

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Cultural and Religious Branding as Soft Power Resources

Paradiplomacy in West Java, Indonesia

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**Abstract:** In the era of globalization and decentralization, subnational governments increasingly participate in international relations through paradiplomacy, employing soft power to promote local identities and support national foreign policy. This study investigates the paradiplomatic strategies of West Java province, Indonesia, emphasizing cultural and religious branding as soft power instruments. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research relies on semi-structured interviews with officials of the Bureau of Government and Regional Autonomy, supplemented by policy documents, program reports, and secondary data. Findings indicate that West Java promotes local assets such as coffee and batik in international forums, while advancing religious branding through the English for Ulama program, developed in partnership with the British Council, which trains ulama, including women, for international dialogues on moderate Indonesian Islam. Supported by collaborations with Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, and the United Kingdom in capacity building, creative economy, and sustainable technology, these initiatives appear to enhance provincial visibility and to contribute to Indonesia's public diplomacy by projecting tolerance, cultural richness, and progressive inclusivity. This research enriches the subnational diplomacy literature by underscoring the underexplored role of religious soft power and gender-inclusive engagement in developing contexts.

**Keywords:** cultural branding; paradiplomacy; religious branding; soft power; West Java.

## 1. Introduction

Globalization and decentralization processes have significantly transformed the landscape of international relations, enabling subnational governments to emerge as active and increasingly autonomous actors in global affairs (Cornago, 2010; Tavares, 2016). This phenomenon, widely referred to as paradiplomacy, involves sub-state entities such as provinces, regions, and cities engaging in cross-border activities to pursue economic, cultural, environmental, and social objectives, often in parallel with, and complementary to, national foreign policy (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999). In a study of Mexico, Añorve-Añorve (2019) demonstrates how the municipality of Guanajuato leverages soft power resources to pursue international cooperation despite lacking formal diplomatic authority, while in Canada, Murphy (2024) shows that even ostensibly domestic subnational bodies, such as Ontario's school boards, can inadvertently function as paradiplomatic agents of national soft power projection through international student recruitment. These cases illustrate that paradiplomacy's soft power dimension operates across diverse institutional forms and levels of intentionality, from formally structured provincial engagement to incidental subnational activity. In many cases, paradiplomacy serves as a vehicle for soft power projection, allowing local governments to leverage cultural, educational, and ideational resources to shape international perceptions and build positive reputations (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004).

In the context of developing countries, paradiplomacy has gained particular relevance as a strategy to address local development needs while contributing to nation branding and diplomatic goals (Mukti, 2020). Indonesia provides a compelling case for examining this dynamic. Subnational governments in Indonesia have progressively expanded their international engagements, particularly in economic cooperation, cultural promotion, and capacity building, while remaining formally aligned with central government foreign policy guidelines (Mukti, 2020). Research indicates that paradiplomacy, when carried out effectively, acts as a channel for placing local heritage in the global spotlight, with particular emphasis on the need for persistent intergovernmental coordination and structured cultural diplomacy initiatives (Dermawan et al., 2021; Nuaba, 2025; Putri et al., 2025; Rachmawati et al., 2026).

West Java is among Indonesia's more prominent subnational actors in paradiplomacy. With the country's largest provincial population and a substantial contribution to national gross domestic product (BPS - Statistics Indonesia, 2025, 2026), the province possesses significant demographic, economic, and cultural resources that position it as a strategic player in projecting Indonesia's image abroad. Through the coordination of Biro Pemerintahan dan Otonomi Daerah [Bureau of Government and Regional Autonomy] (Biro Pemotda), West Java has developed multifaceted international partnerships with countries including Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, and the United Kingdom. These collaborations span human resource development, creative economy initiatives, sustainable technology transfer, and notably, cultural and religious branding (Informants, personal communication, June 26, 2025).

