

**DEALING WITH REVERED PAST: HISTORICAL IDENTITY STATEMENTS  
AND STRATEGIC CHANGE IN JAPANESE FAMILY FIRMS**

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## RESEARCH SUMMARY

This paper examines how strategy-makers attempt to reconcile change initiatives with organizational values and principles laid out long before and still encased in strategic identity statements such as corporate mottos and philosophies. It reveals three discursive strategies that strategy-makers use to establish a sense of continuity in time of change: elaborating (transferring part of the content of the historical statement into a new one), recovering (forging a new statement based on the retrieval and re-use of historical references), and decoupling (allowing the co-existence of the historical statement and a contemporary one). By so doing, our study advances research on uses of the past, it establishes important linkages between identity and strategy research, and enhances our understanding of the intergenerational transfer of values in family firms.

## MANAGERIAL SUMMARY

Crafting a new corporate philosophy or mission statement can help implement strategic change, but can also be experienced as a disruption in people's sense of "who we are" as an organization. This paper reveals a variety of strategies that managers can use to deal with the tension between promoting change and maintaining a sense of continuity with a distant, revered past. By doing so, it helps managers confronting these issues deal with the enabling and constraining effects of the past. While this is a more general challenge for organizations with historical legacies, it is a particularly delicate issue for family firms grappling with the need to transfer values from one generation to the next, while retaining flexibility to change and adapt over time.

Strategy scholars have only recently begun to examine the influence of history on strategy-making (Vaara and Lamberg, 2016; Whittington, Caillaet, and Yakis-Douglas, 2011). This new "historical turn" is part of a broader revived interest in history in management and organization studies (Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014; Godfrey *et al.*, 2016; Kipping and Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker, 2014). In particular, a growing line of inquiry on the *use of the past* has drawn attention to how organizational history is periodically re-constructed in light of present-day concerns and future plans (Foster, Coraiola, Suddaby, Kroezen, and Chandler, 2017).

Collectively, these studies have offered a view of the past as relatively malleable – a rhetorical resource to be used by organizational leaders to further their strategic agendas (Suddaby, Foster, and Quinn Trank, 2010; Kroeze and Keulen, 2013). Recent work, however, suggests that the past may be less pliable than assumed (Brunninge, 2009; Ravasi, Rindova and Stigliani, forthcoming; Ybema, 2014). Long-lived firms, family-owned ones in particular, may

be reluctant to abandon their traditions, and rather seek opportunities to leverage a cherished past (De Massis *et al.*, 2016; Erdogan, Rondi, and De Massis, 2019). The infusion of historical events or artefacts with particular significance may restrict the capacity of strategists to revise historical narratives or depart from historical trajectories (Schultz and Hernes, 2013; Sasaki, Ravasi, and Micelotta, 2019). Yet, we know little about how strategists deal with revered past, which cannot be easily ignored or revisited to accommodate strategic change.

To elucidate this conundrum, we investigated a unique setting that reveals the challenges that strategists encounter when contending with an illustrious distant past: how strategy-makers in long-lived Japanese firms attempt to reconcile change initiatives with organizational values and guidelines laid out by long gone predecessors but still revered in the present day. In Japan, these values and guidelines are known as *ka-kun*, which can be loosely translated as “family mottos,” and include principles, rules and instructions left by past leaders (including founders) to their successors. In many Japanese firms, foundational *ka-kun* have remained relevant for decades, or even centuries, transferred through oral and/or written memory to the present day (Mito, 1991; Yoshida, 2010). Examples of similar practices in Western companies include the Johnson & Johnson Credo (dating back to 1943), the McKnight’s Principles at 3M (dating back to 1948), and the Golden Words at Carlsberg (dating back to 1892; see Schultz and Hernes, forthcoming).

Theoretically, *ka-kun* can be viewed as *strategic identity statements* – strategy documents espousing the mission, values, or philosophy of the organization. It is not uncommon for organizational leaders to craft formal statements about “who we are as an organization” that aim to convey what they view as core and distinctive attributes of the organization (Whetten, 2006). Prior research has shown that over time such statements tend to become emotionally-laden symbols of historical commitments that, when used effectively, can create a shared sense of purpose (Carton, 2018) and mobilize collective action (Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Ravasi and

Schultz, 2006).

Our study combined archival research with contemporary documents and interview data to investigate how 25 Japanese companies engaged with the revered and significant part of their history embodied in their *ka-kun*, in the face of strategic change. In addition to cases of clear-cut remembering or forgetting, we identified three discursive strategies that can be used to establish a sense of continuity in times of change: *elaborating* (transferring part of the content of the historical statement into a new one, and articulating its implications for the current context), *recovering* (forging a new statement, different from the historical one, but based on the retrieval and re-use of historical references), and *decoupling* (allowing the co-existence of the historical statement and a contemporary one, serving complementary purposes). A comparative analysis revealed specific contextual conditions that tended to be associated with the use of each strategy.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Uses of the past in strategy-making**

Historical analysis has been central to the early development of strategic management research (Chandler, 1962, 1977), and longitudinal case studies by strategy scholars and other social scientists have played a central role in strategy process studies (Burgelman, 1983; Pettigrew, 1985). History and strategy, however, have subsequently remained essentially separate areas of inquiry (Kipping and Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker, 2014). Only recently have scholars rediscovered an interest at exploring intersections between the two (Kahl, Silverman, and Cusumano, 2012; Vaara and Lamberg, 2016; Whittington *et al.*, 2011).

An interesting trajectory of this body of work focuses on how organizations “use” history as a resource, and – most important for our purposes – how present-day managers use the past for strategy making (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Wadhvani *et al.* 2018). The antecedents of this stream of research can be found in philosophical and historical analyses that have offered

insights into how accounts of the past are retrospective reconstructions (Ricoeur, 2000; White, 1987), or how our interpretations or narratives are not neutral but politically charged (Foucault, 1972, 1980). Business historians have also pointed out how specific narratives become dominant and discussed the implications thereof (Hansen, 2012; Mordhorst, 2014). This work has also led to a sophisticated discussion about the role of alternative narratives (Boje, 1995) and the production of counter-narratives (Mordhorst, 2008) to complement the hegemonic views of specific historical processes.

Increasing interest in uses of the past has generated a rich body of work elaborating on the various ways in which past events, knowledge or constructions are used for present-day purposes (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Wadhvani *et al.*, 2018; Zundel, Holt, and Popp, 2016). Early studies advanced a rather critical view of the use of past in organizations, arguing that top managers tend to manipulate history to serve their particular interests, selectively representing history to legitimize current management practices (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993). Other studies suggest that rhetorical uses of past corporate speeches, reports, press releases and corporate biographies are primarily driven by power and legitimacy motivations (Kroeze and Keulen, 2013) and historical reconstructions in corporate museums can be manipulated to shape internal and external perceptions of the organization (Nissley and Casey, 2002).

Suddaby, Foster and colleagues importantly suggest that rhetorical history can be “strategic” in the sense that it serves to build and/or take advantage of firm-specific historical narratives and societal-level collective memories as a source of competitive advantage in the present (Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, and Wiebe; 2011; Foster *et al.*, 2017; Suddaby *et al.* 2010). Similarly, De Massis and colleagues show different ways in which family firms use their past – long-standing traditions, founders’ values, and iconic products – as a resource for innovation in the present (De Massis *et al.*, 2016; Erdogan *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have also begun to elaborate on the ways in which organizational leaders use the past to establish continuity or

discontinuity during strategic change (Brunninge, 2009), and the narrative practices that they can use to portray change as a novel but coherent departure from the past (Dalpiaz and DiStefano, 2018).

For the most part, this stream of research has portrayed history and memory as amenable to retrospective manipulation (Anteby and Molnár, 2012; Nissley and Casey, 2002) and flexible use to support new strategic initiatives (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Hatch and Schultz, 2017). Scholars, however, have increasingly pointed out that establishing continuity while undergoing change is not easy (Maclean *et al.*, 2014), as narratives of the past may “trap” firms in their own historical storytelling (Mordhorst, 2014), and strategic uses of the past may be restricted by practices of remembrance outside the organization (Ravasi, Rindova and Stigliani, forthcoming). Sasaki, Ravasi and Micelotta (2019) also show how the acquisition of a particular significance for their constituents may “entrap” firms in the continuation of historical trajectories, despite the changing ambitions of their leaders. These limitations may become particularly vexing if deviations from the current course of action cannot find support in historically-informed understandings of the organization, or are in outright opposition to them (Ybema, 2014).

