Cultural Conflicts in the Process of Embedding Mission Statements

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<Abstract>

This study explores how cultural conflicts have emerged in the process of embedding mission statements. Based on participant observation at a Japanese retailer operating in Hong Kong, this study analyzed the creation and embedding process of the company's mission statement. The results demonstrate that some cultural codes might be hidden in the process of translating mission statements from a spiritual focus to a more concrete one. They also show that store managers may have significant differences of understanding regarding their mission statements, and that their strong autonomy can result in an unbalanced embedding process, creating a diversified store culture rather than an integrated one. Finally, the results show that specific local culture—including communication and shopping behaviors—created additional work for local employees because their jobs were designed based on the Japanese consumption behaviors. This study implies the importance of discussing the hidden cultural codes and potential conflicts during the embedding of mission statements. It also suggests that companies should reexamine their mission statements and "deculturalize" them according to specific local and company context.

I. Introduction

A mission statement is the discourse and projection of the corporate culture, which plays significant roles in a company's performance. Peter Drucker (2012) emphasizes that a well-articulated, reasonable mission statement might influence the success of a company as well. Impacts of mission statements on corporate management have been widely discussed (Bart 1998; Desmidt, Prinzie and Decramer 2011), and, in recent

years, mission statements have regained their attention as the expectation for ethnic control and risk management. Most of the studies dealing with the best ways to create, disseminate and embed mission statements are primarily intended to serve the management side so that they better manage and control the organization, seemingly overlooking the roles of employees and how their ideas can contribute to better realizing corporate goals. The representative theory proposed by Schein (1985), called "culture embedding mechanism," has systematically analyzed the mechanism of the culture embedding structure, although it did not fully explore the impact of cultural conflicts in this process.

To fill in the existing gap in previous literatures, this paper examines the case of a Japanese retailer in Hong Kong, here called "Ichi,"[1] aiming to provide the employees' insights of how and why cultural conflicts occurred in the process of embedding mission statements. It focuses on the embedment process to the store level where the company's branding image and financial outcome depends on. A Japanese company was chosen because, unlike its American counterparts, mission statements play a more significant role in guiding employees' behaviors in Japanese companies, where employees are considered to be stakeholders (Kubo, Hirota and Miyajima 2005). Ichi is a retailer with a strong global exposure and several stores operating overseas that aims to integrate its organization across diverse cultures through a series of mission statements. However, its embedment process faced several challenges. In this paper, mission statements include their descriptive concepts, such as philosophy, value, principle, mission, motto, and policy.

First, this paper reviews past studies and briefly describe Ichi's historical development, overseas expansion, founder legacy, and mission statements. Second, it advances to the analysis of how mission statements were designed to be embedded at the store level by identifying the key culture reinforcer, system design, and the major cultural conflicts in the process. Finally, it concludes with the discussions and implications.

II. Literature Review

Mission statement is a system of belief or ideology that has been published to integrate organization, gain legitimacy, and develop business organization (Kitai and

Deguchi 1996: 67). Jones & Kahaner (1996: ix) describe mission statements as to "articulate the goals, dreams, behavior, culture, and strategies of companies." Mission statements have been studied from the perspectives of its contents, effects, and embedment. Its contents have been explored through text analysis aiming to find the key components and words used for these mission statements (Larson and Pranke 1999; Morphew and Hartley 2006; Peyrefitte and David 2006). Many scholars have concluded that mission statements have positive effects on various issues, such as employee performance, employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and innovations (Ireland and Hirc 1992; Beetz and Kenneth 1998; Bart, Bontis and Taggar 2001; Atrill, Omran and Pointon 2005; Cochran and David 2009). Scholars such as Stone used the examples of companies such as GM, Sears, IBM, Xerox, and Kmart to illustrate the importance of reformulating the mission statements to win in competitive markets (1996: 31).

The embedment of mission statement, which is the main subject of this paper, has also been widely discussed in terms of its process. Many scholars claimed that even though the studies on mission statements and their effects have largely developed in the past years, in many occasions the mission statements have not been well articulated and embedded, and sometimes left merely with its facade (Ralston, Gustafson, et al. 1993; Umezawa 1994; Kitai and Deguchi 1997; Chan and Ellis 1998; Yeung 1998; Nobayashi and Asakawa 2001). This does not only apply to the studies on Japanese companies, but also to the Hong Kong cases.

