



PROJECT MUSE®

Looking Back on Past International Steinbeck Congresses

Yasuo Hashiguchi

Steinbeck Review, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp. 23-33 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/str.2007.0010>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/218350>

LOOKING BACK ON PAST INTERNATIONAL STEINBECK CONGRESSES

YASUO HASHIGUCHI, FUKUOKA, JAPAN

I. INTRODUCTION

As one of those who participated in past International Steinbeck Congresses (except for the Fifth Congress), I would like to look back on them. In doing so I will be guided by Confucius' words, "A man is worthy of being a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with" (64).

The First International Steinbeck Congress was held in Fukuoka, Japan, on August 19-20, 1976, the Second in Salinas, California, on August 1-8, 1984, the Third in Honolulu, Hawaii, on May 27-30, 1990, the Fourth in San José and Monterey, California, on March 19-23, 1997, and the Fifth in Hempstead, New York, on March 20-23, 2002. I would like to review the five congresses in terms of their venues, themes, proceedings, and participants.

2.1. THE FIRST CONGRESS

Fukuoka may sound like an unusual congress venue. It is not a place remembered in connection with Steinbeck. The Congress was born out of a long-standing friendship between Sakae Morioka and Tetsumaro Hayashi, the presidents of the Kyushu American Literature Society, located in Fukuoka, and the Steinbeck Society of America. The two Societies cooperated to host the First Congress. The theme was "John Steinbeck: East and West" and its proceedings were published under the title, *John Steinbeck: East and West* (Tetsumaro Hayashi, Yasuo Hashiguchi, and Richard F. Peterson, editors, Steinbeck Monograph Series, No. 8,

Muncie, Indiana: Steinbeck Society of America, 1978). Martha Heasley Cox commented on the Congress:

I am more impressed with the linguistic ability of Japanese scholars than with any other aspect of the congress. Can you imagine a gathering of some seventy to a hundred literature professors in the United States, scholars conversant with the works of Yukio Mishima, who could both write and deliver their papers in Japanese, then conduct all discussions in Mishima's language? That is precisely what occurred with Steinbeck's work, for English was the official language at Fukuoka. (48)



MARTHA HEASLEY COX

John Ditsky's comment was, "Yet the general level of Japanese Steinbeck criticism appears to be as strikingly advanced as it is intense, and listening to the Kyushu papers was a bit like discovering an independent cell of one's own family, heretofore lost but prospering in parallel activity" (50-51). To my way of thinking, the reception gap between general readers and Steinbeck critics and the conflict/harmony between Steinbeck's thoughts and his

literary depictions of those thoughts might have been further discussed. (Hashiguchi, “The First International Steinbeck Congress” 365)

Although nominally international, the Congress was represented only by Japanese and American scholars. One promising outcome of it was that it gave birth to the John Steinbeck Society of Japan in May 1977. Japanese participants had no idea that the congress would repeat, and could ill afford to make it a transient gathering. From then on the Society has been sponsoring or co-sponsoring the congresses.

2.2. THE SECOND CONGRESS

There is no better venue for a Steinbeck Congress than Salinas, California, Steinbeck’s home town and the heart of Steinbeck Country. In addition, the city has been hosting the annual Steinbeck Festival, sponsored originally by the John Steinbeck Library and since 1993 by the John Steinbeck Foundation (now the National Steinbeck Center). As a matter of fact, the official name of the Congress was “The Steinbeck Festival V (1984) and the Second International Steinbeck Congress.”

The theme was “John Steinbeck: From Salinas to the World,” after Warren French’s keynote speech, and the proceedings were published under the title, *John Steinbeck: From Salinas to the World* (Shigeharu Yano, Tetsumaro Hayashi, Richard F. Peterson, and Yasuo Hashiguchi, editors, Tokyo: Gaku Shobo Press, 1986).

Collaboration of scholars with citizens and multinational participation were two salient features, as I noted:

I feel the collaboration between scholars and interested local volunteers went well for the benefit of both parties. . . . [A]ddressing a mixed audience was a practicum in which to wean ourselves away from in-house liturgy presumption and scholarly jargon. . . . Compared with the First International Congress [. . .] there was a marked advance in internationalization. At that time Japan was the sole representation outside the United States; this time Korea and India were represented as well. One Korean, five Indian, and nine Japanese scholars (three of them by proxy) participated as chairmen or speakers in the Asian programs [. . .]. (Hashiguchi, “Report

of the Fifth Steinbeck Festival and the Second
International Steinbeck Congress" 10)