Collectively, these studies have pointed to the importance of selectively remembering those elements of the past that are valuable and help achieve organizational objectives, while forgetting those that unnecessarily constrain organizational action. Yet, despite the recent surge in interest about these issues, our understanding of how the past is made use of in contemporary strategy-making is still limited. In particular, there is a paucity of knowledge about how strategic decision-makers can effectively deal with revered history that restricts its revision and manipulation in contexts of strategic change. To dig deeper into these processes, we examined how managers engage with one of the most important ways in which the legacy of the past is manifested in the present: historically constructed strategic identity statements.

## **Strategic identity statements and strategic change**

Strategic identity statements include a broad range of texts that convey what are otherwise described as vision, mission, corporate philosophy, or core values (Collins and Porras, 1996; Kenny, 2014). Sometimes they are condensed in corporate mottos or slogans (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Schultz and Hernes, forthcoming) or in the very name of the organization (Glynn and Abzug, 2002). As material manifestations of organizational identity – that is, how members of an organization answer the fundamental question “who are we as an organization?” (Whetten, 2006) – these statements are intended to focus the attention of decision-makers, and offer terms of reference to inspire, direct, or justify decisions in various circumstances (Zundel *et al.*, 2016).

When initially forged, these statements tend to be future-oriented – a declaration of who we are (or who we want to be), setting a direction for future developments, and channeling energies, efforts and resources in that direction. As time passes, however, these statements may come to reflect conditions and circumstances that are no longer relevant. Yet, by then, they may have acquired a particular symbolic status, often charged with emotion – the more so when these statements are associated with remarkable achievements or charismatic figures, or have earned the organization popularity among external audiences (Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2015; Kjærgaard, Morsing, and Ravasi, 2011). Statements originally produced to direct members’ efforts towards the future may then become inextricably tied to their collective sense of self, as legacy of a valued past.

Because of this reason, over time organizations face a heightened tension between strategy-making – which is oriented, by definition, toward the future – and backward-looking identity statements (Sillince and Simpson, 2010; Schultz and Hernes, forthcoming); between preserving a sense of continuity and supporting strategic change (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000). This struggle tends to be increasingly pronounced over long periods of time, as identity statements

become infused with heightened symbolic and emotional significance that may constrain adaptation in the face of changing strategic goals (Canato, Ravasi, and Phillips, 2013). In these circumstances, the revision of identity statements offers organizational leaders an opportunity to forge links between the past, present and future when initiating new strategic initiatives (Fenton and Langley, 2011; Hatch *et al.*, 2015), and it may help members accept strategic changes in light of a new understanding of the identity of the organization (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Rindova, Dalpiaz, and Ravasi, 2011).

Scholars have offered ample advice regarding the ideal content and structure of strategic identity statements (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1994; Collins and Porras, 1996; Lipton, 1996), and documented their capacity to mobilize possible selves (Stam, Lord, Knippenberg, and Wisse, 2014), and confer a shared sense of purpose (Bass and Avolio, 1994). With few exceptions (Zundel *et al.*, 2016), however, this research has been relatively a-historical, and overlooked the fact that, when forging a new statement, other statements may have already been in place for a while, and – to the extent that they have come to be regarded as central expressions of “who we are” as an organization – they cannot be easily set aside, altered, or contradicted.

To shed further light on how managers reconcile the simultaneously enabling and constraining effects of a revered past – and, more generally, how they address the inherent dilemma between remembering and forgetting when crafting new strategic identity statements – we conducted a systematic study of how statements from a distant past were made use of, revisited, or even set aside by long-lived Japanese firms, as managers confronted strategic change.

## **RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS**

Japanese firms offer an ideal setting for our investigation. The country hosts a large number of multi-centenary firms (Imperial Data Bank, 2014), ranging from large internationally renowned corporations such as Sumitomo, Mitsubishi, and Kikkoman, to smaller family firms

such as Japan's oldest cotton cloth quotient, Eirakuya, founded in 1615, and kimono shop Kimura Uheibeï, founded in 1738. In many of these firms, past leaders drafted strategic identity statements – in the form of *ka-kun* (or “family rules”) – that were referred (and deferred) to for several decades, or even centuries (Ashida, 1974a; Ashida, 1974b; Nihon Shashin Insatsu, 1970; Yoshida, 2010). These statements took various forms, such as family lessons, testaments, open letters, etc. – but they all aimed at articulating fundamental norms and values to inspire personal and business conduct. Some of these documents were still formally adhered to at the time of our study, despite the firms having experienced waves of both internal and external changes in their histories. Others were radically altered, or no longer mentioned in organizational self-presentations.

### **Data collection**

Our empirical material consists of extensive archival and more contemporary material gathered in several rounds of data collection (see Table 1 for a summary of the data sources).

--- Insert Table 1 about here ---

Our data collection initially relied on the work of Japanese historians to build a comprehensive empirical database of ancient mottos. To do so, we drew on 14 historical books to identify 190 *ka-kun* from 110 firms, written between 1549 and 1946. These texts were often written in traditional Japanese with partial supplementary explanation in modern Japanese. Although the first author was familiar with the language, history and culture of Japan, she could not fully comprehend the content of some of these texts. Therefore, we hired an expert to translate these texts into modern Japanese and English. The overall transcribed material resulted in 790 pages of double-spaced text.

Next, we gathered information about whether the 110 firms, whose ancient mottos were mentioned by our sources, still existed, and whether they had changed their mottos or not. Our search indicated that 49 of these ancient family firms no longer existed. 10 of them still existed

but did not display any identity statements in their corporate websites; these were mostly small family-run establishments, whose size and complexity would hardly justify formal managerial practices. 51 firms, finally, still existed and displayed strategic identity statements in their corporate websites.

We contacted all these firms and asked whether they had produced other statements between the ancient ones in our possession and the contemporary ones displayed on the webpage, and whether they could provide additional information. 25 firms responded to our queries and offered varying degrees of access to their archives and/or availability for interviews (see Table 2 for additional information). We focused further data collection on these firms, because we considered access essential to examine the transition from the historical statement to the contemporary one. We excluded, instead, firms that did not answer our query because, in these cases, it was impossible to establish whether contemporary statements had directly replaced historical ones or there had been instead intermediate revisions or co-existence.

--- Insert Table 2 about here ---

In further rounds of data collection, the first author conducted a total of 25 interviews and had 65 email exchanges with informants from these cases (see Table 1) to better understand why ancient mottos had been revised, when, by whom, and with what implications. She also collected further secondary archival material as well as 312 additional items from primary archives to triangulate evidence from interviews (see Table 1). These items helped us mitigate the potential retrospective bias in relying solely on interviews and secondary archival material. To place the changes we observed in their historical context, we also tapped a broad range of sources, including business histories, corporate websites, scholarly articles, and on-line articles (see Table 1).

### **Data analysis**

Our analysis combined methods for multiple case analysis (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) with an interpretive historical approach (Vaara and Lamberg, 2016; Wadhvani and Decker, 2017) to uncover patterns in whether and how organizational leaders linked past and newly crafted statements, and with what implications. In its focus on texts, our interpretive approach resonates with rhetorical history, a fruitful perspective in research on uses of the past (Foster et al., 2016; Suddaby et al., 2010). The detailed analysis of the mottos and the strategies used to reproduce or revise them resembles microhistorical research (Ericson et al, 2015; Vaara and Lamberg, 2016); however, our comparative approach differs from the in-depth contextual analysis, focused on specific cases and time periods, that characterizes this type of research (e.g. Popp and Holt, 2013).

*Step 1: Comparative content analysis of historical and contemporary mottos*

We began our analysis by comparing the content of historical mottos and contemporary ones. To do so, we searched each statement for the claims that it contained about attributes that characterized the conduct of the firm and/or its leaders. These claims were frequently expressed in the form of organizational values or rules of conduct that constituted the concrete enactment of these values. Identifying the values contained in each statement was facilitated by the fact that in many statements rules were numbered (with each number corresponding to a value or rules of conduct) while, in others, values were clearly labelled or highlighted through paragraphing, etc.