The most representative theory in this field is the one of Schein (1985), who proposed the theory of culture embedding mechanism composed by primary and secondary mechanisms. In the primary mechanism, leaders are the major players to determine the organizational climate, including what leaders should pay attentions, their reactions to critical incidents and crises, resource allocation, role modeling, and so on. This level is mostly spiritual, where the culture is created (Yokokawa 2010: 220). The secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanism includes organization design, structure, systems, procedures, rites, rituals, designs, and so on, and requires to correspond the primary mechanism, also playing a role as a culture reinforcer. These two do not necessary indicate first and second levels, but are rather interchangeable according to the size and mature degree of a company.

Some scholars discussed in detail how to embed mission statements. Tanaka (2006) pointed out the importance of people's emotions and listed seven key elements to embed the mission statements: 1) To recruit talents who can sympathize with mission statements; 2) through daily jobs; 3) chorus mission statements; 4) communication between managers and employees; 5) managers as models for the employees; 6) increase the training; 7) and to incorporate into the system. Nakajima (2006) studied the effects of training on the embedment of mission statements and concluded that there are several features. The first is to show the statements and to break down to each department, division and individual. The second is to incorporate statements into the action plans. The third is that directors and chiefs at each department and divisions play significant roles. The fourth is that the supervisors need to have faith on their subordinates to grow and that delivering this message could facilitate the process of embedment. Takao, Ou and Kou (2009) pointed that, in the process of embedment, there are three main dimensions: 1) if an individual's behavior has been reflected the mission statements; 2) if an individual understand or recognize the contents of mission statements; 3) if an individual sympathizes to the statements without conflicting with his or her values.

The above literature was mostly based on quantitative methodology through the eyes of top management aiming to provide several effects and suggestions about mission statements. This paper attempts to incorporate how the employees understand and interpret the company's aim of embedding mission statements, and how cultural conflicts fit in this context.

III. Methodology

Previous literatures were mostly based on the deductive approach, meaning that they would first formulate hypotheses and then experiment to validate them. This type of approach allowed researchers to test the existing hypotheses as well as to find new elements. However, it does not consider the possibility that these hypotheses might have already narrowed down their results before the testing. In order to explore the hidden issues that can largely influence the research questions, this study adopts the inductive approach along with the methodology of participant observation, which requires immersion over a certain amount of time in a particular field.

Data in this study are based on participant observation as well as individual face-to-face interviews during my fieldwork from 2009 to 2011, with permission from the head office of the research target, Ichi, in Hong Kong. I was assigned to observe at several retail stores for eight hours a day, five days a week, as an intern. Before going into the field, I had some general research questions, but the main purpose was to discover what are *actually* happening rather than to describe what they *say* they do there. This type of methodology requires an inductive approach in order to obtain a broader understanding from a specific observation (Zhu 2016).

There have been many debates about the legitimacy of this methodology in management, and some may consider participant observation as a rather subjective method. However, the results of this research show that the cultural conflicts that occur in daily work were easily overlooked in the mass survey and even in the interview, since the context changes, and sometimes employees do not notice such conflicts; it is only through observations that it is possible to have a general idea of how they behave as group.

The following begins the description of the Ichi case in Hong Kong from its financial status, historical development, and founder legacy. With such background information, this paper moves to the discussion of its mission statements.

IV. Case description

Ichi is a Japanese retailer that operates under the management of its mother company, Ichi Global. The company started its business in the 1980s and gradually evolved into a national brand in the 1990s, based on its strategy of providing high-quality homemade casual ware. In the early 2000s, the company decided to expand overseas from Europe and then opened its second store in Asia. Despite undesirable financial achievements in the early years, Ichi was able to revive after opening a store in Hong Kong, which was the first overseas market where Ichi made profits. The company accelerated overseas expansions and, by early 2018, the company operated more than 1,000 stores worldwide.

The founder legacy played a significant role on the establishment of Ichi's mission statements. Ichi had sets of mission statements composed of simple but ambitious messages from the founder, who incorporated his hope for Japan to fulfill its business

potentials and to regain its status in the world. Having been born after World War II, the founder has witnessed the critical situation of Japan and also experienced its glorious economic revival. In many of the founder's publications, the message has focused largely on the necessity of win through Japan's fast pace (change, innovation), and good business practices (such as quality-oriented productions, advanced technology), which are paramount to surviving in a competitive environment.

