

BRIDGING THE GAP

30 Years of Connecting Japanese & Americans

By Michael R. MOYLE

Photo: Author
Golden Gate Bridge, California



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Some Truth in a Stereotype

Over 40 years ago, when I was just beginning to learn about Japan, a teacher told me that the Japanese people suffered from two related drawbacks. He said:

"First, they are among the world's least understood people, and second, they are often hesitant to share information about themselves."

I remember that when I heard that comment my reaction was that it was just another stereotype (which, of course, it was!). However, as time passed and my experience working with Japan grew, I have seen examples which have supported the statement. More importantly, I realized that there were opportunities we all have to help to address the challenges reflected by that statement.

This past December I celebrated my 60th birthday. In many Asian cultures, including in Japan, one's 60th birthday (referred to as "*kanreki*" in Japan), apart from being a good reason to celebrate for surviving, marks the end of a 60-year cycle based on the Asian zodiac system and a symbolic rebirth. In any case, it is an appropriate time for reflection about one's first 60 years.

Big Island Origins

I was born on the Big Island of Hawaii where, while growing up, I experienced the cultures of the several groups that had immigrated to Hawaii, including from Japan. In 1966, while I was in high school, I had the chance to visit Japan briefly for the first time. Later, at college on the East Coast, I unexpectedly ended up majoring in Japanese history and began to study Japanese. That led me, in turn, to two years of graduate work in legal history at Doshisha and Kyoto universities in Kyoto, and then to Harvard Law School where I was involved with the East Asia Legal Studies Program. After another year of graduate work back in Kyoto, in 1977 I started my legal practice at the firm of Graham & James – the predecessor to my current firm of Squire Sanders & Dempsey. I was immediately involved with the firm's work involving Japan which, at that time, already dated back over 20 years to the mid-1950s when the firm opened its first office in Tokyo.

During my subsequent 30-plus years of legal practice, almost all of my work has involved Japanese clients or Japan in some way, and I have had a chance to work with a large and diverse group of Japanese companies and Japanese business persons. In addition, I have had the pleasure to get to know many other Japanese individuals over the years, both here in California and in Japan.

Friction in the Early Days

In the late 1970s Japanese investment in the United States was steadily increasing, and much of that investment was being made in California. The real explosion of investment came during the so-called Japanese "bubble" period in the late 1980s when many suddenly cash-rich Japanese companies and individuals eagerly invested their resources overseas. Unfortunately, many of those investments were not well considered and, when the bubble burst in the early 1990s and Japan's so-called "lost decade" began, several had to be written off.

Obviously, Japan today is far different from Japan in the mid-1970s when I began my career. While many of the Japanese business persons with whom I worked at that time – including many at Japanese banks, trading companies and other similar institutions which already had many decades of international experience – were extremely proficient in English and had substantial experience working in overseas business environments, many did not. This lack of English ability and cross-cultural business experience became particularly acute in the 1980s when many Japanese companies with little prior direct experience in the United States began making investments here and sought to manage those investments through employees sent from the parent companies in Japan. While those individuals were very capable in a Japanese business context, in many cases they were ill-equipped to manage an American company and workforce, and there was a good deal of misunderstanding and friction on both the Japanese and American sides. As lawyers who tend to get involved where disagreements arise, we saw our fair share of these issues.

America was also much less familiar with Japan in the 1970s and 1980s than it is today. At that time the average American had very little information about Japan beyond watching World War II movies and the TV drama "*Shogun*," which debuted in 1980. Japan's sudden economic success and the wave of Japanese investment in the 1980s came as a shock and there were a number of negative and, in some cases, racist reactions. The following are just a few examples of inflammatory headlines from the covers of US magazines from that era, all accompanied by lurid artwork reminiscent of World War II propaganda posters which reinforced the "us vs. them" attitude found in certain quarters:

- *Japan Moves In: Tokyo Inc's Bold Thrust into the American Heartland* [US News & World Report – 5/9/88]
- *Japan's Influence in America: Its Clout in Washington – Its Role at U.S. Universities – Its Philanthropy and Image Building* [Business Week – 7/11/88]
- *Where Japan Will Strike Next* [Fortune – 9/25/89]
- *Fear and Loathing of Japan: Why It's Growing – Why It's Dangerous – What to Do About It* [Fortune – 2/26/90]

