

# J-A Law

**Lisa Kitsuta went out on her own and wound up with some of the top Japanese business clients in America.**



by Jana J. Monji

**I**f you can't break through the glass ceiling, become the architect and builder of your own dreams. Just a year ago, Lisa Kitsuta, 35, left her position in mergers and acquisitions at a highly respected Orange County, California law firm to start her own professional corporation with her husband and fellow attorney James R. Ebert.

But hers is more than just a fledgling mom-and-pop law firm. According to the 1994 Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory, Kitsuta is now representing international power clients like All Nippon Airways Co Ltd, Cyber Entertainment Inc, Chuo Jutaku Co Ltd and the second-largest bank in the world, Sakura Bank (formerly Mitsui Taiyo Kobe Bank).

"Practicing law in America to serve Japanese clients has been very exciting and very rewarding," Kitsuta asserts. "However, I needed to establish my own firm in order to truly realize this sense of success. I tried to do my best at very large law firms that call themselves international, but they still were not truly interested in the interests of their Japanese clients. They just wanted the money. It was a difficult situation, where I was forced to do everything for these Japanese clients.

"My Japanese clients sensed this," Kitsuta recalls. "For years they had said to me 'Why don't you start your own firm? We didn't come to this law firm because of their name. We are here because of you.'"

Despite the near legendary Japanese male chauvinism, any discrimination she felt came from her fellow Americans. "There were no women partners in that department of the firm. There were no minorities that were partners in the firm and there were no other international clients. (I hit) several glass ceilings at several different levels," Kitsuta comments. Yet she also admits, "I

was able to learn the strengths and weaknesses of these large law firms that I am competing with now." And Kitsuta's new law firm can obviously play hardball with the best.

All this is hardly surprising from the only American woman and the last of only three Americans to earn a degree in Japanese Civil Law from the prestigious Kyoto University. In Japan, on a Mombusho fellowship, she was also one of the research assistants for Zentaro Kitagawa's *Doing Business in Japan*, a monumental work explaining Japanese business law in English.

Kitsuta credits her measure of success to her persistence. "Perhaps I'm not the most intelligent person in the world, but I never give up. I'm like the tortoise not the hare. The tortoise just keeps plodding along and never takes anything for granted and just never gives up."

Coming from humble beginnings, Kitsuta earned academic scholarships to some of the most exclusive private universities in California.

"Without those scholarships, I would not have had a chance to go to really outstanding colleges and go to graduate school," she says, suddenly becoming more serious.

Like many Asian American women, she wasn't pressured to succeed by her parents. She recalls "My parents pushed my brother more than me because he was the only son. Me, they never pushed."

Yet Kitsuta had her own lofty goals, set far higher than her parents could have imagined "I had rather ambitious personal and professional goals from the time that I was a child," she comments. "I wanted to be able to utilize my bilingual and bicultural background in order to find some way to reduce the trade friction between the U.S. and Japan, because so much of it seemed based upon misunderstandings."

Kitsuta earned her bachelor's from USC in business finance (1979) and was offered scholarships for both an MBA program and law. She entered Loyola Law School—a choice her parents initially opposed, believing the adversarial nature of American law practice to be both un-Japanese and unladylike.

At Loyola as at USC, many of Kitsuta's fellow students did not share the same economic concerns about making a living while getting an education. Those concerns bore down on her psyche. "I felt tremendous pressure. I still had to work and find whatever means I could to graduate." Besides law, Kitsuta learned a steely resolve that helped her through the difficult times. "That determination never leaves you," she admits. "(Because of my experiences) I have a great empathy for those who have struggled to achieve their goals."

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# KITSUTA

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And becoming a lawyer was not the end of her dreams.

Driven by an almost Confucian sense of filial piety, Kitsuta then cast her gaze across the Pacific Ocean. Growing wistful, Kitsuta conjures up ancestral ghosts and says, "My grandfather, who died before I was born, was sent by the Japanese government in the 1920s to

own academic accomplishments in hand, Kitsuta secured a Mombusho fellowship to study at Kyoto University.

It was exciting and uncomfortable at the same time, but it was not something that I was unaccustomed to feeling," she says. Though she grew up in the Japanese American ethnic enclave of Gardena, Kitsuta finished high school in Orange County, California, as a not-always-accepted minority. "At Huntington Beach High I was one of two Japanese Americans in my class of 600. It was a

Japan you try to blend in and not stick out. I was put on the spot a lot more than the average Japanese graduate student."

In the end, Kitsuta notes, "As much as I wanted to fit in with the other students, I could never be accepted as an equal because I was a foreigner.

"It was more that I was an American lawyer (than a woman) that they resented me," she claims. In Japan fewer law students actually become lawyers and those that do take six to eight years to pass their bar exam equivalent. "I felt the other stu-



study at Ohio State, where he got his PhD in organic chemistry. I wanted to see if the feat could be repeated, except in reverse—with me as a foreigner studying in Japan."

Her father's potential and hopes were crushed by international and political events. "Due to the intervening war my father, who was raised in Japan, did not have an opportunity to go to college."

On a summer law program at Tokyo University, Kitsuta found a mentor in Kitagawa, the dean of Kyoto University Law School and found of the Kyoto Comparative Law Center. He was so impressed with her that he consented to be her personal guarantor—an official position that is not taken lightly in Japan. With a very impressive mentor and her

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very uncomfortable feeling," she explains. People would call me 'Jap' and trip me."

Although Kitsuta was one of only a few foreigners in her courses at Kyoto University and one of only three women, she found her professors were kind and patient. Yet there were other problems.

"I was often asked pointed questions about American law in front of my classmates," she recalls. "And, typically, in

dents were a bit envious that I could use the word 'lawyer' to describe myself as a professional."

Some of the resentment might also have come from the blazing pace that Kitsuta set. In 1986 she graduated with her class. She comments with some pride, "To my understanding there have been no other American lawyers to graduate since then."

With some of the brightest names in Japanese business among her clients, Kitsuta has proven that its not necessary to be a monster law firm with a big name and a big building in order to get the best international business clientele. In fact, a monster law firm may be a hindrance. It's a case where the tortoise has once again proven faster than the hare. 7