We then compared the content of statements produced at different points in time to examine whether, on aggregate, the type of values that these statements upheld or the way in which they were expressed had changed over time. This preliminary step provided the backdrop for further analyses by sensitizing us to the extent to which changes observed in particular cases reflected broader trends in the form and content of *ka-kun*, themselves a reflection of macro-level changes in the socio-cultural context (e.g. the Meiji Restoration and modernization of the

country, the decline of the traditional household business, the rise and fall of management-led large conglomerates, rising expectations for social and environmental responsibility, etc.).

*Step 2: Within-case historical analysis*

Based on systematic coding of ancient and contemporary statements, we turned to a within-case analysis of changes in identity statements. For each firm in our subsample, we compared the different statements it had produced over time, the extent to which their content overlapped, and the way in which later statements (or the way in which they were presented or had been introduced) referenced previous ones. To place these changes in the context within which they occurred, we reconstructed a historical chronology emphasizing structural and strategic discontinuities in each firm's history, and events that occurred at about the time when identity statements were revisited. To do so, we complemented archival data with interviews and other supplementary sources to gradually move from our initial content analysis to a more nuanced understanding of the particular context within which mottos had been revised and the motivation that induced their revision.

*Step 3: Cross-case comparison (search for similar patterns across change episodes)*

Next, we conducted a cross-case comparison to uncover managers' strategies to link past and present statements. To do so, we focused our comparison on change episodes – that is, occasions when historical mottos had been revisited or integrated. We did so, because the prior analytical step had revealed that some companies had altered their identity statements in different ways in multiple occasions. Our comparative analysis searched for similarities across change episodes by looking at i) whether historical statements co-existed with the new ones or were replaced by them, ii) whether there was overlap in the content of two consecutive statements, and iii) whether the content of the new statement drew on historical references or not.

These criteria helped us identify three strategies that managers used to maintain or establish continuity as they managed change episodes, in addition to outright reproduction or forgetting of ancient mottos: *elaborating*, *recovering*, and *decoupling* (see Table 2 for a summary). Elaborating was characterized by the replacement of historical statements with new ones that maintained, nevertheless, some overlapping content, and were presented in continuity with the prior ones. Recovering, instead, was characterized by little if any overlap in content; the content of the new statement, however, was presented as drawing on historical references. Decoupling, finally, was characterized by the co-existence of the old statement and the new one, with no overlap between them, and the new statement was presented as addressing concerns not covered by the old one.

*Step 4: Cross-case comparison of change episodes (search for explanation of observed differences)*

In a final round, we compared change episodes associated with common strategies, searching for possible explanations in the content of statements or the context within which change occurred. We distinguished between changes in the organizational context (by which we refer to structural characteristics, such as size, ownership, governance, and operations) and competitive context (by which we refer to the characteristics of the industry, such as intensity of competition and customers' preferences). We also examined more closely the implications of the change (e.g. supporting a new strategic course, or consolidating the current trajectory) and the nature of the issues that it aimed at addressing. This analysis pointed to some contextual conditions that were more frequently (although not exclusively) associated with each strategy.

At this stage, we also searched for explanations for the cases in our sample where ancient mottos – to the best of our knowledge – seemed to have been replaced entirely, and the contemporary mottos made no reference to the original ones. In most cases, these firms had undergone radical changes in their structure and/or operations – often reflecting mergers (or

de-mergers), ownership changes, or divestitures of the core business. In the case of Mitsui and Yasuda, for instance, – two of the largest pre-war conglomerates, locally referred to as *zaibatsu* – their dissolution after the Second World War produced companies that were no longer controlled by the founding families, nor had, in some cases, any legal connections with the pre-war entities. Kikkoman was the result of the gradual mergers of eight family firms, some of which had their own foundational mottos; none of these mottos, however, were retained by the new entity. In these cases, radical restructuring likely relieved managers from the pressure to maintain a sense of continuity with the previous entities. Similarly, Saratake International and Yuasa Trading were currently very different companies than they were at the foundation, the former having divested from its core business in retail to remain active in marketing and consulting for the entertainment business, the latter having evolved from an all-purpose hardware store to a diversified multinational group.

The only three firms that no longer used foundational mottos (Minori, Yamamotoyama, and Mukai Shouzou), while still maintaining some degree of continuity with the original business, had eventually produced a new identity statement after the old one had long disappeared from official use and collective memory. In these three cases, the eventual disappearance of the foundational philosophies could be explained by the particular content of these statements, which was either too mundane (e.g. “wake up at 6” or “be careful about the fire”) or too abstract and philosophical (“heavenly norms” and philosophical reflections from Buddhism and Confucianism) to be of continued relevance to the company.

In only one case, Eirakuya, a producer of traditional cotton towels founded in 1615, the “Lessons Learned” written at the end of the 17th century by 4th generation leader Iemon Hosotsuji, (10 points, ranging from “the family should be in good terms”, to “do not be greedy”, and “do not forget to be thankful”) were presented by the firm as “still alive” and “the pillar of the family business.” The influence of these “Lessons Learned” on current strategies, however,

was less clear, and we had the impression that historical statements rather featured in official communication to highlight the historical roots of the firm and support claims of authenticity of their craft products. Also, it was not possible for us ascertain whether these “Lessons” had really been in use for three centuries, or only recently recovered for communication purposes.

## **FINDINGS**

Our comparative analysis of how 25 Japanese companies handled corporate mottos from a distant past as they faced changes in the organizational and competitive context over time revealed three key strategies –recovering, decoupling, and elaborating – that managers used to preserve a connection between past and contemporary statements. Each of them tended to be associated with particular contextual conditions. In this section, we illustrate these strategies using three of the cases we examined. We offer additional examples in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

### **Elaborating**

In some cases, managers adopted a discursive strategy that transferred one or more values from historical identity statements to the new ones, updated the form in which they were expressed and/or further articulated their implications for the current strategic context. This strategy helped maintain a sense of continuity by explicitly linking part of the revised statement with the previous one. The revised statement was often presented as a “development” or an “update” of previous ones – rather than a replacement – by highlighting continuity and commonality of content, and by de-emphasizing differences as being more in form (e.g. wording) than substance. Strategic relevance was pursued by refocusing attention values that managers viewed as important to maintain the organization viable in the present (and dropping reference to parts of the historical statement that they no longer considered relevant). For instance, in 1891, a revised wording of Sumitomo’s family rules, written more than two centuries before, dispensed with specific references to the original copper trade, to focus instead on more general precepts, such as “Put duty before pleasure” and “Do not make risky

investments for a quick profit”, deemed of continued relevance for the large financial concern that Sumitomo had become, and reinterpreted them accordingly (see Table 3 for other examples).

--- Insert Table 3 about here ---

This strategy tended to be associated with gradual and incremental change in strategy and the environment. In these circumstances, rather than using the new statement to support substantial change (as in the case of recovering and decoupling discussed later), managers used this strategy to consolidate a subset of values – some covered by the historical statement, others presented as emerging more recently – that they viewed as essential to cumulatively build on the strategic trajectory they inherited. When adopted sequentially, as in the Gekkeikan case presented in this section, this strategy manifested in the periodic reformulation of identity statements to maintain alignment with an evolving strategic course (rather than driving changes in it).

#### *The ongoing elaboration of historical identity statements at Gekkeikan*

Gekkeikan was established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and for more than two centuries, it operated as a small sake brewer that catered to locals and travelers. Under the leadership of the 11<sup>th</sup> generation Tsunekichi Okura (1874-1950), the company became one of the largest brewers in Japan. Tsunekichi inherited the firm at a very early age, when both his father and elder brother passed away in 1886. In line with the modernization and industrialization that characterized Japan in those years, he approached more scientifically the production of sake. His correspondence with Japanese scientists convinced him of the potential of introducing modern science into sake brewing<sup>1</sup> and to build the first research laboratory in the sake industry. These efforts led to the discovery of a sterilization technique that increased the quality of sake and

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<sup>1</sup> Personal correspondence, (1915) 大蔵省醸造試験所の鹿又親技師が恒吉に宛てた手紙 Archived in the company museum of Gekkeikan.

reduced its perishability by preventing the proliferation of lactic acid bacteria. He also introduced important commercial innovations: in 1910, for instance, the introduction of a small-size glass bottle that contained a cup on the head, sold at train stations throughout Japan, vastly increased the notoriety of the Gekkeikan brand.

