

Los Angeles Times

MARKETS/MONEY/PERSONAL FINANCE

BUSINESS

ORANGE COUNTY
Los Angeles Times

SECTION

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MONDAY

AUGUST 9, 1993

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On

Japan-bashing...

"It seems to be on the uprise. I don't know if it's attributable solely to a faltering economy."

On the U.S. recession...

"Many of my Japanese clients are using the term depression. There are similarities: Massive bank and thrift failures, lack of consumer confidence, fundamental problems with deficit spending."

On the stereotypes...

"It's easy to stereotype Asians as hard-working, ruthless, succeed-at-all-costs businessmen or gangsters, as opposed to someone who's human, has a soul, has a family to support and is just trying to do their best in this world."

On the new government in Japan...

"Some people are predicting that this is a transitional government and do not expect much activity until the next administration takes office."



KAREN TAPPA / Los Angeles Times

LISA M. KITSUTA

Attorney at Good, Wildman, Hegness & Walley



Recent media images depict Japanese business people as ruthless, even evil. Those images make trade between Americans and Japanese difficult, and the tension has even ruined potential business alliances. Lisa M. Kitsuta, a Newport Beach attorney who has earned degrees at universities in both countries, works almost exclusively with Japanese and Japanese-American clients. Kitsuta is an outspoken and enthusiastic promoter of Japanese business interests. She spoke recently with Times staff writer Anne Michaud.

Were you concerned about Japanese stereotypes in the film "Rising Sun"?

I'm more concerned about the images in [the futuristic TV miniseries] "Wild Palms," where the basic subliminal message was Japanese investments and high technology are evil. There's a fundamental premise that's frightening. So, I hope that will not perpetuate a lot of Japan-bashing, criticism, hate crimes or attacks.

In "Rising Sun," once again, you are seeing the subliminal message that Japanese investment is evil. The stereotypes are so obvious, though, you can only hope the audience will see through that and laugh. I'm not threatened by what is basically a very mediocre movie.

I was disturbed, though, that the Japanese were referred to as "Jap" and "Nip" and that went unchallenged.

You started the Japanese-American Lawyers Assn. in Orange County and maintain an informal network of Japanese business people. Do you make it a point to reach out to others?

Absolutely. Not only Japanese businesses but Nikkei, or people of Japanese descent. I feel that it's my obligation as a lawyer to reach out to them and assist and unite them in any way that I can.

What do you mean when you say you have an obligation as a lawyer?

Well, traditionally, the Japanese have not looked to lawyers necessarily to resolve their disputes. As a result, at least in the United States, they haven't had people who would act as advocates for them. A good example of that is the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war.

Also, because of the economy, people are losing jobs and they're looking for an easy scapegoat. So you'll see Japanese and other Asians becoming the victims of hate crimes. That has regrettably been on the uprise, particularly in Orange County.

You moderated a hate crime seminar last year, is that right?

Yes, it was sponsored by a coalition of Japanese and Nikkei organizations. The Orange County Human Relations Commission and the police were there too, all appearing as panelists together.

Which hate crimes are you referring to?

There was an attack [in June, 1992] by a group of Caucasian youths on a group of Japanese-American brothers who were in a car on Beach Boulevard in Huntington Beach. They were stopped and attacked, and there were some derogatory names used.

What do you say to a Nikkei who has not been active in the community, when that person says he or she does not believe in organizing around race?

There are some who do say that, and that's

their choice. But those who say that are usually a bit younger and naive. They have not had a personal watershed event to make them realize that they look different, and it's in their own best interest to become more active in the Nikkei community.

Sometimes it's an event where they're a victim of discrimination, or they've come up against a glass ceiling, or they've been assaulted.

But it could also be something as basic or natural as becoming a parent and having to decide about the future of your child. You start to realize that it's in the child's best interest to search out your roots and study and try to cherish and preserve the culture of your ancestors.

There is a stereotype about the Japanese that they are quiet and circumspect. You seem to work against that stereotype.

There's an old Japanese proverb: The nail that sticks up will get hammered down. To the extent you do stick up and become a spokesperson, you become a target. It takes courage.

Culturally, speaking up is discouraged. I know and appreciate that. But by being silent, you're often more at risk. It's better to be vocal and to try as much preventive action as possible so that other incidents won't occur.

Have you ever been chastised for speaking up?

On the contrary, I get a lot of compliments from my Japanese clients. They told me that I've become more Japanese and more... the term they used was dignified.

How much business goes on between Orange County and Japan?

As you know, there are quite a few U.S. headquarters of major Japanese companies here in Orange County—for example, Canon, Toshiba, Ricoh, Mitsubishi, Masda.

Orange County has the cachet of being known as the new Silicon Valley. You'll find a lot of these high-tech companies here, and they seem to hedge their bets by having branch offices in the Silicon Valley-Palo Alto area.

You mentioned that the Japanese companies here have been active recently in charitable contributions.

Yes. In 1992, The Japan Business Assn. [of Southern California] donated almost \$2 million to the United Way, \$300,000 to the arts, and \$300,000 in cash and products to the local schools.

Is that changing perceptions at all?

I think it is. The Japan Business Assn., in its newsletter, will often enclose copies of thank-you letters from school principals.

In the private sense, between the recipients and the organization, there's been a much more positive view of the Japanese.