The idea of increased Asian participation came up when Shigeharu Yano, John Gross, and Tetsumaro Hayashi discussed organizational problems at the John Steinbeck Library in Salinas during the previous summer. Yano was Asian Coordinator and Senior Consultant to Hayashi, Director of the Congress, and Gross, Program Chairman and Director of the Festival/Congress. Gross proposed the idea. His proposal caught Yano unprepared, but he responded, "Of course, I'll do my best, and I'll leave the result to God." Yano wrote letters to more than ten universities in Asian countries. This resulted in Korean and Indian scholars joining Japanese scholars to make up the group. (Yano 6) His labor of love is a reminder that there is always an unsung hero behind any project, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

2.3. THE THIRD CONGRESS

Honolulu, Hawaii, may not sound like a natural congress venue, but it is a place where East and West meet and is in harmony with the 1990 Congress theme, "John Steinbeck: East and West (Part II)." The proceedings were published separately, however, under the titles, *John Steinbeck: Asian Perspectives* (Kiyoshi Nakayama, Scott Pugh, and Shigeharu Yano, editors, Osaka: Osaka Kyoiku Toshō, 1992) and *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936-1939* (Tetsumaro Hayashi, editor, Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1993).

The John Steinbeck Society of Japan sponsored the Third Congress in cooperation with the International Steinbeck Society (formerly the Steinbeck Society of America). We chose to hold the Congress at a hotel, and our first step was to pick out a suitable

LOUIS OWENS,
SUSAN SHILLINGLAW,
AND
TETSUMARO
HAYASHI IN 1989



one. Our first choice charged too high a price. The cost of the second choice was more reasonable, but it had no meeting room “except a big ballroom which costs \$3,000 per day.” The third time was the charm. (Nakayama 1-2).

Hisashi Egusa pointed out four salient features of the Congress: (1) feminism, typified by an American scholar taking issue with making a “No Name Woman” of Curley’s wife in *Of Mice and Men*; (2) interdisciplinary approaches, typified by a Japanese scholar’s exegesis of “timshel” in *East of Eden*; (3) ethnic points of view, typified by an Indian scholar discussing echoes of Indian thought in Steinbeck; and (4) charges against Japan, typified by a Korean scholar finding an analogy between the Okies of *The Grapes of Wrath* and Korean farmers who had to emigrate to Manchuria during the Japanese occupation of Korea (290-91). A Thai scholar contributed to the ever-increasing multinational participation.

2.4. THE FOURTH CONGRESS

San José and Monterey, California, were perfectly suited to be the joint venue for the Fourth Congress. Monterey included Ed Ricketts’ Pacific Biological Laboratories (Western Biological Laboratory/Laboratories in *Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday*), and San José is the home to the Steinbeck Research Center (now the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies) of San José State University, which sponsored the Congress in cooperation with the John Steinbeck Society of Japan.

“Beyond Boundaries: Steinbeck and the World” was the theme, and the proceedings were published under the title, *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck* (Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle, editors, Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002).



JOHN DITSKY AT THE FOURTH
INTERNATIONAL
CONGRESS IN 1997

As was the case in the Third Congress, participants came from India, Korea, Japan, Thailand and the United States.

Sandy Lydon's lecture, "The Invisible People: The Japanese and John Steinbeck," was the highlight of the Fourth Congress in the view of Hiromasa Takamura. As a historian Lydon took issue with the lack of Japanese characters in Steinbeck's fiction compared with the frequent appearance of Chinese characters, although the Japanese outnumbered the Chinese statistically. Lydon suggested that Steinbeck mirrored a general bias against the Japanese prevalent among Salinas and Monterey residents. "Asian Ghosts: A Tour of the Little Known Places around the Monterey Peninsula where Immigrants from China and Japan Make History" was a follow-up field trip to the lecture. One of the destinations was

LYDON TOOK ISSUE WITH THE LACK OF JAPANESE CHARACTERS IN STEINBECK'S FICTION COMPARED WITH THE FREQUENT APPEARANCE OF CHINESE CHARACTERS, ALTHOUGH THE JAPANESE OUTNUMBERED THE CHINESE STATISTICALLY

Point Lobos, which was once a thriving base for Japanese whaling and abalone fishing. (8)

Citizen participation was as strong as ever. As part of their extracur-

ricular activities local high school students attended my lecture on *The Forgotten Village*. When it was over, I was asked to sign their attendance cards. I don't think I was the sole lecturer honored in that way.

2.5. THE FIFTH CONGRESS

Hempstead, New York, was the venue for the Fifth Congress. It is located on Long Island within easy reach of Sag Harbor and New York City, where the Steinbecks opted to live late in life. No wonder "Tour to Sag Harbor" and "Tour to New York City" were part of the program.

