

Court snips off haircut chain's claim

BY T. RAJAN

A BARBERSHOP tussle involving 10-minute haircut chain EC House came to a close after the High Court threw out claims by a Japanese company that EC House had copied its business method and design.

In a judgment delivered on Tuesday, Justice Lai Siu Chu dismissed the case and ordered QB Net to pay all the legal costs of the suit.

She said QB Net, a Tokyo-based express haircut chain, had not proved that EC House had ripped off its business model.

The judge said the information about QB Net's business, the special tools it used, its business model and design was in the public domain. The company had disclosed these details to the public in interviews with publications like the Far Eastern Economic Review and a Japanese newspaper as far back as 1999, she said.

Both companies use tools like a ticket-vending payment machine and a special vacuum cleaner, called the "air wash", instead of shampooing after a haircut.

The ruling also denies QB Net a monopoly on the express, "no-frills" haircut business in Singapore. Apart from EC House, there are at least five other express haircut chains here.

Last year, QB Net sued Singapore-based businessman Koki Matsuda, EC House and its consultant, Mr Koji Muira. It claimed the three had committed a breach of contract, conspired to hurt its business and passed off its business as their own.

The saga began in 2001, when Mr Matsuda approached QB Net with a request to import its express haircut concept here. QB Net agreed, and granted Mr Matsuda a licence agreement. He opened the first QB House outlet in 2002. Under the agreement, he paid a monthly licensing fee of \$30,000 for QB Net's expertise. But Mr Matsuda, a 43-year-old divorcee who has lived here about 11 years, felt the fee was too high.

"I did everything in the business here, from training the barbers to running the daily operations," he told The Straits Times after the court decision.

Last year, he wound up his QB House business and allowed EC House to take over its 17 branches. He is a director of EC House.