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Empal Gentong as a Regional Gastrodiplomacy Resource: A Qualitative Case Study of Cirebon

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Abstract

Culinary heritage has become a visible resource in city diplomacy and place branding, yet studies on local dishes often describe tourism appeal without explaining how heritage can be connected to subnational diplomatic channels. This article aims to identify the gastronomic assets of Empal Gentong, a traditional Cirebon dish, and examine the institutional conditions needed to link these assets to regional gastrodiplomacy, soft power, and city branding. A qualitative case-study design was used. Data were collected through a targeted literature review, documentary materials on regional policy and tourism promotion, media coverage, and observation of culinary presentation and promotional practices. Three analytic instruments guided the process: a literature review matrix, a document extraction matrix, and an observation guide. Data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, thematic comparison, and conclusion drawing. The findings identify Empal Gentong's clay-vessel preparation, firewood cooking, historical associations, cultural identity, and tourism appeal as gastronomic assets that can support a diplomatic narrative. The documented 2017 presidential visit to Haji Apud restaurant demonstrates national visibility, but it does not, by itself, constitute international gastrodiplomacy. The study also finds limited policy integration, fragmented stakeholder coordination, weak international networks, uneven product and service standards, insufficient culinary storytelling, and limited digital and heritage strategies. On this basis, the article proposes a conditional Paradiplomatic Gastrodiplomacy Model that links culinary heritage, storytelling, public engagement, paradiplomacy, collaborative governance, soft-power potential, and city branding. The model is a conceptual and testable contribution; its international effects were not measured. Future research should test the model with foreign audiences, conduct stakeholder interviews, conduct comparative city studies, and analyze multilingual digital engagement.

Keywords: *Culinary Heritage; Paradiplomacy; Soft Power; City Branding; Collaborative Governance; Thematic Analysis*

A. Introduction

Contemporary international relations increasingly involve actors and channels beyond central governments. Cities and other subnational authorities participate in international networks, tourism promotion, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation while remaining situated within the legal and institutional framework of national foreign policy. This development is commonly discussed in the context of paradiplomacy, which concerns the international activities of subnational governments and their interactions with external partners (Duchacek, 1990; Lecours, 2008). At the same time, public diplomacy emphasizes

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communication with foreign publics, while soft power concerns the capacity to obtain outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004, 2008).

Food provides a particularly tangible medium through which culture can be encountered. Gastrodiplomacy generally refers to the strategic use of food and culinary culture in communication with foreign publics, with food serving as a vehicle for cultural representation, relationship-building, and image-formation (Rockower, 2012, 2016; Zhang, 2015). This concept should be distinguished from culinary diplomacy, which is conducted through official meals and diplomatic protocol. Recent scholarship also notes that gastrodiplomacy research has historically concentrated on states and national campaigns, although attention to sub-state and non-state actors is expanding (Li & Mok, 2025).

Indonesia has substantial gastronomic diversity that can serve cultural, tourism, and branding purposes. Cirebon is particularly relevant because its historical position on Java's northern coast has connected it to trade and cultural interaction. Its culinary traditions reflect a layered local identity shaped by interaction among Javanese, Sundanese, Chinese, Arab, and European influences. In this setting, Empal Gentong is a prominent culinary marker of Cirebon.

Empal Gentong is distinguished by its preparation in a clay vessel and, traditionally, the use of firewood. Beyond taste, the dish can be read as a cultural object that connects culinary practice with place, memory, and identity. Such characteristics matter for place branding because food can contribute to sensory experience and the formation of associations between a destination and its cultural identity (Berg & Sevón, 2014; Freire & Gertner, 2020). City branding, however, is not equivalent to advertising. It involves the construction, communication, and management of a place image through interactions among multiple stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Previous studies have examined Empal Gentong and Cirebon culinary tourism in relation to product and service quality, culinary promotion, and city branding (Mustafa & Khalim, 2024; Mustafa & Hernawati, 2025; Mustafa & Setiawan, 2026). These studies establish the relevance of local cuisine to tourism and branding, but they do not fully explain how a specific culinary heritage item could be positioned within a subnational diplomatic framework. This gap is also consistent with broader reviews of city branding, which note the prevalence of descriptive case studies and the need for stronger connections between concepts, empirical evidence, and measurable outcomes (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Oğuztimur & Akturan, 2016).

The present study therefore shifts the analytical focus from whether Empal Gentong is already an international diplomatic instrument to the more defensible question of how its existing cultural and tourism assets could support a regional gastrodiplomacy pathway. This distinction is essential because visibility should not be treated as proof of diplomatic impact. For example, media coverage of President Joko Widodo's visit to Empal Gentong Haji Apud in Cirebon on 13 April 2017 demonstrates national attention to the dish, but it does not demonstrate a change in foreign public perceptions or an established international program (ANTARA News, 2017).

Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions: (1) What characteristics of Empal Gentong provide a basis for its potential use in regional gastrodiplomacy? (2) What institutional and stakeholder conditions are necessary for connecting Empal Gentong with paradiplomacy and public diplomacy? (3) What conceptual model can explain the pathway from culinary heritage to potential soft power and city branding? The objectives are to identify the relevant cultural assets, analyze the institutional and collaborative conditions, and formulate a conceptual model that can be tested in subsequent empirical research.

The contribution of this study is therefore conceptual and exploratory rather than evaluative. It does not claim that Empal Gentong has already generated measurable international soft power

or that Cirebon has established an international gastrodiplomacy program. Instead, it identifies the conditions under which culinary heritage could serve as a diplomatic resource and proposes a model that can be tested empirically in the future.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study design. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of Empal Gentong's potential, development strategies, and the dynamics of relationships among actors in the context of regional gastrodiplomacy. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that qualitative research is suitable for exploring and understanding the meaning of a social phenomenon. Yin (2018) identifies the case study as a suitable strategy for answering "how" and "why" questions regarding contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts. The research location is the city of Cirebon, West Java. Data were collected through a literature review, documentation, observation, and information gathering on regional policies, tourism promotion, culinary activities, media coverage, and literature on gastrodiplomacy, paradiplomacy, soft power, and city branding. The data were not used to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of gastrodiplomacy but rather to identify capacities, opportunities, barriers, and development mechanisms. Data analysis employed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), encompassing data condensation, data presentation, and the derivation and verification of conclusions. To strengthen pattern identification, data themes were grouped into the following categories: gastronomic capital, visibility, actor strategies, soft power, city branding, challenges, and development models. The interpretations were then compared with existing theories and prior research.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine Empal Gentong within the social, cultural, tourism, and institutional contexts of Cirebon. A case study is appropriate when a contemporary phenomenon is examined in its real-life context and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not fully separable (Yin, 2018). The design was exploratory: the study sought to identify meanings, relationships, opportunities, and constraints rather than to estimate the statistical effect of gastrodiplomacy. The unit of analysis was Empal Gentong's potential to develop as a regional gastrodiplomacy resource. The analytical context comprised Cirebon's culinary identity, tourism promotion, city branding, public communication, regional government capacity, stakeholder relations, and potential international channels. The study did not use a survey instrument or statistical measurement of foreign public opinion; consequently, the findings concern potential, institutional readiness, and proposed mechanisms rather than demonstrated international impact.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Four forms of qualitative evidence were used: literature, documents, observations, and publicly available media. The literature review focused on gastrodiplomacy, culinary diplomacy, public diplomacy, soft power, paradiplomacy, collaborative governance, city branding, food tourism, and culinary heritage. Relevant studies on Cirebon and Empal Gentong were also examined to establish the empirical research gap. Documentary data consisted of publicly available materials concerning regional policy, tourism promotion, culinary activities, city branding, and relevant institutional initiatives. Media materials were used primarily to establish documented public visibility and contextual events. The use of media evidence was deliberately limited: media coverage was treated as evidence of communication and visibility, not as a proxy for diplomatic effectiveness.

Observation was used to examine publicly observable features relevant to culinary identity and communication, including the presentation of Empal Gentong, preparation-related cultural cues, culinary storytelling, tourism-oriented presentation, and promotional communication. The observation did not attempt to measure consumer attitudes or establish causal effects. To make the procedures transparent, the study used three qualitative analytic instruments. First, a literature-review matrix recorded the author, year, conceptual focus, empirical context, methodological approach, and relevance to the research questions. Second, a document-extraction matrix recorded the document source, institutional actor, policy or promotional issue, evidence concerning Empal Gentong, and relevance to gastrodiplomacy. Third, an observation guide recorded culinary practices, cultural narratives, identity markers, visitor-facing presentation, and communication elements. These instruments functioned as organizing and coding tools rather than numerical measurement scales.