In 1935, after having led the firm for almost fifty years, Tsunekichi became the first head of the firm to leave a written statement about the corporate philosophy, as he thus explained “The reason for Gekkeikan’s 300 years of longevity”:

From the past, our family has been thrift and diligent in business. It is important to pay back favors. It is important to take a good care of the ancestor’s graves. It is important to hold Buddhist services.

To which he added the “Secret for my success”<sup>2</sup>:

Make home life as simple as possible. Make a fun and secure family. Take care of material things. Work without lies. Value the life of employees. Make the best sake in Japan.

Tsunekichi’s words, initially addressed to his family members, were made public five years after his death, when the company published a corporate biography. In this occasion, his son Jiichi (1899-1992), now head of the firm, reaffirmed Tsunekichi’s legacy as he wrote:

My father had a strong faith in Shintoism and Buddhism. He always kept in mind to contribute to the society. He wanted to make the best sake in Japan. For him, it was important to do business without lies, take a good care of goods, be thrift, have peace in the family, and take a good care of the employees” (*360 Years of History of Gekkeikan*, 1955: 379).

In this summary, while restating many of the points contained in the original motto, Jiichi added emphasis on “contribution to society” – a value that, while absent from Tsunekichi’s original words, had characterized the last three decades of his tenure at the head of the firm, as he began to redistribute to the local community part of the wealth made by the firm.

Tsunekichi’s son maintained his father’s dedication to high-quality sake even during the hardship of the Second World War (“Quality first!” was his personal motto), and his engagement

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<sup>2</sup> Practical examples of some of these points had already appeared in handwritten notes about “What to pay attention to” dating back to 1921, preserved in the archives of the Gekkeikan corporate museum.

in the local community. While recognizing the importance of worshipping ancestors, which featured prominently in Tsunekichi's original words, he acknowledged a value – continuous innovation – that had been curiously absent from them, despite having characterized much of Tsunekichi's work. He did so as he reaffirmed the importance of “Continuously innovating while respecting the traditions from the ancestors” (Kawaguchi and Fujimoto, 2007).

Jiichi's son, the 13<sup>th</sup> generation leader Keiichi (1927-2016) led the company through further growth domestically and internationally, building on his predecessors' work and continuing to contribute to the local community. It was only in 1997, when his son Haruhiko replaced him at the head of the firm, that a new motto was introduced in the form of three “Basic Principles”. These principles dispensed with much of the moral content of the previous statements, such as religious worship, respect for ancestors, frugality, truthfulness. It focused instead on three values that had been part of Tsunekichi's original statement and/or his son's reformulations – quality, continuous innovation, and care for employees – and were now considered more important to maintain the current strategic trajectory:

Quality: always provide the best quality sake in the world at reasonable price to satisfy customers. Creativity: always be creative, and innovate management and technology and try new ways. Humanity: help employees to have fulfilling life, based on education and skill improvement.

The presentation of the new statement emphasized this continuity, as the president remarked:

With this basic philosophy, we continue to inherit the spirit of the 11<sup>th</sup> generation Tsunekichi Okura, by conveying the essence of exercising creativity, to embrace the feelings of wanting to surpass other productions by quality, and to challenge in new frontiers.

At the same time, he underlined the importance of gradually adapting over time, by periodically refocusing attention on the values that were more relevant to the present:

The corporate philosophy is not entirely new, but it is a summary of the development of the firm until the present day. Corporate philosophies become easily obsolete. I have heard that in other long-living firms, they have maintained family mottos unchanged until today, even when the firm grows. I do not want to make such a taboo. ... I transmit what I think is valuable, and my son will decide to inherit what he thinks is valuable.

Strategically, the revised motto was intended to consolidate traditional emphasis on quality, and continue the constant exploration of new brewing technologies and commercial opportunities that had characterized the company since Tsunekichi's time. The new motto introduced a new reference to "reasonable pricing" to reaffirm the company's historical commitment to affordable product lines for a mass market, rather than the "blind" pursue of high-end niche products. The notion of Humanity, finally, reformulated Tsunekichi's original precept to "value the life of employees" to highlight Gekkeikan's commitment to maintain a "family like spirit", in a company where many employees had a relationship with the company that spanned two or three generations.

Notably, values such as "thriftiness" and "cleanness of the household or firm's facilities" that were part of Tsunekichi's original statement eventually disappeared from corporate narratives and philosophy, even if they could have possibly been still relevant in the present. This observation shows how successive rounds of elaboration to adapt ancient statements to evolving conditions may lead involuntarily, perhaps unintentionally, to forget what not deliberately remembered.

### **Recovering**

In other episodes, when confronting conditions viewed as requiring a change in the strategic course of the company or offering opportunities for it, managers adopted a strategy based on the formulation of new identity statements that, while diverging from the previous ones in ways that supported a new course of action, drew explicitly on historical references or documents retrieved from the archives. We refer to this strategy as *recovering*.

This strategy rests on the search of written, oral or even material forms of memory for cues that could be assembled to support claims about the recovery of important values relevant to the present situation. These cues were often in the form of writings from past leaders (sometimes even ancient mottos that had been replaced or modified at a later stage), but could

also be anecdotes of their lives (see the case of Matsuya in Table 4) used to give credence to the historical grounding of the values and norms that were now brought to the attention of the rest of the organization (see Table 4 for additional examples).

--- Insert Table 4 about here ---

By accepting to disconnect the content of the new identity statement from the previous one, managers allowed it to redirect attention on norms and values that they considered relevant to inspire and legitimize strategic change. At the same time, they claimed continuity of action – or re-established it (see Brunninge, 2009) – by re-using texts produced in a distant past, which had been set aside for some time (that is, they had disappeared from collective memory). Doing so conferred a sense of authenticity to the new claims (see also Hatch and Schultz, 2017), and enabled managers to mitigate potential resistance to change, by presenting the new statement as firmly grounded in the company’s history and keeping in line with the legacy of foundational leaders.

The episodes we observed frequently corresponded to the sudden intensification of competitive pressures because of deregulation (as in the case Tokyo Keizai University discussed later), technological innovation (e.g. Matsuya, see Table 4), or the deterioration of financial conditions because of a loss of competitiveness (e.g. Katakura, see Table 4). Managers responded to these rising pressures by introducing changes in the corporate or business strategy, which the new statements intended to legitimize and provide direction to. At Kimura Uheibei, for instance, recovering occurred as the company – a producer of exquisite and highly expensive hand-made kimonos – was under pressure because of the shrinking demand for traditional products. As the current president explained, he had recently rediscovered founder Uhei Kimura’s writings in the archive as he was searching for inspiration, and decided to bring his personal motto *Eitai fueki* – an expression that can be loosely translated as “changing without changing” – back in use. He explained that sometime in the mid-20th

century, the ancient family law and this motto had been set aside by the 8th generation leader – an adopted son, who probably wanted to underline the disruption in the succession line by adopting, as a new motto, the common expression: “a business should be long and thin like a cow’s drool.” The current president found this cautious motto unhelpful to ignite a response to the diminishing demand for the company’s products, and decided to replace it with the ancient one. He reinterpreted the words *Eitai fueki* as “never change the essence of the product”<sup>3</sup> to coordinate efforts (communication, factory tours, etc.) to emphasize the high quality of the products, resting in traditional craftsmanship and materials, to secure a high-end niche in the dwindling market.

Unlike elaborating, then, recovering does not aim at consolidating the current strategic trajectory (hence the need to introduce discontinuity with the previous identity statement), but at supporting changes in it. Unlike decoupling (described next), it attempts to preserve a sense of continuity, not by symbolically allowing for the co-existence of an old and a new statement but by presenting the new statement as rooted in a distant, possibly forgotten past.

#### *Recovering the spirit of the founder at Tokyo Keizai University*

Tokyo Keizai University is a private school founded in 1900 by Kihachiro Okura (1837-1928), a renowned entrepreneur who pioneered international trade and actively promoted the transition of the country to a Western capitalist economy during the Meiji Restoration that restored Imperial rule from the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868. As his son recalled later:

The most significant character of my father is that he contributed to the modern development of the nation through his entrepreneurial spirit of taking unprecedented challenges in aspects of not only economy but education and art.