One of the turning points in Ichi's mission statement practices worldwide was when the globalization strategy shifted its corporate goals. Ichi discovered that one of the main reasons for its success in Hong Kong was the strategy of presenting the company as a Japanese brand, and thus decided to disseminate all elements that were considered to be specific to Japan and its best practices. Moreover, the company started to standardize all of its systems abroad, including mission statements, according to the standards of the Japanese headquarters.

Mission Statements at Ichi

This section discusses the following major statements: Ichi Way, Basic Policy, Promise and Service Concept.[2] Ichi Way was composed of Statement, Mission, Value, and Principle, and its contents were from rather abstract writing to more concrete contents (see figure 1). Ichi Way was the main pillar of Ichi's mission statements, and all employees were expected to be familiar with it.

Figure 1 Ichi Way

	Descriptions	Features	
Statement	Deconstruct common sense Change the world	Higher level Core idea	Abstract
Mission	Create new values Spread happiness Contribute to the society Enrich life	Description of Statement	
Value	Customer-oriented Innovation Respect the individual Company growth	Methods to realize core ideas Create Mindsets	
Principle	Everything is for the customers Aim for higher standards Respect diversity Speedy action	Further detail explanation Action plans	Concrete

Data was acquired during the fieldwork. Contents were altered to avoid identification of the company.

Ichi Statement shows the company's ambition to change common sense and the world, while Ichi Mission explains this by stating the company's aim of creating new values in clothing, spreading happiness around the world, and contributing to the society. Ichi Value emphasizes the "customers-first" mindset, innovation, respect of individual, and growth of the company. Ichi Principle further explains how employees should think and react to realize these values. For instance, their actions should always be customers-driven and they should seek higher standards. Ichi Way expressed strong interlinked concepts, such as changes, innovation, new and customers-first. For instance, Statement is explained in detail in Mission, while Value and Principle are expected to be the mindset system that guide employees. Principle breaks down the contents in Value and suggest more practical actions.

The second type of mission statements comprises Basic Policy, Promise, and Basic Service Concept (see figure 2). These polices reflect expectations of Ichi Way, such as the customer-first concept that includes customer service attitudes (smiling, greeting, politeness, fast) and store environment (full stock, cleanliness), and have stronger normative elements according to which the system was expected to guide or restrict employee behaviors. It is worth mentioning that, in the areas of customer service attitudes, the company emphasizes employees' presentation and speed more than other issues, such as being attentive to customers and observing customers' behaviors to detect their potential needs since Ichi is based in the self-service described in Basic Service Concept. In other words, Ichi do emphasize on taking care of customers, but it needs to be hurry and minimum, which are different from the salesperson at high-end stores who are expected to spend more time with individual customer.

Figure 2 Basic Policy, Promise, and Basic Service Conept

Basic Policy	Serve customers with a smile Politeness, greetings Cleanliness Be fast, with cheerful spirits Maintain full stock Always priortize customers

Promise	Clean shop floor Full stock Availability of product return

Basic Service Concept	Self-service

Data was acquired during the fieldwork. Contents were altered to avoid identification of the company.

Figure 1 and 2 explains two types of mission statements: one is rather theoretical (Ichi Way), while the other is a series of normative principles (Basic Policy, Promise, and Basic Service Concept). The latter type of mission statement was an explanation of the first one, aiming to provide clearer guidance to the employees. The next section describes how the company endeavored to embed those normative principles in the store.

Embedding Mission Statements to the store

There are two embedding measurements: briefing session and daily routine. In the daily briefing session, which is normally conducted before the start of each shift (morning, afternoon, and evening), employees were expected to chorus by memorizing Basic Policy and Promise. Managers, usually one or two including the store manager, stand opposed to the employees before the briefing starts. Everyone is expected to have pen and notebook prepared for the briefing session, because the company expects all employees to be aware of the business at the store. After sharing business-related information (such as the total sales and the list of best sellers of the previous day, the current day sales target, and announcements from the head office), a manager would randomly choose one non-manager, typically a part-timer or a new full-timer, to lead the chorus. Sometimes they would forget one or two items from Promise and Basic Policy because the chorus was irregular and less frequent. There was no written

punishment for employees who forgot these items or if no punishment is needed. Whenever a decision needed to be made and was not found in the manual, it was usually made by store managers.