Table 1. Data Sources, Materials, Analytical Instruments, and Purposes

Data source	Material examined	Analytic instrument	Purpose
Literature	Gastrodiplomacy, paradiplomacy, soft power, public diplomacy, city branding, food tourism, Cirebon culinary studies	Literature-review matrix	Identify concepts, debates, and research gaps
Documents	Regional policy and tourism-promotion materials, institutional/public communications	Document-extraction matrix	Identify institutional roles, policy integration, and promotional mechanisms
Observation	Culinary presentation, preparation cues, storytelling, tourism-facing communication	Observation guide	Identify visible cultural and communication assets
Media/public information	Reports on Empal Gentong, including the 2017 presidential visit	Document-extraction matrix	Establish documented visibility and distinguish it from international diplomatic impact

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative approach of Miles et al. (2020), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Initial coding grouped evidence into seven themes: gastronomic capital; culinary identity and storytelling; visibility and communication; institutional actors; paradiplomatic channels; soft-power and city-branding mechanisms; and barriers to implementation. The coded material was then compared across sources and interpreted in relation to the theoretical literature. The analysis also applied a claim-evidence check. Statements about existing visibility were separated from statements about potential diplomatic effects. A claim of established international gastrodiplomacy would require

evidence of organized engagement with foreign publics, international networks, or measurable changes in foreign perceptions. Because such evidence was not available in the study materials, the manuscript uses terms such as potential, pathway, capacity, and proposed model rather than established impact.

Research Scope and Limitations

The methodological scope places clear boundaries on the findings. The study does not include interviews with foreign audiences, survey-based measures of international perceptions, experimental exposure to Empal Gentong, quantitative social media analytics, or longitudinal economic indicators attributable to gastrodiplomacy. These limitations are not treated as minor technical details; they determine what the study can legitimately conclude. The proposed model should therefore be understood as a conceptual proposition grounded in qualitative evidence, not as an empirically validated causal model.

C. Results and Discussion

The analyzed materials consistently position Empal Gentong as a distinctive Cirebon culinary product. The characteristics emphasized in the evidence are the use of a clay vessel, traditional cooking over a wood fire, a distinctive spice profile, historical associations, and its role in culinary tourism. These features provide more than a product attribute: they create material and symbolic elements from which a place-based narrative can be constructed. The evidence also indicates that the value of Empal Gentong lies in the relationships among the dish, preparation practices, culinary practitioners, consumers, and Cirebon as a place. In this sense, the relevant asset is not only the recipe but a living culinary practice. This is important because gastrodiplomacy requires conveying cultural meaning rather than promoting food in a context-free manner (Rockower, 2012; Zhang, 2015).

Documented Visibility and the Limits of the Evidence

One clearly documented episode of national visibility occurred on 13 April 2017, when President Joko Widodo and First Lady Iriana Joko Widodo visited Empal Gentong Haji Apud in Cirebon and ate with local residents. ANTARA News reported the visit and described the interaction between the President, residents, and the restaurant setting (ANTARA News, 2017). This event is relevant because it shows that Empal Gentong had entered a nationally visible public communication context. However, the evidence does not demonstrate that the visit constituted international gastrodiplomacy. There is no evidence in the present dataset that the event was designed as communication with foreign publics, that it involved international diplomatic networks, or that it produced measurable changes in foreign perceptions. The appropriate empirical conclusion is therefore limited to national visibility and symbolic recognition.

Cultural Assets Relevant to Soft-Power Potential

The evidence identifies several features that could contribute to attraction: authenticity, recognizable preparation techniques, historical and cultural narrative, sensory experience, and association with Cirebon. These characteristics are consistent with the general logic of soft power, in which cultural resources may become sources of attraction when they are communicated credibly and experienced by audiences (Nye, 2004, 2008). The result is a conditional relationship rather than an automatic one. Empal Gentong is a cultural resource; it becomes a potential soft-power resource only when actors organize experiences, narratives, communication channels, and relationships around it. The available evidence does not allow the

study to claim that foreign audiences have already developed positive perceptions because of Empal Gentong.

Empal Gentong and City Branding

The findings indicate a strong conceptual connection between Empal Gentong and Cirebon's place identity. Food can operate as a sensory and symbolic element of place branding because eating experiences connect visitors with images of place, culture, and everyday life (Berg & Sevón, 2014; Freire & Gertner, 2020). Cirebon's existing culinary-tourism literature likewise identifies Empal Gentong as part of the city's recognizable culinary identity (Mustafa & Setiawan, 2026). At the same time, branding should not be reduced to logos, slogans, or promotional images. Place-brand theory emphasizes interaction and dialogue among stakeholders and between internal identity and external perceptions (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Accordingly, Empal Gentong can contribute to city branding when its culinary experience aligns with a broader narrative of Cirebon's history, culture, and contemporary identity.

Institutional and Stakeholder Conditions

The evidence identifies several institutional conditions that would need to be addressed before a regional gastrodiplomacy program could be considered operational. These include policy integration, stakeholder coordination, international networking, product and service standards, culinary storytelling, digital communication, and heritage protection.

