

P E R S O N A L I T I E S

## Doing It All

Attorney Lisa Kitsuta, who has law degrees from both U.S. and Japanese universities, bridges the gap between East and West.



(Left) Lisa Kitsuta in her Newport Beach office.



MARIE G. REYNOLDS/DAVIS

By JANA MONJI  
RAJU STAFF WRITER

NEWPORT BEACH—Like many Nikkei, attorney Lisa Kitsuta has applied her knowledge of Japan and the Japanese language to take advantage of the Pacific Rim business boom in Orange County.

Bilingual and with law degrees from Loyola and Kyoto University, Kitsuta specializes in mergers and acquisitions at Good, Wildman, Hegness & Walley, serving exclusively Japanese clients such as the second largest bank in the world, Sakai Bank (formerly Mitsui Taiyo Kobe Bank).

Dressed in a deep purple suit, Kitsuta, 33, was down-to-earth and humorous during her interview with *The Raku Shimpō*. Yet, in spite of her casual and friendly demeanor, she represents major Japanese banks, animation production companies, hotel and resort developers, high-tech and service companies.

Kitsuta is exceptional in many respects. Born in Inglewood, the USC graduate attended Loyola Law School and went on to receive a Morbusho scholarship to study in Japan.

She became one of only three American lawyers to earn a degree in Japanese Civil Law from the prestigious Kyoto University and worked as a research assistant for Zentaro Kitagawa's "Doing Business in Japan," a monumental work explaining Japanese business law in English.

Kitsuta is lavish with her praise of Kitagawa and the work, saying, "It is a tremendous resource. It was the first real attempt to translate and make available to the world and understanding of the Japanese legal system. Up until then, the language was such a barrier and the people could not comprehend it. He tried very, very hard to do it."

According to Kitsuta, "It was a 10-year commitment on his part, and he managed to coordinate about a hundred different writers, editors and translators. He was the general editor."

As Kitsuta tells it, her meeting with Kitagawa was a lucky accident on her path towards realizing a childhood dream—the desire to emulate her paternal grandfather.

She explained, "My grandfather was sent by the Japanese government in the 1920s to study at Ohio State and get his Ph.D. in organic chemistry. I wanted to see if that feat could be repeated, except in reverse—with me as a foreigner studying in Japan."

After finishing her bachelor's at USC in business finance, Kitsuta was offered scholarships for both a master's in business administration and law degrees.

Being bilingual and bicultural, Kitsuta chose law as a means of bridging the abyss of understanding that still exists between America and Japan.

She commented, "The trade friction was one of my original reasons for studying law. It troubled me that there was so much Japan-bashing—and this was even back in the '70s. And the Japanese were being so tolerant. They were not willing to dispute what the Americans said; they were simply trying to accommodate them."

"I thought that the Japanese needed someone who would act as their advocate and would try, at least, to explain their system to the Americans so that there would be better understanding."

More pragmatically, Kitsuta had sized up her competition. "I knew that there were very few bilingual attorneys," she commented. "I saw this as a marvelous (business) opportunity."

But her parents, whom Kitsuta characterized as "very traditional," were not enthusiastic over her career choice. Kitsuta is their middle child—older brother Tom resides in Hawaii where he owns a taxi company, while younger sister Patricia is a salesperson. Her father had been a geological draftsman before he retired and her mother had worked as a medical secretary. Neither parent had encouraged their daughter to choose law.

Kitsuta recalled, "They were initially very much against my going to law school. It's not very Japanese, number one, to be adversarial. And number two, it's not very feminine. But given that I've always been such a tomboy, I felt, they were probably resigned that I would do well and since I can be sort of talkative, I guess they thought it was good that I could counsel someone and get paid for it."

But Kitsuta was also not without familial approval. Kitsuta, whose paternal side includes the pianist Nakamura Hiroko and S.I. Hayakawa, added that her aunt and uncle, Chris and Mary Kitada of Los Angeles, were "very supportive" of her law school dreams and continue to be so in every way.

But perhaps her parents were also worried about the pace Kitsuta had set for herself. "Typically," Kitsuta said, "I would leave the house at 5 by the morning, get there (Loyola) before 7 and have the janitor let me in, then, start studying. I would drive home about 11 or 12 at night. I was also working two jobs at the time."

Yet Kitsuta seemed to thrive on this fast-paced lifestyle and her parents came to accept it. "By the time I graduated from law school," said Kitsuta, "at that point they were happier for me. Once I got the Morbusho scholarship, they were quite pleased. Plus," she added with a laugh, "I was finally moving out of their house."

## Doing It All

The Morbusho scholarship also gave Kitsuta a chance to accomplish her dream of holding a Japanese and an American Ph.D. "Although I went to law school—that would be the doctorate degree—I also wanted to make sure I got a postgraduate degree from Kyoto University," said Kitsuta.

It doing so, Kitsuta gave up the quicker road to riches. Looking back, without any apparent regrets, Kitsuta admitted, "If I had stayed here and practiced law here, I probably would have been able to buy my house sooner and have a lot more comfortable lifestyle than the poverty lifestyle of living in Japan."

Luck was also on her side. During a summer law program at Tokyo University, she found a mentor in Kyoto University's Kitagawa. The introduction came through one of the professors, a retired judge named Kosugi Takeo.

"When I told him of my dream to study at a Japanese university and more importantly, to graduate," Kitsuta remembered, "then, he said you might want to meet Professor Kitagawa and that he would provide the introduction."

The introduction was less casual than an American might think. Japanese professors seldom tolerate "cold calls" from interested students or researchers. A person stakes his reputation on introductions he/she makes.