PHOTO 1

Photo: Author



A group at dinner

PHOTO 2

Photo: Author



One of our tasting events held at the offices of Squire, Sanders & Dempsey on June 2, 2005

A Chance to Play a Useful Role

I was very fortunate in the 1970s to be in the right place at the right time to play a role in the expanding US/Japan relationship. I was working in a region that was a focus of Japanese investment, had studied Japanese history and language, and had at least some familiarity with Japanese customs and business practices. Like many multinationals, Japanese companies have generally posted their Japanese staff overseas for periods of three to five years. As a result, every year approximately 20%-30% of the individuals with whom I was working had newly arrived, many with no prior experience living or working in the United States. Consequently there was a constant demand to help a significant number of individuals who had considerable responsibility over local investments to orient themselves quickly to life and work here. While that rotational system is understandable in a multinational organization, it came at a cost to the US-based subsidiaries to which these managers were assigned since in many cases the personnel changes caused dislocations in both internal and external working relationships and implementation of business strategies, not to mention lost opportunities that may have been exploited by having executives remain longer and become more integrated with the local community. Happily, that has changed to some extent with a greater “localization” of management at many Japanese subsidiaries here in the United States, and with the greater degree of prior US experience that many Japanese business people who are posted here have today.

Notwithstanding these more recent developments, there are still today many Japanese business people and their families who are living here in the United States who would benefit from more contact with Americans, especially in a place like Northern California. By contrast to some smaller US communities to which Japanese business persons may be posted – for example to manufacturing facilities in the Midwest or South – in a region like Northern California we have a very diverse population and workforce and an urban environment where newcomers can easily blend in and, less positively, can be overlooked by those around them. While newcomers from Japan may be able to easily create an environment here in some ways not too different from that in Japan – through the Internet and with local Japanese supermarkets, bookstores, restaurants, schools and TV stations – that isolation diminishes their experience of living in a foreign country and is a lost opportunity for the rest of us.

Business persons may have the benefit of their work environment to help them to acclimate to the local community, although their families may have a greater challenge, particularly if their spouses have language challenges or, coming from Japan where public transportation is so well developed, may not even be able to drive. On the

other hand, an increasing number of Japanese business persons come here alone, leaving their families behind in Japan (a custom referred to as “*tanshin funin*”), often due to concerns about their children’s education and the need to stay “on track” in the highly competitive Japanese educational system, or to the need to have their spouse remain behind to take care of aging relatives. Those individuals may often face loneliness and isolation.

For all these reasons, I have always felt, and still do today, that there is a great responsibility and opportunity for those who live here in the United States and know something about Japan to do more to help individuals newly arrived from Japan to orient themselves and more fully enjoy the range of experiences that our country has to offer. In Northern California we have organizations such as the Japan Society of Northern California, which provides an opportunity for Japanese persons to meet Americans who are very interested in Japan, although a more proactive and individual one-on-one approach is really needed in many cases to reach out to newcomers (*Photo 1*).

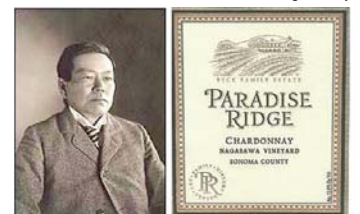
One avenue I found helpful in my own efforts to build bridges was working with a wine-tasting group established through the Japanese Chamber of Commerce of Northern California (*Photo 2*). In the three years I chaired the group we had a number of tastings, meals and educational programs which were quite successful, in particular because it was a subject in which many are interested – especially in a place like Northern California – and it is an activity in which spouses could also participate even if their English ability was limited.

Two Bridge Builders from Japan – A Century Apart

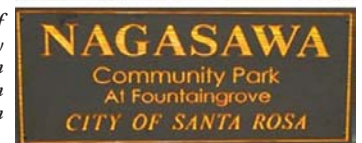
Through our wine group I also came across a very interesting wine-related connection between Japan and California which reflected both a pioneering spirit and an early US/Japan success story. Kanaye Nagasawa was born in Kagoshima on the westernmost main island of Kyushu in 1852 and, through a very circuitous route – including stops in England and the eastern United States – ultimately made his way to the Santa Rosa area north of San Francisco where he was one of the founders of the California wine industry (*Photo 3*).