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<sup>3</sup> We had no way to ascertain the president’s claim, as we had no access to the original archival records he mentioned. Whether his attribution of the newly-adopted motto to its distant predecessor is accurate or not, however, is beside the point. In these circumstances what matters is that a sense (or a pretence) of continuity and historical grounding is maintained in the face of change. Few if any organizational constituents are in a position to assess the veracity of the claim anyway.

In 1989, Kihachiro, invested 500,000 Yen of personal wealth to fund the Okura Commerce School, which in 1949 became Tokyo Keizai University after the dissolution of the Okura group, “to groom young Japanese merchants who can compete with the foreign merchants that will be entering the country”<sup>4</sup>. As he explained in his inauguration speech in 1902<sup>5</sup>:

The amendment of the treaty is realized, and soon we will need to share the homeland with foreigners. However, knowledge about commerce in our country has not changed from the past. At this pace, due to the peace treaty and the co-habitation with foreigners, this country’s commercial landscape will be occupied by foreigners. The reason why I have set up foreign subsidiaries and sent young men is to oppose foreigners. This is why I would like to commemorate my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of marriage by establishing the commercial school and educate many merchants, and contribute to society.

The school of commerce belonged to the Okura *zaibatsu*, one of the large conglomerates that dominated the Japanese economy until the Second World War. Sometime in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (the exact date is unavailable), Kihachiro crafted nine “instructions” intended to inspire and coordinate the management of the members of the large financial group:

1. Time is money; 2. Be always on guard; 3. Do not waste; 4. Do not overuse God’s natural gift; 5. Trust comes first. Unreliability is the same as a headless; 6. Calm yourself and work wholeheartedly for everything; 7. Though you work or play, time passes. Struggle; 8. Stop thinking to live in comfortable retirement, call up all your courage, contribute to one’s country and home. It is a man’s duty; 9. Work 12 hours if others work 10 hours. Where there is a will, there is a way. Therefore, there is no doubt that you will be successful.

Kihachiro was a prolific writer, and used his writings to urge the younger generations to be entrepreneurial. He constantly reminded that business should be set up for the benefit of the nation and public good, and one should always maintain an “explosive” entrepreneurial spirit.

After the Second World War, the University suffered from the loss of financial support from the Okura family, due to the dissolution of the Okura *zaibatsu*, and from disputes between management and faculty due to ideological confrontations. It was only in 1992, that the philosophy of the university was formally revisited, and the words and legacy of the founder

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<sup>4</sup> *Ookura Shougyou Gakkou Setsuritu no Shui* 「大倉氏商業学校設立ノ主意」 (1898) 「設立満十周年記念号」  
Archived at Tokyo Keizai University library.

<sup>5</sup> *Ookura Shougyou Gakkou Gakusei ni Tugu* 「大倉商業学校学生二告グ」 (1902) 「大倉商業学校演説集」  
Archived at Tokyo Keizai University library.

were recovered to justify strategic changes, drawing on the vast body of writings produced by Kihachiro during his lifetime.

The introduction of the new philosophy occurred as the government liberalized university curriculums. School leaders foresaw an intensification of competition, but also an opportunity to expand. Two new faculties (Communication, and Contemporary law) and four new programs were added to the existing ones. To energize and direct these efforts, they forged two new mottos, that were presented as Kihachiro's legacy: "Forward Forever", to symbolize and summarize the philosophy of *Yangmingism* (one of the major philosophical schools of Neo-Confucianism), and "Honesty and Responsibility" to symbolize and summarize the philosophy of *Sekimon Shingaku* (a Japanese religious movement that encouraged dedication and the fulfilment of one's duty).

The top management team selected these statements because they saw *Yangmingism* and *Sekimon Shingaku* as "the basis of Kihachiro Okura's management philosophy":

When reading the words that the great Kihachiro left, we notice that the most passionate message that he left for young people revolve around Forward Forever and Honesty and Responsibility... These are also the concepts that are most suitable and applicable in the modern age where the globalization is rapidly becoming the norm (Former Chairman of the University, Statement upon reprinting of *Shingaku Sentetsu Soushuu*, 2010).

According to the former president, the recovery of Kihachiro's legacy "provided value and weight" behind the new strategy. Not only it legitimized and supported bold diversification but also helped the newly re-organized university differentiate its approach to education, as deregulation increased competition. As the chairman observed:

While it is important for universities to continuously adapt themselves to the changing societal needs, it is important for students to have 'trust and responsibility'. This is especially true in today's society, where these aspects are taken lightly. Trustable and responsible students transfer these qualities to companies and society.

Again, this approach was presented as grounded in Kihachiro's legacy, by recalling the content of his last public speech, in 1928, for the inauguration of the academic year<sup>6</sup>, when he mentioned:

Whatever you do, trust is important. People who do not have trust are like people without head, and have little value as human beings. Take responsibility of your work, and always implement what you promise. Trust emerges from the foundation of keeping promises.

In 2006, when the school introduced a new curriculum called the TKU Challenge, encompassing both basic and advanced programs, the motto Forward Forever was used to label one of the pillars of the new system. Under this curriculum, the concept of Forward Forever was translated into "the strength to challenge new things" inspiring the design of the four-year curriculum. According to the former chairman of the university:

Kihachiro Okura, when founding the Okura Commercial School, aimed at nurturing "merchants" who could play an active part in the international stage, especially emphasizing practical skills and English. The TKU Challenge system is a teaching reform that inherited its spirit, and is now firmly rooted throughout the university.

This motto became commonly used in university communication and events, and inspired the name of two new facilities, the Forward Forever Pavilion and Forward Hall. In the inauguration of the latter, the president of the university remarked:

Today is the day we will never forget in the history of our university. From this day on, the great Kihachiro will become the treasure of our university and will look after the students for a long time. (Tokyo Keizai University internal magazine, 2014)

Some informants, however, pointed out how the recovery of Kihachiro's legacy had been partial, possibly underexploiting the potential inherent in his original words. According to the current president, "Kihachiro's central teachings can be found in other moral values such as diligence, endurance, and patience" (preface to the re-print of *Shingaku Sentetsu Soushuu*, 2010). Yet, these values were selectively overlooked as his legacy was recovered by the school to drive the changes we described (possibly because, at that time, managers did not view them

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<sup>6</sup> The last speech by Kihachiro (1928) 大倉喜八郎最後の訓話 Archived at Tokyo Keizai University library.

as relevant to the context they faced). Similarly, the wave of changes introduced in 2006 reformation had eventually focused on “Forward Forever” and ignored “Honesty and Responsibility” because – the former president explained – “the slogan Forward Forever strategically fit with the purpose of curriculum reform.”

### **Decoupling**

Finally, another set of episodes saw managers adopting what we refer to as a *decoupling* strategy, based on the co-existence of historical identity statements in their original form and newly crafted ones upholding different norms or values, to address separately the needs for continuity and relevance. The new statement turned the attention of the organization to emerging issues and expectations that the former did not help address, and it offered justification and direction for organizational changes targeting these issues. The maintenance of the historical one – albeit in a purely ceremonial form or available only to family members – offered a reassuring anchor with the past, maintaining a sense of stability and continuity of action in the presence of change.

In some cases, this strategy allowed managers to circumscribe the continued implementation of historical statements that they no longer perceived as relevant to the strategic context, as they used new statements to steer change into a new direction; in others, the two identity statements continued to be considered relevant, but addressing different domains (see Table 5 for examples).

--- Insert Table 5 about here ---

Like in the case of recovering, the introduction of a new statement was associated with organizational or strategic changes (rather than with maintenance and consolidation, as in the case of elaborating). However, while recovering seemed to aim more at supporting strategic changes in the presence of competitive challenges or opportunities, decoupling was more frequently associated with action targeting emerging issues or new expectations that could not

be addressed based on the content of the historical statements. This was the case, for instance, of companies that, because of their increasing size or rising public awareness, felt rising expectations to behave in a socially or environmentally responsible way; these concerns, however, were largely absent from historical statements, crafted at a time where neither the prominence of the firm nor the expectations of society had induced leaders to attend to these issues. In 2004, for instance, to support a corporate-wide CSR program, producer of ceramics TOTO added a “group philosophy” – “We TOTO group will contribute to the development of society and aim to be a firm that is trusted by people around the world” – to the foundational words of founder Kazuchika Okura drawing attention to product quality and customer satisfaction (see also Shimadzu, in Table 5).

