrine, gives him magic powers, and he is revived as a half-man and half-*oni*. In the opening movie of the novel, a red butterfly representing Akito's blood slowly flies in the shrine at night.

Boku no Te no Naka no Rakuen (ボクの手の中の楽園; by Caramel-Box) went on sale in 2009 and is a fantasy romantic graphic novel set on an island based on medieval Europe. The story begins when the hero, Yū, loses his memory and is cast ashore on the island. On the island, there is a piece of folklore saying that butterflies can travel between different worlds and bring mad persons from the mountains into town. One day, chimerical mad people appear in a town on the island and commit murders. Yū decides to solve the cases, accompanied by a group of female warriors. In the opening movie of the novel, a cloud of pale butterflies flies around the dark blue skies.

Nights of Azure (よるのないくに, *Yoru no Nai Kuni*; by Koei Tecmo) went on sale

in 2015 and is a horror action role-playing game set in early modern Europe. In its world, many monsters dominate cities at night. The heroine, Arnice (アーナス), is a holy knight, who leaves for a battlefield filled with monsters on an order from the holy Pope. In the opening movie of the game, a cloud of blue butterflies flies in the darkness (Fig. 7).

The roles of butterflies in the three cases above were to emphasize the weird atmosphere in each fictional world. In fact, the director of *Boku no Te no Naka no Rakuen* commented that he used butterflies to generate a negative feeling and a dramatic impact in the game (Jive Editorial Department, 2009).

DISCUSSION

In the animations and video games belonging to the Akihabara Culture, there are often scenes in which few butterflies fly slowly around flower gardens during daytime. These butterflies represent a mild day in spring. Moreover, butterfly-shaped monsters sometimes appear in a variety of video games, including role-playing games, such as *Pokémon*, and entries in the series *Dragon Quest* and *Disgaea* (Hoshina, 2013;



Figure 7. *Nights of Azure*; © Koei Tecmo.

Kittel, 2018; Schmidt-Jefferus & Nelson, 2018). However, butterflies described in this paper have another point-of-view from the butterfly-shaped monsters in cultural entomology. In role-playing games, butterfly-shaped monsters are only one group of all insect-like monsters and do not have special roles in the whole stories and views of the world in each fictional work. By contrast, butterflies described in this paper are thought to be particularly meaningful with respect to cultural entomology, because they act on characters, stories, and atmospheres of fictional works.

As mentioned above, after all, butterflies are described in this paper as spiritual insects. Of all insects appearing in the Akihabara Culture, only butterflies and fireflies can play these roles (Hoshina, 2018a, 2018c). There is a tendency to consider butterflies as spiritual insects in both the Akihabara Culture and around the world (Cherry, 2011). For example, in Greek culture, the soul at corporeal death is thought to leave the body in the form of a butterfly (Adachi, 1995; MacRae, 2007). The Greek goddess Psyche, who represents the soul, has been illustrated with butterfly's wings (Tüzün, 2015). In Transylvania, it is thought that many people can project their souls as a butterfly (Murgoci, 1998). In Europe, butterflies have maintained their status as the iconic representations of the soul since medieval times (Dicke, 2000; Nazari, 2014). The Māori in New Zealand believe that the soul returns to earth after death as a butterfly. In the sacrificial moment at the symbolic center of the Aztec culture, the freed soul/butterfly was said to be released from the body by an obsidian blade and simultaneously captured within the stone (MacRae, 2007). In some Chinese folktales, it has been said that the soul of the dead becomes a butterfly and returns to their lover (Segawa, 2016). According to another report, ancient Egyptians believed that butterflies possessed a symbolic or magical meaning related to the afterlife, although there are various hypotheses concerning the symbolic significance of butterflies (Nazari & Evans, 2015). Thus, butterflies have been used to represent the souls of the deceased individuals worldwide.

In addition, Europe has bizarre regional folklore combining butterflies and vampires; in Romania, a type of vampire, *nosferat*, can transform into a butterfly, black cat, black dog, and a straw, while in that of the Mari people in Volga Basin, the *buber* vampire transforms itself into a butterfly and escapes from its own mouth if its body is set on fire (Hiraga, 2000). In Japan, there is no folklore combining butterflies and vampires. However, a famous Japanese cartoonist, Narumi Kakinouchi, depicted butterflies sucking blood from a female vampire in her 2002 work *Vampire Yui Kanonshou* (吸血姫夕維 香音抄).

In Japan, there are some traditions in which butterflies are also regarded as souls of deceased individuals (Imai, 1978). For example, after Christianity was introduced to Japan in the 16th century, unique interpretations were sometimes added to its doctrine. In a tradition in Nagasaki Prefecture, where Christianity is strongly followed, the Holy Spirit was thought to change into a butterfly, flying into the Blessed Mary's mouth, for which Mary conceived Christ (Usui, 1982). According to another report, it is likely that the ancient Japanese witnessed butterflies gathering around corpses for sapping, thus regarding this as the incarnation of the dead (Imai, 1978).

Furthermore, butterflies have been said to be insects indicating an ominous sign in ancient Japan. According to an official history book, *Azuma Kagami* (吾妻鏡), which was edited by the government in the 14th century, many yellow butterflies gathered in the capital city, Kamakura, inciting fear in the masses of the inauspicious sight in 1247. In fact, the powerful Miura family raised a rebellion against the government soon after the incident. In addition, during the *Edo* period, the pupa of *Byasa alcinous* (Klug, 1836) (the Chinese windmill) was called *okiku-mushi*, a name derived from a woman put to death, Miss Okiku, and became a model of a monster appearing in a famous Japanese ballad drama, *Banshū Sarayashiki* (播州皿屋敷). People feared the pupa of *B. alcinous* due to similarities in its appearance with that of a woman tied up

with her hands behind her back (Fig. 8). As such, *B. alcinous* is still regarded as a weird insect. For example, in the opening of a modern Japanese horror TV animation, *Jigoku Shōjo* (地獄少女, also known as *Hell Girl*; by Studio Deen), in 2005, an adult of *B. alcinous* was luridly flying. Apart from that, there is a strange tradition in Japan that butterflies eat human flesh (Imai, 1978).

As mentioned in the introduction above, older Japanese individuals prefer fireflies and singing Orthoptera, rather than butterflies. In contrast, at present, many Japanese people recognize the beauty of butterflies, and many amateurs enthusiastically collect butterfly specimens. There are two societies, The Butterfly Society of Japan and The Butterfly Science Society of Japan, studying only butterflies, separate from The Lepidopterological Society of Japan, although in most cases only one society for Lepidoptera has been established in any given country.

However, many roles of butterflies are

negative, such as the representation as the souls of the dead and weirdness in the Akihabara Culture. There is a Japanese proverb, “Beautiful roses have thorns,” meaning that extremely beautiful things are dangerous. Butterflies are not only the embodiment of beauty but are also still viewed as mysterious and sinister insects for many Japanese people. Thus, the Akihabara Culture has inherited the traditional views of butterflies.

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Figure 8. Pupa of *Byasa alcinous*. © Ishikawa Insect Museum.

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