One of the main problems of this procedure were the different interpretations of store managers on these rules. Strong autonomy was given to the store managers and, in addition to that, the lack of sufficient monitoring or support from the head office allowed store managers to freely drive the rules. Employees would mostly follow the management style and decisions made by particular store managers because of their strong power on determining their careers rather than because they follow the system. I observed how two types of store managers strongly impact employee behaviors. The first was obedient and showed cooperation on the company's policy and manuals. This store manager created a tense atmosphere during the briefing. The store manager would scold and punish employees who forgot some of the principles (or sometimes all of them) by making them write these principles a dozen times and recite them in front of the store manager before they finish the work. The store manager wanted to show the head office efforts to embed mission statements at the store to fulfill the job requirements. Unsurprisingly, the head office gave this store manager a rather high evaluation.

The second store manager was reluctant to memorize these mission statements, focusing instead on increasing store sales. This store manager was in fact the successor of the first store manager abovementioned, and many employees felt that the store atmosphere became less intense. Unlike the first store manager who had a lower self-esteem, this store manager showed confidence in improving the sales, which was shown by past glorious achievements. The store manager believed that, as long as the store achieve good numbers, the head office would not evaluate them poorly; therefore, besides some of verbal warning, there were no punishments for employees who forgot these statements. The store manager also repeatedly suggested that employees memorize as much as they can to deal with the examination because they care little about gaining actual skills, such as stock control, store layout, and other management skills. In contrast to the first store manager, the second one believed that embedding mission statements in the store was less important for the future career path than increasing store sales. The head office seemed less motivated to give this store manager

a low evaluation because sales were indeed increasing.

The above examples show that the store managers' attitudes toward their future career path resulted in differences in embedding the mission statement, and even created a diverse store culture. This diversity was enhanced by the managers' strong autonomy and by less control by the head office, which resulted in unbalanced level of mission statements embedment.

The second measurement of embedding mission statements is daily routine. To give a more concrete image, here is presented an example of customer service in a staff manual to show how these principles were translated into the rules as shown in Figure 3. Ichi imported these rules directly from Japan and believed this would contribute to standardize the customer service level and to provide high-quality services anywhere. Contents show that there are several rules restricting employee behaviors (such as do not chat, do not walk pass the customer, do not make poker faces, and so on), and emphasize on politeness while interacting with the customers, as well as speedy reactions.

Figure 3 Job Tasks and Rules

Job tasks	Category	Rules
Customer service	Greetings	Greet customers when they enter the store Use Service Words when talking with customers Store atmosphere must be cheerful
	Be polite	Only use appropriate word Do not chat at the shop floor Do not walk pass the customers Do not make poker faces Need to behave speedy Do not treat products rudely
	Be attentive	Use polite wordings when talking to customers Greet customers when they approach Do not intersect customers while replenishing the stock
	Customer request	Check the stock according to the Manual Politely explain the features of products when customers ask

Data was acquired during the field work. Contents were altered to avoid identification of the company.

These rules were not complicated in nature, but cultural differences in communication and shopping behaviors delayed the embedding process. First, local employees felt that some of these rules unfit their communication styles. For instance, it is considered as a way to show the company's gratitude greeting the customer when