#### *Decoupling family law and corporate philosophy at Yamanaka Hyoemon Shouten*

Yamanaka Hyoemon Shouten was established in 1718 in the Shizuoka prefecture as a trader of bowls (*A 260-year history of Yamanaka Hyoemon Shouten*). In 1800, under the leadership of the founder’s son, Hyoemon II (1725-1805), sake production began, and it rapidly grew as equipment and new facilities were purchased in the following decades. In 1802, three years before he passed away, Hyoemon II left a “will” to his son comprising ten points. As common to statements written around this time, Hyoemon II placed emphasis on moral and religious conduct (articles 1 to 3) and practical guidelines (articles 4 to 10):

1. A person who is appointed as a town leader shall not take advantage of the authority and shelter oneself under the governmental influence. Attach importance to be discreet in word and deed. Conduct secret act of charity; 2. Hold a Buddhist memorial service properly; 3. Be discreet with one’s faithless conduct; 4. Select carefully all merchandise in stock and sell only few with high quality articles; 5. Do not deal with articles in illegal or crude goods. Never expect large profits; 6. Sincerity is the most important thing for treat articles and the regular customers; 7. Give favorable treatment to small business customers further, 8. Never conduct a flashy business for appearance’ sake. Be steady at one’s business; 9. Do not settle an account without a settlement of the actual object foreseeing the fluctuation in stock prices such as operation of the market quotation of rice. Never conduct speculative trading. Do not change occupation; 10. Give kind treatment to the servants and give full attention to an honest worker.

Hyoemon III (1758-1825) further expanded the business by entering into soya sauce production<sup>7</sup>, moneylending to *bushi* families, and trading silk and medicine. A first, temporary form of decoupling occurred when his son inherited the family business at the relatively young age of 21. Hyoemon IV is described by archival sources as being “weak in health and not skilled in management” (*260 years history of Yamanaka Hyoemon Shouten*, 1978). Because of this reason, other family members and senior employees felt the need to write “five rules” for him to follow, as an addendum to the family law (written in 1815)<sup>8</sup>:

1. To keep the rules set by ancestors;
2. Have loyalty to parents;
3. Take responsibility in managing the business, and conduct bookkeeping;
4. Be aware of the public eye, conduct appropriate public ceremonies, have good relationship with relatives, and do not go to play outside in the nights;
5. Distinguish who are good and bad servants.

Notably, this document was not intended to replace Hyoemon II’s will (and indeed it reaffirmed its continued relevance at point 1) but to address what its authors viewed as particular weaknesses of the new head of the firm. While it remained in the company’s archive until the present, it was no longer referenced by Yoemon IV’s successors.

A new statement – described as a “corporate philosophy” – was eventually produced in 2016 by the new head of the firm in order to address financial losses, which he attributed to obsolete practices that needed to be “modernized” for the company to regain competitiveness. While important to family members, he explained, the ancient family law was less relevant to the rest of the employees. Also, written at a time when the firm was a retail establishment, it did not provide useful guidance to manage the increased organizational complexity. As he explained:

I do not make day-to-day management decisions based on the content of the historical identity statement... Although it was written by my ancestors, it was written by people who are now dead. Although I respect them, I am living in the present, and my primary focus is on solving the present-day problems.

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<sup>7</sup> Regulations of the soya sauce cooperative 醤油仲間の規定書 (1833) Archived at Yamanaka Hyoemon Shouten.

<sup>8</sup> *Kitvigaki* 「矢巨（き）定書」 (1815) Archived at Yamanaka Hyoemon Shouten.

While acknowledging the historical roots of the company, then, the new philosophy highlighted the importance of addressing the needs and expectations of a broad range of stakeholders:

As one of the companies that has the origin of Oumi Merchant, we adopt its philosophy of *Sampou Yoshi* meaning that “our firm makes sure that our sellers, buyers and the society are good”. We have been striving to make our customers happy through our business. We are conscious that our sellers have allowed us to grow. And we have been doing the effort of contributing to the local community.

The new identity statement was associated with the adoption of a more participative and consultative decision-making process, referred to in Japan as *nemawashi*, and more frequent meetings between the new head of the firm and its top managers. The purpose of this change was to break away with the more traditional managerial style adopted by Hyoemon VIII’s predecessors, whereby decisions were centralized at the top and obediently implemented by other managers, and to ensure a broader participation of middle managers and line employees in strategic decisions.

As the president explained, however, the new corporate philosophy was not intended to replace the ancient family law:

The family law is still alive in the company. What we did was just to newly establish the corporate philosophy. ... The original calligraphy of the family law is on display in the local community museum, which used to be the house of the Yamanaka family, which we donated to the city in 1981. I keep a copy of it near my desk, so I can reflect on it once a month over prayer, or when I struggle with managing major changes.

The ancient law, he explained, offered him direction and “moral support” for change:

Changing requires a lot of courage... It is in these occasions that I have a look at the family law and put my hands together in front of the Buddhist and Shinto altars. As the family law recommends to be religious, I put my hands together in the beginning of every month.

He remarked how those ancient precepts were still relevant to him, as a member of the Yamanaka family, even if they were not part of the official corporate communication:

This is a family law for the Yamanaka family, so we do not share it with the employees... [However], personally, I feel that all my actions are affected by the ancient family motto. ... I do think that the inheritance of the ancient family motto is one of the reasons why our firm could survive until today, for over 300 years. Hence, although we may adjust the way

we operate depending on the era, this ancient philosophy provides an unchanging philosophical core when going through changes.

He described the historical statement as a “moral compass”, and mentioned the importance of actively remembering it, through reference and display, to avoid that, eventually, the new statement would unintentionally replace the ancient one entirely.

### **A comparative analysis of discursive strategies and contextual conditions**

Our analysis of how Japanese companies use historical mottos reveals that corporate leaders use a variety of strategies to deal with revered past when moving on with strategic change. These strategies differed in how they simultaneously addressed the need to maintain continuity with the past and strategic relevance in the present (see Table 6).

--- Insert Table 6 here ---

Our observations suggest that variation in the adoption of these strategies can partly be related to the type and degree of change (inside or outside the organization) that induced managers to reconsider historical statements. Organizational changes ranged from increased size and complexity, to changing lines of business, ownership change, or mergers and acquisitions. Environmental changes ranged from increased competitive pressures, to changing market preferences or industry regulations, or new stakeholder’s expectations. At the one end, the forgetting and eventual replacement of historical statements was often associated with radical organizational restructuring, through mergers or demergers, transition to public ownership, or divestiture of the core business. At the opposite end, the only organization that had continued to honor the ancient motto in its original form, with neither additions nor modifications, had preserved the same core business, ownership within the family, and roughly the same size.

The three strategies we focused on – elaborating, recovering, and decoupling – were generally associated with a varied degree of change. In these circumstances, they enabled managers to address differently the tension between the need to preserve a sense of continuity

over time and the need to provide support and direction to the new strategic course (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of these differences). They did so, partly, by orienting the attention of members to attitudes, behaviours, values and priorities instrumental to address emerging strategic issues (Gioia and Thomas, 1996), and partly by helping members make sense of the prospective course of action by establishing linkages between ancient past and present directions (and future ambitions) (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013). Doing so helped contain resistance to change and foster alignment around a new or emerging strategy (Gioia, Thomas, Clark and Chittipeddi, 1994).

--- Insert Figure 1 about here ---

In some cases, managers adopted strategies that combined elements of more than one strategy, possibly using the revision of a historical statement – often a highly symbolic event – to address more than one issue. For instance, in 1991, Takashimaya, presented an updated version of its foundational family precepts that focused on four customer-oriented principles (elaborating; see Table 3); at the same time, it introduced a new motto that began to express broader concerns for society (decoupling; see Table 5). Seventeen years later, an elaboration of the new motto further articulated the environmental and social responsibility of the company (referred to in Table 5).

While the three strategies differed in the outcomes they intended to achieve, at times they also produced unintended consequences. For instance, successive rounds of elaboration of historical statements could lead to the unintentional loss of meaning. The recovery and re-use of past, possibly “forgotten,” texts to inspire new identity statements could crystallize new interpretations, and constrain future uses of this portion of the past. The continued co-existence of old and new statement might confuse employees about their application, or risk undermining the credibility of both. Evidence of unintended consequences was insufficient to support robust theorizing across cases. It was however sufficiently suggestive to foreshadow interesting

opportunities for future research to explore in more depth how different uses of history influence successive use, by establish interpretive frames that gradually restrict (or possibly expand) future uses.