Table 2. Institutional and Stakeholder Conditions for Regional Gastrodiplomacy

Observed condition	Implication	Potential responsible actors
Gastrodiplomacy is not clearly integrated into regional policy	A roadmap should connect culinary, tourism, culture, creative economy, and external cooperation	City government and relevant agencies
International networks are limited in the available evidence	International city-to-city, diaspora, and diplomatic channels would be required	City government, central government, partner cities, diaspora
Stakeholder coordination is fragmented	A coordination mechanism can align roles and resources	Government, businesses, communities, academics, media
Product and service quality varies	Standardization, hygiene, certification, packaging, and training are needed	Culinary businesses, tourism sector, government
Culinary storytelling is underdeveloped	Historical, cultural, and preparation narratives should be documented and communicated	Communities, practitioners, academics, media
Digital communication is fragmented	Multilingual and coordinated digital communication could extend reach	Government, media, creators, diaspora
Heritage and sustainability require attention	Documentation, intellectual-property/GI consideration, practitioner regeneration, and sustainable sourcing are needed	Government, communities, producers, academics

From Culinary Heritage to Gastrodiplomatic Potential

The first research question concerns which characteristics of Empal Gentong provide a basis for regional gastrodiplomacy. The results suggest that the relevant basis is a combination of material distinctiveness and narrative capacity. The clay vessel, firewood preparation, spice profile, historical associations, and relationship to Cirebon create a sensory and cultural package that can be communicated to audiences. This supports the argument that food can operate as a place-branding resource rather than merely a tourism commodity (Berg & Sevón, 2014). Yet the distinction between resource and diplomatic instrument is analytically crucial. Gastrodiplomacy involves intentional communication with foreign publics, while culinary heritage exists independently of diplomatic strategy (Li & Mok, 2025; Zhang, 2015). Therefore, the presence of an authentic food product does not establish gastrodiplomacy. What turns heritage into a diplomatic resource is the institutional organization of narratives, experiences, communication, and relationships.

National Visibility Is Not International Gastrodiplomacy

The 2017 presidential visit illustrates why evidentiary discipline is necessary. The event produced media visibility and connected Empal Gentong to a nationally prominent public figure. Such visibility can increase recognition within Indonesia. It cannot, without additional evidence, demonstrate a shift in foreign public opinion or the creation of international diplomatic relationships. This distinction also responds to a common problem in cultural-diplomacy research: treating exposure as equivalent to effect. Gastrodiplomacy campaigns documented in the international literature typically involve explicit strategies, target audiences, communication messages, networks, or organized promotional activities (Zhang, 2015). The present case has identifiable cultural assets but lacks sufficient evidence to establish that the full diplomatic mechanism is already operating.

Paradiplomacy as an Institutional Channel

The second research question concerns institutional conditions. The results suggest that paradiplomacy is best understood here as a channel rather than as a substitute for national diplomacy. The Cirebon City Government could use city-to-city cooperation, tourism networks, cultural exchanges, diaspora relations, and other authorized international connections to introduce local culinary heritage. Such activity would need to remain compatible with Indonesia's national foreign-policy framework. This interpretation is consistent with the literature on subnational international relations, which emphasizes that local governments can pursue external relations in areas linked to local interests while operating within broader national institutional structures (Duchacek, 1990; Lecours, 2008). The proposed role of the city government is therefore orchestration: connecting local cultural resources to legitimate channels rather than independently claiming diplomatic authority.

Collaborative Governance and the Multi-Actor Nature of Gastrodiplomacy

Gastrodiplomacy cannot be implemented effectively by the government alone because the actual culinary experience is shaped by businesses, practitioners, communities, tourism operators, the media, and visitors. Collaborative governance is relevant because it emphasizes shared processes, interdependence, and coordination among public and non-public actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). For Cirebon, a multi-stakeholder gastrodiplomacy forum could function as a coordination mechanism rather than as a symbolic committee. Its potential tasks would include developing narratives, coordinating promotion, supporting standards, identifying international partners, documenting heritage, and evaluating programs. The important point is that such a forum is a proposed institutional mechanism, not an existing institution demonstrated by the present evidence.

Culinary Storytelling, Public Diplomacy, and City Branding

Public diplomacy requires communication that is credible, sustained, and responsive to audiences (Nye, 2008). Culinary storytelling can support this process by connecting taste and sensory experience to history, cultural practice, and contemporary community life. This is more substantial than simply posting photographs of food. A diplomatic narrative would explain why Empal Gentong matters to Cirebon and allow audiences to encounter that meaning through culinary experience. The same process can support city branding. Place branding research emphasizes that place identity is continuously negotiated through stakeholder interaction rather than simply imposed through a marketing message (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Food, therefore, contributes most effectively when the experience, narrative, service quality, and the broader city environment reinforce one another. This is consistent with research linking food tourism and destination-brand formation to experiential and identity-related processes (Freire & Gertner, 2020; Gupta et al., 2024).