he or she enters and leaves the store at the entrance, but many local employees believed customers in Hong Kong would care less if someone greets them. Another example is the way salesperson talks to a customer. It is a common sense to use polite words ("keigo" or "teineigo" in Japanese) to show respect to a customer, but local employees felt this would build a wall between them and the customers, and they believed it might be more efficient to gain loyal customers by showing their friendliness. It was also apparent that speed, accuracy and professionalism are the key elements favored by many local customers. They would expect employees at the cashier to be speedy rather than being polite and wasting their time.
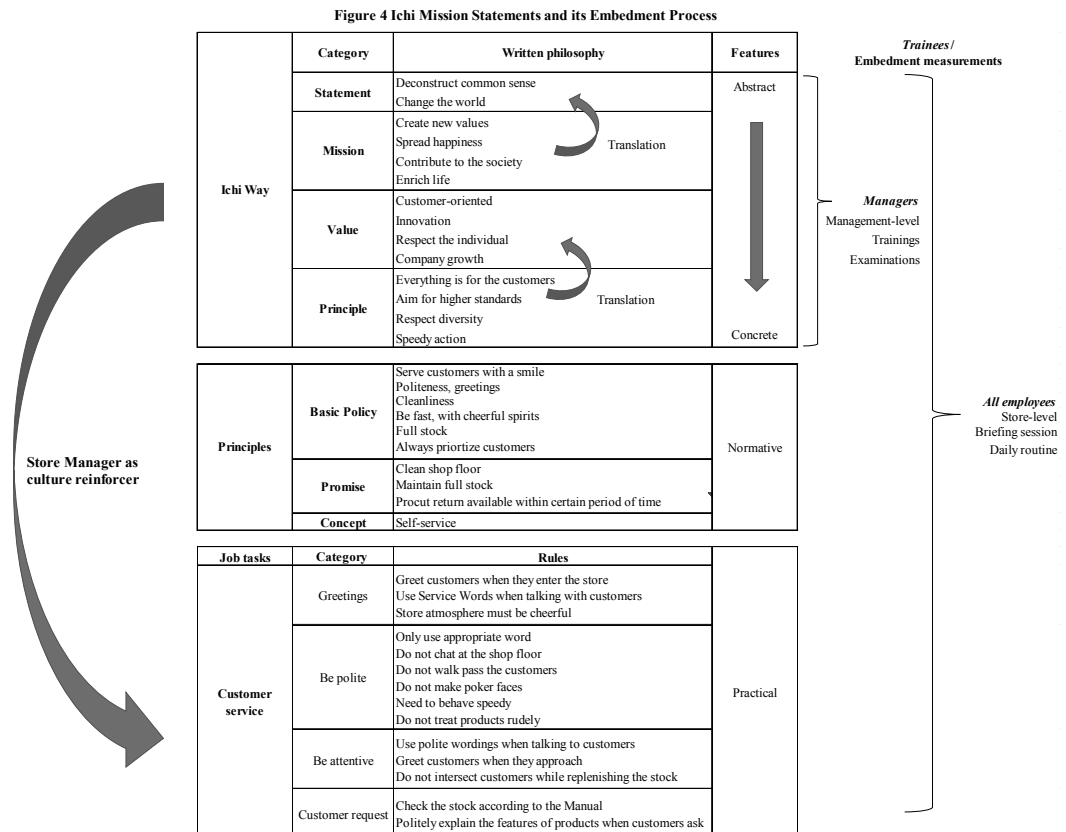
Second is the cultural differences in shopping behaviors. The large number of customers and different shopping custom enhanced the difficulty of performing as the way company expected. Ichi Hong Kong stores were crowded almost every day during my fieldwork, and this was different from the situation of Ichi Japan, where the stores were mostly crowded only during the weekends. This might not be a big problem as long as the shopping environment sustains the self-service concept. However, the case of Ichi Hong Kong shows that locals' shopping behaviors increased employees' overall workload. For instance, Hong Kong customers were used to approach employees more than Japanese ones to inquire about products because of their unfamiliarity with the Ichi store system and their doubts on the new brand. This requires employees to have competency to handle customer requests as soon as possible so as to move to the next one. However, if an employee is new, some job tasks may require more time, such as finding the shelf the customer is looking for. I encountered many occasions when, on my way to respond to a customer's request, I had more than two new inquiries, and this would make employees confusing, which might eventually delay some of their requests, or even forget them. This was in fact not a serious problem as long as the store assigns more employees, but it was restricted because of the budget issue, and, in principle, Ichi is a store with self-service concept.

Embedding mission statements through daily routine showed the importance of local contexts—in this case, the different communication style and shopping behaviors of people in Hong Kong—on embedding mission statements. The above examples demonstrated that the contexts in which the staff manual was written sometimes incorporated the experiences that worked in Japan but which might not fit well in

Hong Kong.

V. Findings and Discussions

First, this paper clarified the flow of embedding mission statements from the top management to the store level (see figure 4): theoretical foundation (Ichi Way), normative principles (Basic Policy, Promise and Basic Service Concept), and then practical applications (Job Tasks and Rules). From each category to the next one, there was a translation process. For instance, contents of Ichi Way were translated from abstract ideas to more concrete guidelines, and play a role as spiritual and theoretical foundation for the normative principles, such as Basic Policy, Promise, and Basic Service Concept, which were expected to guide and restrict employee behaviors. This paper described how the customer service rules were consisted of the translations of Ichi's various mission statements, and showed how these rules were expected to help embed them to the front-line level.