## **DISCUSSION**

By highlighting the role of historical identity statements in contemporary strategy-making, our study advances research on uses of the past, establishes important linkages between identity and strategy research, and adds to our understanding of the transfer of values in family business research.

### **Revealing cultural-historical practices and strategies to deal with the revered past**

Research on uses of the past has only recently been linked with strategy-making (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Wadhvani *et al.*, 2018). This body of work has mostly focused on the relatively recent past, which has been seen as rather pliable (for exceptions see Brunninge, 2009; Mordhorst, 2014; Ravasi, *et al.*, forthcoming; Ybema, 2014). By contrast, our study helps to understand how strategists deal with a less malleable, revered distant past when confronting strategic change, through different forms of selective remembering and forgetting.

Research on uses of the past has highlighted various ways in which history can be used in the present (Basque and Langley, 2018; Brunninge, 2009; Hansen, 2012; Ooi, 2002; Ravasi *et al.*, forthcoming), but the insights produced about reconstructing continuity or discontinuity have not been linked with research on strategic change. Research suggests that change requires mental schemata to replace the old ones – either through rapid conversion (Labianca, Gray, and Brass, 2000), gradual integration (Weber and Crocker, 1983), or dialectical synthesis (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Bartunek, 1984) – but has been less clear about whether and how different types of change requires managers to handle differently the inevitable discrepancy between past and present that they bring about. Our study begins to bridge these two literatures by articulating different ways of using history (which only partly overlap with what described

by previous studies) and connecting them with different degrees and types of strategic change (or continuity), and by showing how different linkages between past and present statements are intended to facilitate the gradual evolution (elaboration), rapid reorientation (recovering), or radical restructuring (forgetting) of the shared understandings that support a firm's strategy.

What is interesting in the strategies we observed is that they all involve selective remembering and forgetting in varying degrees. *Per se*, the idea that uses of the past rely on selective remembering is neither novel, nor surprising: memory is selective by definition, as remembering some events imply the forgetting of other (Bruninngge, 2009; Ooi, 2002). However, while past research has pointed out that organizations “create both memory and forgetting by including some elements and leaving out of their narrative” (Hansen, 2012: 702), our study extends this idea by detailing different ways in which this occurs. We distinguish, for instance, between the selective retrieval of re-use of texts and ideas that characterizes recovering, from the selective parsing of norms and values that remain relevant to the current context from those that can be silently forgotten, which characterizes elaborating on prior identity statements. Unravelling these strategies is important to deepen our understanding of how “history matters”, how specific practices are used in “moments of discontinuity” or change (Maclean *et al.*, 2018), and how the past shapes contemporary strategy-making – often simultaneously as an enabler and constraint.

Our analysis also begins to shed light on the contextual conditions associated with the use of these strategies. Balogun and Johnson (2004) first observed how contextual factors might affect change strategies; their analysis, however, focuses essentially on change management style. Our research, in contrast, reveals how broader structural and competitive forces may influence the choice among available strategies to reconcile continuity and change. By doing so, our study begins to explain variation in uses of the past that past studies have often noted, but rarely accounted for (see Ravasi *et al.*, forthcoming, for an exception).

Finally, by studying the specific context of Japanese mottos and how they are reproduced and revised, our analysis also reveals a set of historically significant strategic practices that matter in contemporary organizations. By so doing, our analysis follows calls to identify and elaborate on historically important, institutionally embedded practices to advance strategy process and practice research (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018; Ericson *et al.*, 2015; Vaara and Lamberg, 2016; Whittington *et al.*, 2011). In particular, this analysis shows rare insight into the historical evolution of one of the earliest formal tools that managers used to articulate and consolidate the fundamental principles that underpinned their business conduct and strategic course. The fact that our analysis finds similar practices used in a number of cases adds to the importance of our findings.

### **Contribution to research on organizational identity and strategy**

Strategic identity statements lie at the nexus between organizational identity and strategy (Schultz and Hernes, forthcoming). They direct attention to strategic issues (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), set direction for change (Gioia and Thomas, 1996), and may help steer a drifting identity (and strategy) back to a sustainable course (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011). Seen from an identity perspective, the strategies that we described show alternative options available to strategy makers to maintain a sense of continuity with the past, while at the same time ensuring periodic adaptation to a changing environment. Gioia and colleagues introduced the notion of “adaptive instability” (Gioia *et al.*, 2000) to explain how organizations adapt by symbolically preserving past statement but effectively reinterpreting them over time. Our findings extend this idea by showing more nuanced ways to handle past statements, other than replacement or ceremonial preservation, to address situations when current identity statements may no longer be entirely compatible with the viability of the firm.

Past research has traditionally conceived organizational identity as an inertial force, and highlighted the reluctance of organization members to embrace strategic changes that question

consolidated views of “who we are” as an organization (e.g., Canato *et al.*, 2013; Nag, Corley, and Gioia, 2007). It has shown how responding to competitive challenges may require members to revise identity statements (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) or cumulatively enrich existing ones (Rindova *et al.*, 2011). Most studies, however, tend to portray the process as relatively unconstrained by past statements and symbolic commitments. Yet, longstanding, time-honored identity statements may be less malleable than more recent ones, as any alteration may threaten the sense of continuity that identity-referencing discourse is expected to provide (Whetten, 2006). Change processes that clash with established identities enshrined in these statements, without offering credible alternatives, are likely to encounter severe resistance (Canato *et al.*, 2013). Our analysis, in this respect, begins to unpack how organizational leaders can grapple with these highly symbolic, but delicate artefacts, and turn them from a potential source of inertia into a generative resource for change.

Finally, research on organizational change has highlighted the “identity ambiguity” that may accompany structural (Corley and Gioia, 2004) and strategic disruptions (Canato *et al.*, 2013), but has been less clear about how managers may reconcile this “sensemaking imperative” with a view on supporting change (Corley and Gioia, 2004). Ravasi and Schultz’s (2006) suggestion that, in these circumstances, the cultural heritage of the organization may provide stability in the face of identity threat offers only a partial answer, as it assumes the continued relevance of the organizational past; the processes they describe, then, may be less applicable when addressing changing conditions requires to depart, at least partly, from the current trajectory. Our findings, in this respect, offers a broader view of the alternative courses of action available to organizational leaders to support strategic change without triggering unwanted identity crises. Collectively, they point to ways to managed change processes whereby organizational identities adapt to changing conditions in a relatively non-traumatic way for the organization.

### **Insights for value transfer in family firms**

When ancient mottos were crafted, all firms considered in our study were family-owned and run; many of them still were at the time of our study. Family business literature emphasizes founding family values as a distinctive element of family firms that drives their long-term success (e.g. Aronoff and Ward, 2011). Scholars consider past values and traditions as a resource available to family firms to encourage innovation (De Massis *et al.*, 2016; Erdogan *et al.*, 2019) and entrepreneurship (Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2015). However, attachment to past values may also create inertia and inhibit the ability of family firms to change and adapt over time (e.g., Jaskiewicz *et al.*, 2016; Rondi, De Massis, and Kotlar, 2018). Our study shows how family firm managers can take advantage of the inspirational legacy of foundational values, while at the same time avoiding to remain trapped in an inertial trajectory. Thus, it adds two insights to this growing body of research.

First, it foregrounds strategic identity statements as a means to hand down past values in family firms and to maintain them relevant across generations, and it theorizes how managers can reconcile the opportunity that these values offer with the need to adapt to changing conditions. By doing so, we answer a recent call for research into the “micro-foundations” of family business strategy (De Massis and Foss, 2018), illuminating specific historical practices available to family business leaders to use and reconstruct founding family values over time. Providing more precise accounts of the strategic practices through which family firms can reconcile tensions underlying the dual role of the past for adaptation and change, future research can enrich macro-level explanations of family firms’ strategic behaviors and performance.