The Proposed Paradiplomatic Gastrodiplomacy Model

Culinary Heritage → Culinary Storytelling → Gastrodiplomatic Engagement → Public Attraction and Experience → Potential Positive Perception → Soft-Power Potential → City Branding → International Visibility and Cooperation. The arrows represent a proposed mechanism, not empirically demonstrated causality. Each transition requires enabling conditions. Culinary heritage must be documented and maintained; storytelling must be credible; engagement must reach relevant audiences; experiences must be of sufficient quality; perceptions must be measured rather than assumed; and international visibility must be distinguished from actual cooperation.

Table 3. Discussion – Components, Functions, and Key Actors in the Proposed Paradiplomatic Gastrodiplomacy Model

Component	Function in the model	Key actors
Culinary heritage	Provides material and cultural foundations for identity and authenticity	Practitioners, communities, businesses
Culinary storytelling	Transforms culinary practice into communicable cultural narratives	Communities, academics, media, government
Gastrodiplomatic engagement	Creates structured encounters between culinary culture and target publics	City government, tourism sector, media, diaspora
Paradiplomacy	Provides channels for authorized international cooperation	City government, central government, partner cities
Collaborative governance	Coordinates actors, resources, standards, and responsibilities	Government, private sector, communities, academics
Soft-power potential	Creates conditions for attraction through culture and experience	The wider stakeholder ecosystem
City branding	Connects culinary identity with place identity and reputation	City government and stakeholders

Research Contribution, Implications, and Testable Propositions

The theoretical contribution lies in connecting three bodies of literature that are often treated separately: gastrodiplomacy, paradiplomacy, and city/place branding. The study proposes that a local culinary resource can be analyzed as a potential diplomatic asset only when the institutional and communicative mechanisms linking the resource to external audiences are specified. This provides a more cautious extension of gastrodiplomacy research from national campaigns toward subnational contexts. Practically, the findings suggest five priority areas for future policy development: (1) create a policy roadmap that defines institutional roles; (2) strengthen product, service, food-safety, and packaging standards; (3) develop multilingual culinary storytelling; (4) build legitimate international networks and city-to-city channels; and (5) establish evaluation mechanisms based on audience evidence rather than visibility alone. The model also generates testable propositions for future research. First, exposure to structured Empal Gentong culinary experiences may influence foreign audiences' perceptions of Cirebon when accompanied by credible cultural narratives. Second, consistency in culinary quality and storytelling may strengthen destination-brand associations. Third, institutional coordination may mediate the relationship between culinary promotion and sustained international engagement. These are propositions for subsequent empirical studies, not findings established by the present case study.

D. Conclusion

This study finds that Empal Gentong possesses cultural and gastronomic characteristics that make it a plausible resource for regional gastrodiplomacy. Its distinctive preparation, culinary identity, historical associations, and tourism appeal provide material from which a place-based narrative can be constructed. The evidence also shows national visibility, including the documented 2017 visit of President Joko Widodo to Empal Gentong Haji Apud. However, that visibility should not be interpreted as evidence that international gastrodiplomacy has already been established. The central implication is that Empal Gentong should be understood as a potential diplomatic resource rather than an already proven instrument of international soft power. For such potential to become operational, Cirebon would need coordinated policy, stakeholder collaboration, credible culinary storytelling, product and service standards, digital communication, heritage protection, and legitimate international networks. Paradiplomacy can provide channels for external cooperation, while collaborative governance can connect the city government with businesses, communities, academics, media, tourism actors, and other stakeholders.

The study therefore proposes a Paradiplomatic Gastrodiplomacy Model linking culinary heritage, storytelling, gastrodiplomatic engagement, paradiplomacy, collaborative governance, soft-power potential, and city branding. The model is deliberately presented as a conceptual and testable framework. Its international effects have not been measured in this study. Future research should collect primary evidence from foreign audiences, conduct interviews with institutional and culinary stakeholders, analyze multilingual digital engagement, compare Cirebon with other culinary cities, and evaluate any future gastrodiplomacy program longitudinally. The principal limitation is the absence of direct evidence concerning foreign-audience perceptions and measurable international outcomes. Consequently, the contribution of this article is not a claim of achieved internationalization, but a theoretically informed explanation of how a local culinary heritage resource could be transformed into a regional diplomatic asset under appropriate institutional and communicative conditions.

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