Figure 4 Ichi Mission Statements and its Embedment Process

This creation process overall echoes Schein's two cultural embedding mechanisms: creation of mission statements by the leader, and articulation and reinforcement for its embedment. Ichi translated an abstract idea into a more concrete context in the Ichi Way, then later it broke down to rather normative principles (Basic Policy, Promise and Basic Service Concept)—and even to the details of each job, such as customer service. One distinctive feature in which Ichi's case differed from Schein's cultural embedding mechanism is that some cultural codes were embedded during the translation from normative principles to practical job tasks. This made it more difficult for local employees to decode them correctly, which resulted in slowing down the embedment process.

Second, this paper broke down the mission statements into more practical contexts, and showed how briefing session and daily routines were expected to facilitate mission statements embedment by focusing on employees' customer service performance. On the one hand, employees were randomly chosen to lead the chorus of memorization of some of the corporate principles during the daily briefing sessions. This helped embed mission statements to some small degree, but store managers with different understandings of the mission statements created distinctive store cultures. This was due to an incomplete corporate monitoring system, that is, overly independent store managers coupled with the lack of sufficient support and control from the head office.

On the other hand, mission statements were expected to be embedded through daily work, but this also faced some challenges due to the company's underestimation on the impact of local culture. Consumer customs in Hong Kong, such as their communication style and shopping behaviors, greatly influenced the efficiency of the employees by creating extra work for the employees.

This study illustrates the importance of discussing the contents of the mission statement and examining its cultural fitness. In previous studies, many have argued over the best ways to embed mission statements, but they have not fully incorporated the possible cultural conflicts inherent in this process. The case of Ichi shows this type of conflict could also happen in the most practical of settings, such as the employee manual. This has a significant implication in the studies of mission embedment because it demonstrates that staff manuals need to be *cultureless*. In other words, companies may need to *deculturalize* their written criteria so that people from different

cultures can have mutual understanding, although even with these changes, it would take some time before the mission is embedded.

VI. Conclusion

This paper explores how cultural conflicts have emerged and influenced the process of embedding mission statements to store employees. Based on a long-term participant observation of a Japanese retailer in Hong Kong, here called "Ichi," this paper described the flows of this process and analyzed the challenges this company faced during this process. There was an extensive literature on mission statements' contents, effects, and embedding process that provided us with general flows and impacts of the mission statements. However, most of them did not fully incorporate employees' perspectives into their discussions, and does not provide detailed analyses on the possible influences of cultural conflicts.

This study explained three layers in the process of embedment, from top management down to the store level, and its mechanism echoes Schein's cultural embedding mechanism theory. Starting from the Ichi Way, which was rather theoretical and spiritual, the mission statements were further translated into a series of normative principles (Basic Policy, Promise, and Basic Service Concept), and finally into the most practical of functions, such as job tasks in an employee manual. These three layers were translated at each stage, and store managers were expected to disseminate them to the front-line workers as cultural reinforcers. One distinctive characteristic in Ichi's case was presenting hidden cultural codes or tacit knowledge in an explicit format, representatively in the staff manual. Local employees had different decoding mechanisms, and this resulted in slowing down the embedment process.

This study also illustrated how daily briefing sessions and routine tasks were used as measurements to embed mission statements at the store. This process faced certain difficulties because the key cultural reinforcers—the store managers—had different ways of responding to the embedment of mission statements. While some store managers supported this process for getting better evaluations from the head office, others found that not doing so would not seriously damage their future career so long as they could increase store sales. This was reinforced by insufficient support and control from the head office, as well as the strong autonomy and decision-making power of the

store managers. These differences in understanding and execution have created their distinctive store cultures.

Finally, this study argued that specific cultural contexts, such as the local customers' communication style and shopping behaviors, might influence the progress of statement embedment as well. Results show that differences in local communication and shopping customs increased workload for the employees because the job was designed based on the experiences of Japan, and this made employees more reluctant to follow the rules that were designed to facilitate the process of embedding mission statements.

This study aimed to open a dialogue with researchers who study the embedding of mission statements, to suggest the importance of discussing hidden cultural codes during the translation of mission statements from spiritual to more concrete and practical tasks, and ways to avoid possible cultural conflicts during its embedding process. It also suggests that companies who face similar problems should consider deculturalizing these mission statements and replacing them with more universal descriptions to ease such conflicts.

<Endnotes>

1   This paper will alternate the person's names as well as its mission statements to avoid identification of the company.
2   Contents of these principles were originally in Cantonese, but I have translated in English for reading purposes. This might not be the same as the ones used in English speaking countries, where Ichi has stores.

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