With the open door, Kitsuta still had no guarantees. But, she said, "Based on that introduction, I made a special trip down to Kyoto to meet with Professor Kitagawa and he interviewed me—and I was quite honored—irrespective of whether or not he was willing to act as my mentor for this scholarship—I was very honored to meet him."

Kitagawa, the dean of Kyoto University Law School and founder of the Kyoto Comparative Law Center, was impressed enough with Kitsuta to consent to becoming her personal guarantor.

Kitsuta explained, "Very few individuals are willing to support foreigners in Japan to that extent—to put their own personal property at risk for a stranger so that they can study there."

"I guess he could sense that his

degree from Kyoto University meant a great deal to me and I was not interested in the money. I just wanted to study in my grandfather's footsteps. So when I applied for the Morbusho scholarship, he was willing to become my guarantor."

But as an American, Kitsuta still had to pass the entrance exam—one that challenged native Japanese applicants. During an 18-month period, Kitsuta learned standard and Meiji Japanese, including older and legal *kaaji*.

More astoundingly, she graduated with the class that she matriculated with. "Once I was there," she said, "the (Morbusho) scholarship ran out and I was given another scholarship by the Japanese university."

Kitsuta was one of three women in her course. This did not go unnoticed by her classmates. She remarked, "I could sense, at least, that the other Japanese classmates were probably intimidated by having a woman classmate in something as exclusive as Kyoto University."

There was also some xenophobia to confront. Kitsuta commented, "Although I am Nikkei—I'm Japanese American and I look Japanese and have a Japanese name and ancestry—I was still a foreigner in that I'm an American lawyer. The Japanese do blame many of the social problems of the U.S. on the fact that there are so many lawyers—something that I do not entirely disagree with. They didn't necessarily include me in many events."

Kitsuta cannot pinpoint the true cause. She said, "I don't know if that was necessarily because I was an American. I think they treat any foreigner that way. And also being a woman and being a lawyer on top of that probably didn't enhance things too much."

But her presence also had positive aspects. She stated, "They also appreciated having an American lawyer there in their courses because they could ask me questions on various areas of law that they could ask me questions about."

The high expectations and dedication of her fellow students impressed her as well. In a course taught by her mentor, Kitagawa, each of the students needed to take the codes or sections on law and translate it.

Each student was required to find the "original code and translate them from the original foreign language into Japanese, have that prepared and distributed at class and then

each of them would discuss it. I don't think we find that kind of dedication necessarily on America's part because we're insulated in that Americans do not typically study foreign languages. Generally speaking, Americans are only conversant in English."

Kitsuta was not given special allowances and was required to write her thesis in Japanese. Even for a woman that had grown up in a Japanese-speaking household, it wasn't easy either.

"I recall I tried to translate one case and that one case was only a one-page case in Japanese, in small print, of course," Kitsuta said. "It took me four days to translate that one case. I remember thinking this is monumental. It's an astronomical amount of work because I had to read thousands of cases before and summarize them and distill them into some sort of a thesis within this two-year period of time."

In her thesis, Kitsuta had "to compare the Japanese civil code which is a continental German and French code with the English common law case system."

Her experiences left a deep impression on her—one that makes her somewhat critical of America. Kitsuta commented, "I think the Japanese should be credited with having an insatiable curiosity about the world about foreign languages and cultures. I don't know that the Americans are as willing to devote as much of their time and energy to studying other countries and cultures."

This, Kitsuta feels is one reason for the trade frictions that plague Japan-U.S. relations. "Maybe some of our more successful multinational corporations gave done that (researched other cultures)," she continued.

"But for the most part, Americans seem only to want to export their products the way it is. You can have any color you want as long as it's black. They are not as flexible or as willing to adapt as say the Japanese have been to modify their products here."

During her four-year stay in Japan, the attorney also took time out to get married at the Heian shrine in Kyoto—with her Italian American husband and her dressed in the rested traditional Japanese wedding attire and a full Shimo ceremony.

Her certified public accountant (CPA) and attorney husband, James Ebert, who also works at her new firm, had followed her to Japan—

much to the chagrin of his traditional Northern Italian parents.

She admitted, "Initially they were very troubled by it this following her. He was their only son. They are very European, very Northern Italian. Once they got used to the idea, they were very supportive."

The Japanese traditional wedding also intrigued her new in-laws. With Kitsuta dressed in her mother's wedding gown, the couple also included an Episcopal ceremony to satisfy her Baptist and his Catholic parents.

Kitsuta, whose relatives live in the Tokyo area, sometimes missed the more "American things" available in cities like Tokyo, but has magical memories of moonlit bicycle rides along the river under a canopy of cherry blossoms in Kyoto. In her spare time, the energetic attorney also taught courses in American contract law for companies like Samitomo.

The Kyoto dialect, which is thought to be very feminine, has been an added asset in her current work. She can be "less formal, but feminine" by changing from the harder Tokyo dialect during her business relations. She has no complaints, but plenty of advice about working with Japanese businessmen.

If ever there was a real superwoman, Kitsuta may be it. In early November of last year, Kitsuta gave birth to James Zentaro Ebert. With the help of a Japanese-speaking nanny, Kitsuta has kept up the pace she set in law school.

Kitsuta is on the board of directors of the Orange County Japanese American Lawyers Association, which she founded and served as president (1989-1991); board of directors of the OC Japanese American Association; the OC Japan Business Association; the CC Bar Association; American Bar Association; California State Bar International Law Section as an advisor to the executive committee; OC Women Lawyers; OC Japanese Professional Women's Network; and on the advisory board of the OC Japan American Society.

Kitsuta will also be acting as moderator for a Nikkei community awareness seminar on hate crimes and Japan-bashing to be held in both English and Japanese. The free program will be held at the Pan Pacific Hotel, 1717 S. West Street in Anaheim. For more information, call the OC Japanese American Association at (714)730-3779.