The Hofstra Cultural Center of Hofstra University sponsored the Congress in cooperation with the Center for Steinbeck Studies of San José State University and the John Steinbeck Society of Japan. The theme was "John Steinbeck's Americas: A Centennial Conference." The proceedings are yet to appear—hopefully they will be available soon.

This time the number of countries represented by participants doubled with the addition of Canada, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia and the United Kingdom to the regulars. More than that, these additions extended the reach of the Congress beyond the boundaries of an Asian-North American alliance.

3. SUMMARY

“John Steinbeck: East and West,” “John Steinbeck: From Salinas to the World,” “John Steinbeck: East and West (Part II),” “Beyond Boundaries: Steinbeck and the World,” and “John Steinbeck’s Americas: A Centennial Conference”—a grand parade of these congress themes is an eloquent testimony to the fact that past international Steinbeck congresses were built upon the rock of global dimensions. This much said, I will summarize the review above in three observations.

3.1. THE PROGRESSION FROM TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO INNOVATIVE ONES

By traditional approaches I mean “explications, generally employing techniques derived from the long-dominant New Criticism” (3), as Warren French put it in his keynote speech in the Second Congress which was later included in its proceedings. I think the Third Congress marked a turning point in critical approaches. We noted earlier four salient features: (1) feminism, (2) interdisciplinary approaches, (3) ethnic points of view, and collateral to this, (4) charges against an aggressive Japan. I believe the last feature applies to any nation or individual that fails to face history squarely. “Anyone who shuts their eyes to the past becomes blind to the present,” as Richard von Weizsäcker, the then President of the Federal Republic of Germany, said in his speech to the German Parliament to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Germany’s unconditional surrender in World War II.

Examples of innovative approaches are “*The Ghost of Tom Joad*: Steinbeck’s Legacy in the Songs of Bruce Springsteen,” “Steinbeck’s Influence upon Native American Writers,” and “The Global Appeal of Steinbeck’s Science: The Animal-Human Connections” (the Fourth Congress); “Two Views of the Sea: Steinbeck/Ricketts and Rachel Carson,” “John Steinbeck and Mexico: From *The Forgotten Village* to *Viva Zapata*,” and “Steinbeck, Ecology and Law” (the Fifth Congress).



*BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN RECEIVES THE "IN THE SOULS
OF THE PEOPLE" AWARD FROM ELAINE STEINBECK IN
1996*

3.2. THE PROGRESSION FROM A JAPAN-U.S EVENT TO MULTINATIONAL ONES

Originally a Japan-U.S. event, the congress grew into an Asian-American one in the Second Congress. The Asian group consisted of Japan, Korea and India. The Third Congress added Thailand to the Asian group. The Fourth Congress took on the same shape. With the entrance of European countries, the Fifth Congress made a gathering calling itself international worthy of the name.

3.3. THE PROGRESSION FROM SCHOLARS ONLY TO COLLABORATION WITH CITIZENS

Liable to fall into stark professionalism, scholars should listen to what Steinbeck had to say about the "town" as distinct from the academic "gown":

I had a letter a few weeks ago from a bookseller in one of the outlying districts of Denmark who said, "I feel you ought to know this. A woman rowed in an open boat over eight miles to bring two chickens to my store to exchange for one of your books." Just think! Rowing eight miles there and eight miles back—sixteen miles—to trade for one of your books! This is what you write for. This is as good a prize as you can get. (Valjean 165)

The Second Congress opened the way to collaboration with citizens in that it was a joint event with the citizen-oriented Steinbeck Festival. Under the direction of a Japanese participant, a group of students on a study abroad program attended the Third Congress, along with several Honolulu residents. Monterey high school students participated in the Fourth Congress as part of their extracurricular activities.

Looking back on past International Steinbeck Congresses in this way, I am reminded of a saying, “Great oaks from little acorns grow.” Surely the congress history is proof of this saying.

4. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, allow me to propose areas for further development. First, I propose a closer collaboration with professional writers. “One becomes a critic when one cannot be an artist, just as a man becomes a stool pigeon when he cannot be a soldier.” So said Gustave Flaubert in his letter to Louise Colet, and I, for one, believe him. A Christ-figure in Jim Casy of *The Grapes of Wrath* has been recognized, but Shumon Miura, a writer, found this figure in none other than Lennie Small of *Of Mice and Men*. Not the authoritative Jesus, of course, but the “ineffectual” Jesus, the kind of Jesus image Shusaku Endo, Miura’s literary friend, fictionalized in *Sikai no Hotori* [*Near the Dead Sea*] and theorized in *Iesu no Shogai* [*A Life of Jesus*]. Miura says:

The way George accepts Lennie reminds us of joys and embarrassments of believers around the “ineffectual” Jesus, those who were burdened with faith. Somehow George cannot get rid of Lennie. He may condescendingly think it is because Lennie is too weak to get along without him, but the fact is George needs Lennie to be human. (90-91)

Second, I propose a closer collaboration with scholars of related disciplines. When he failed in an experiment with shipping refrigerated lettuce, Adam Trask of *East of Eden* was counted among “[t]hese know-it-all dreamers [who] always got into trouble” (438), and I don’t want to be of a kind with him. Theologian Teruo Kuribayashi’s exegesis of the Cain and Abel story (Gen. 4:1-16) in connection with *East of Eden* deepens our appreciation of the novel. Kuribayashi says:

The story of fratricide reflects the bloody history of oppression by old-time agricultural people of

newly arrived nomadic people in ancient Palestine. The Lord was pleased with Abel's offering but rejected Cain's offering, because He favored the poor and the landless. . . . The Lord chose Israelites because they were weak and small. "The Lord did not love you and choose you because you outnumbered other peoples; you were the smallest nation on earth" (Deut. 7:7). Throughout the Old Testament testimony of the Lord's favor to the weak and the oppressed abounds. (52)

This exegesis explains why Cyrus Trask favored Adam over Charles, why Adam in his turn favored Aron over Cal, and why even Cathy favored Aron over Cal. Cathy said of Aron, "He couldn't protect himself" (513). Adam couldn't protect himself either. They were weak. They were favored.

It seems to me that investigating such connections between Steinbeck and the perspectives of professional writers and scholars of related disciplines might offer exciting possibilities for future inquiry.

WORKS CITED

- Confucius. *The Analects*. Trans. D.C. Lau. London: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Cox, Martha Heasley. "A Time to Remember." *Steinbeck Quarterly* 10.2 (1977): 48-49.
- Ditsky, John. "With Steinbeck in Japan." *Steinbeck Quarterly* 10.2 (1977): 50-52.
- Egusa, Hisashi. "Sutainbekku Kenkyu no Shin-Ryoiki—Kokusai Sutainbekku Gakkai kara [New Territories of Steinbeck Studies—What the [Third] International Congress Revealed]." *The Rising Generation* 136 (1990): 290-91.
- Flaubert, Gustave. "To Louise Colet." 22 Oct. 1846. Letter quoted in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. Ed. Emily Morison Beck. 15th ed. Boston: Little, 1980. 583.
- French, Warren. "John Steinbeck: From Salinas to the World." *John Steinbeck: From Salinas to the World*. Ed. Shigeharu Yano, Tetsumaro Hayashi, Richard F. Peterson, and Yasuo Hashiguchi. Tokyo: Gaku

- Shobo Press, 1986, 1-12.
- Hashiguchi, Yasuo. "The First International Steinbeck Congress." *The Rising Generation* 122 (1976): 364-65.
- . "Report of the Fifth Steinbeck Festival and the Second International Steinbeck Congress." *Steinbeck Quarterly* 18.1-2 (1985): 10-11.
- Kuribayashi, Teruo. *Shinema de Yomu Kyuyaku-Seisho* [Cinema and the Old Testament]. Tokyo: Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan Shuppan-Kyoku, 2003.
- Miura, Shumon. "Sutainbekku to Shakaishugi [Steinbeck and Socialism]." Comment. *Fookunaa, Sutainbekku, Wairudaa, Saroiyan* [Faulkner, Steinbeck, Wilder, and Saroyan]. Kirisuto-Kyo Bungaku no Sekai [World of Christian Literature] 22. Tokyo: Shufu no Tomo Sha, 1977, 83-92.
- Nakayama, Kiyoshi. "The Third International Steinbeck Congress: A Reminiscence." *The John Steinbeck Society of Japan Newsletter* 14 (1991): 1-2.
- Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. New York: Viking, 1952.
- Takamura, Hiromasa. "Dai 4 Kai Kokusai Sutainbekku Kaigi Hokoku [Report of the Fourth International Steinbeck Congress]." *The John Steinbeck Society of Japan Newsletter* 23 (1997): 8.
- Valjean, Nelson. *John Steinbeck, The Errant Knight: An Intimate Biography of His California Years*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1975.
- Weizsäcker, Richard von. Speech. German Parliament. Bonn, Germany. 8 May 1985.
- Yano, Shigeharu. "Dai 1 Kai Sutainbekku Gakkai to Dai 2 Kai Kokusai Sutainbekku Kaigi no Omoide [The First Conference of the John Steinbeck Society of Japan and the Second International Steinbeck Congress: A Reminiscence]." *The John Steinbeck Society of Japan Newsletter* 22 (1996): 6.