Second, our study provides a nuanced understanding of the tension between past and future involved in upholding family firms’ founding values alive and relevant over time. Prior studies addressing this issue are few, and have either emphasized the opportunity to mobilize the past as a strategic resource, by transferring values from one generation to the next (De Massis, Chua,

and Chrisman, 2008), or to downplay old values that are not seen as appropriate or legitimate with new ones (Parada, Nordqvist, and Gimeno, 2010). Compared to these studies, our findings suggest a more nuanced view, whereby the successful transmission of past values requires firms to skillfully balance selective remembering and forgetting. In this respect, each of the three discursive strategies documented in our study illustrates a viable way in which family firms can address the trade-offs between continuity and change over time (Kotlar and Chrisman, 2018), advancing our understanding of these issues while expanding the spectrum of strategic practices available to family firms to facilitate the continuation of family values through generational changes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Drawing on an extensive analysis corporate mottos of long-lived Japanese firms, we examined discursive strategies available to strategy makers to reconcile strategic changes with the legacy of an illustrious, revered past. Our analysis adds to the growing body of work on the importance of continuity and discontinuity in the reconstruction of the past by detailing three specific ways of dealing with highly significant historical texts and by uncovering the prevailing contextual conditions associated with these strategies. By no means, however, do we claim a deterministic relation between context and strategy. Indeed, the observation of cases that did not conform with the prevailing pattern suggests that other conditions – which future research may examine in more depth – such as the availability of a rich documental archive, or the personal ambitions of the organizational leader, may affect whether and how a certain type of strategy will be available to or selected by a particular firm.

The setting we have focused on – like any other setting – while revealing, it is also in some ways unique. Our findings thus call future research to investigate how identity statements or other strategically relevant documents are used in other cultural and socio-historical settings. To further unpack the impact of the socio-historical context of strategic practices, future studies

may also examine how the development of strategic tools such as corporate mottos was shaped by historical events and socio-cultural trends in the first place. Such historical analysis should focus on specific time periods to provide in-depth understanding of the historical embeddedness of these statements. Comparison of these different time periods can elucidate how and why these strategic practices have changed over time, and with what impact on the prevailing strategies that firms pursued.

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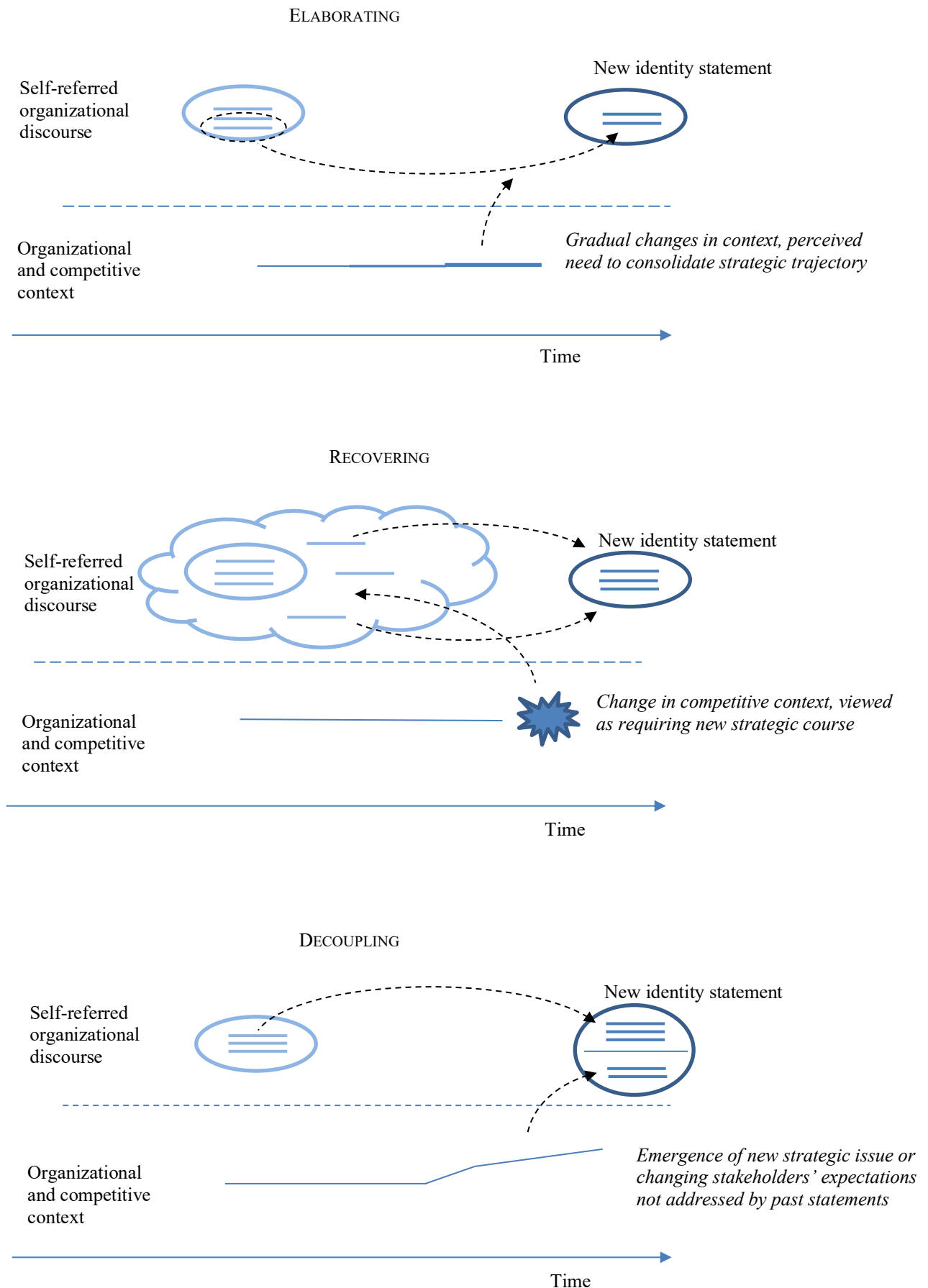
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**Figure 1. A visual representation of discursive strategies**



**Table 1. Summary of data sources**

<b>Data source</b>	<b>Use in the analysis</b>
<b>Archival sources (Round 1)</b>	
14 books published by Japanese business historians about family mottos ( <i>ka-kun</i> ). 51 corporate websites and 104 on-line articles.	Identify publicly available historical identity statements and analyze their content. Track changes in mottos.
51 internal archival items (leaflets, catalogues, and newsletters). 4 articles about specific ancient mottos; 10 online articles and 7 academic articles about family mottos.	Reconstruct a detailed historical chronology of events for each firm. Contextualize observations about the case firms to a wider scholarly understanding about Japanese family mottos.
<b>Archival sources (Round 2)</b>	
178 <i>primary</i> archival items: bookkeeping booklets, letters, speeches (134 items), newspaper articles (40 items), leaflets, posters, maps, and pictures (87 items), other material displayed in corporate museums (17 items) 31 <i>secondary</i> archival material: documents and statistics (10 items), journal articles (6 items), books (7 items), on-line articles (4 items)	Provide deeper contextual understanding of the period when historical identity statements were created, and when they were revised. Supplement interviews and mitigate potential bias. Triangulate other archival sources. Set the scope of primary archival data collection
<b>Archival sources (Round 3)</b>	
72 <i>primary</i> archival items from the 25 case firms: speech (1 item), map (1 item), letters (2 items), advertisements (2 items), copy of original calligraphy of the ancient motto (4 items), copy of the original foundational emblem (1 item), photographs (61 items) 188 <i>secondary</i> archival material from the 25 case firms: internal documents (25 items), corporate biographies (3 items), annual reports (150 items), journal article (1 item), magazine articles (2 items), video material (7 items)	Understand the competitive and organizational contexts of the formation and uses of the historical identity statements. Supplement interviews and mitigate potential bias.  Understand the historical key events and turning points in the case firms. Supplement interviews and mitigate potential bias.
<b>Interviews (Round 1)</b>	
24 email exchanges with presidents, managers, and corporate archivists.	Investigate whether firms had produced other statements than those collected from available sources.
12 interviews with presidents, managers, and employees.	Examine in more depth the decision to alter statements, and the strategies used to link past and present statements.
<b>Interviews (Round 2)</b>	
12 interviews with presidents, managers, and corporate archivists. 25 e-mail exchanges with presidents, managers, and corporate archivists.	Deepen our understanding of why historical identity statements were revised, and whether and how historical identity statements had affected strategic decisions.
<b>Interviews (Round 3)</b>	
16-mail exchanges with presidents, managers, and corporate archivists.	Understand the unintended consequences of the uses of the historical identity statements.