PHOTO 3

Photo: Paradise Ridge Winery



Mr. Kanaye Nagasawa; label of Paradise Ridge Winery’s Chardonnay from their Nagasawa Vineyard; sign from Nagasawa Community Park in Santa Rosa dedicated in 2007 in honor of Mr. Nagasawa’s memory



Nagasawa's accomplishments were recognized during a speech made by President Ronald Reagan before the Japanese Diet during a visit to Japan in 1983 as follows:

"You and your neighbors are shining examples for all who seek rapid development.

The Pacific Basin represents the most exciting region of economic growth in the world today. Your people stretch your abilities to the limit, and when an entire nation does this, miracles occur. Being a Californian, I have seen many miracles hardworking Japanese have brought to our shores. In 1865, a young *samurai* student, Kanaye Nagasawa, left Japan to learn what made the West economically strong and technologically advanced. Ten years later he founded a small winery at Santa Rosa, California, called the Fountaingrove Round Barn and Winery. Soon he became known as the Grape King of California. Nagasawa came to California to enrich our lives. Both our countries owe much to this Japanese warrior-turned-businessman."

Mr. Yoshi Tome is another individual who has much more recently made a pioneering contribution to the US/Japan relationship in many ways similar to that of Mr. Nagasawa. I have gotten to know Mr. Tome very well over the years since he lives and works in the same town in which I live – Sausalito just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. Mr. Tome moved to California from Okinawa in the early 1980s, originally on a teacher exchange program. However, not long after he arrived, he had the opportunity first to work at, then soon thereafter to acquire, a small – and frankly not very successful – *sushi* restaurant in Sausalito named Sushi Ran.

Over the years Mr. Tome both expanded the restaurant, while maintaining its friendly and intimate atmosphere, and significantly upgraded the quality of the cuisine (Photo 4). In fact, in a 2006 Zagat survey, Sushi Ran was ranked among the top five restaurants in the entire Bay Area across all categories of cuisine, not just Japanese, and also received a Michelin star. Apart from its food, Sushi Ran also offers today more than 50 brands of premium Japanese *sake* from across Japan (Photo 5).

However, beyond just running his own business, Mr. Tome also employed his warm and outgoing personality to help to expand interest about Japanese cuisine more generally to a wide range of individuals in the Bay Area. As a reflection of his leadership and initiative, he was elected president of the Northern California Japanese Restaurant Association in 1999, and continues to hold that position today. In addition, at the end of June, Mr. Tome was one of the recipients of an annual award granted by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries for the promotion of Japanese cuisine overseas (Photo 6).



Mr. Yoshi Tome of Sushi Ran; some of the premium sakes offered at Sushi Ran

PHOTO 6

Photo: Mr. Yoshi Tome



The 2009 recipients of a Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries award for the promotion of Japanese cuisine abroad. Mr. Yoshi Tome in the grey suit in the center. Former Prime Minister Koizumi in the grey suit to the right also joined in the ceremony.

Mr. Tome has also worked hard on behalf of the local Sausalito and Marin County communities, and among other activities, has served the Sausalito Chamber of Commerce as a member, director, and chairperson for over 15 years. He has also been one of the strongest supporters of the Sister City Program between Sausalito and the town of Sakaide on the north coast of the smallest Japanese main island of Shikoku, and the strength of that grassroots program owes a great deal to that support. He is another example of the sort of difference that a single person can make to help to bring America and Japan closer together and to help Americans to learn more about Japan. My only personal regret is that he has done such a good job that it is much harder to get into Sushi Ran these days!

The US/Japan relationship and level of cooperation have improved significantly on many levels over the years, although, returning to the statement at the beginning of this article, America still has much to learn about Japan and Japan has to continue to help Americans to understand more about them. The US/Japan relationship is one of the most important that either country has and none of us should in any way take that relationship for granted. All of us on both sides of the Pacific can and should help with this important effort. **JS**

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