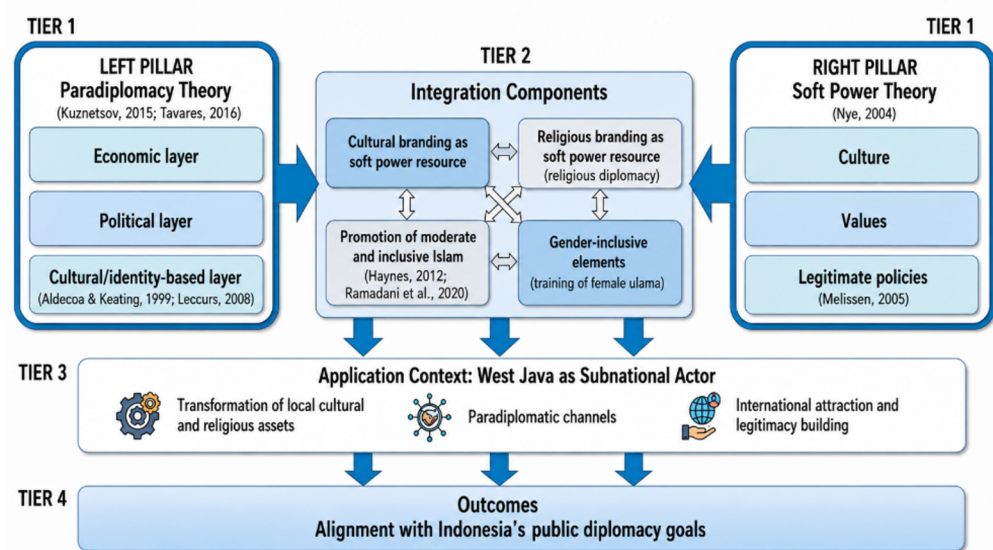
A distinctive feature of West Java's approach is its strategic use of cultural and religious branding as instruments of soft power. The province actively promotes iconic local products such as specialty coffee and traditional batik in international forums, while simultaneously pioneering religious branding programs. One flagship initiative is the English for Ulama program, developed in collaboration with the British Council, which equips ulama, including women, with English-language proficiency to

participate in international interfaith dialogues, articulate moderate Islamic values, and enhance Indonesia's image as a tolerant, progressive Muslim-majority nation (Ramadani et al., 2020). In this study, religious branding is not treated merely as a subset of cultural branding, but as a value-based soft power resource through which subnational governments strategically mobilize religious actors and narratives in international engagement.

Despite growing scholarly interest in Indonesian paradiplomacy, much of the existing literature focuses on economic cooperation, trade promotion, or general institutional frameworks (Ginanjari, 2022). Relatively few studies have systematically explored the intersection of cultural heritage, religious soft power, and gender-inclusive religious engagement as deliberate subnational branding strategies in developing contexts.

While Indonesian paradiplomacy scholarship has begun to document specific cultural and religious dimensions, existing studies tend to treat these as separate phenomena. Pratama (2020) examines how West Nusa Tenggara's halal tourism branding functions as a religiously inflected form of paradiplomacy, yet does not address gender dimensions of religious engagement. Lufiah et al. (2024) analyze the Borobudur Temple Twin World Heritage program as an instrument of cultural-heritage diplomacy, but their focus remains on visitor statistics and economic outcomes rather than religious or gender dimensions. Mukti (2020) addresses paradiplomacy in Aceh and Papua, but centers on sovereignty and separatist political dynamics rather than cultural or religious branding. Taken together, this body of work indicates that Indonesian paradiplomacy research has expanded along cultural, religious, and political-security lines separately, but no existing study appears to have examined the intersection of cultural heritage, religious soft power, and gender-inclusive religious engagement as a deliberate, integrated subnational branding strategy. This gap rests on two working assumptions: first, that religious branding functions as an autonomous soft power resource distinct from general cultural branding (elaborated in the Theoretical Framework); and second, that gender-inclusive religious engagement constitutes a deliberate rather than incidental element of subnational branding strategy. This gap is particularly evident in analyses of West Java, where the integration of local identity elements into global engagements remains underexplored.

This article addresses this gap by examining how West Java province employs paradiplomacy as a soft power mechanism through cultural and religious branding. Specifically, it analyzes the design, implementation, and international implications of key initiatives, including cultural product promotion and the English for Ulama program. The study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of subnational diplomacy by examining how local actors can harness distinctive cultural and religious assets to enhance both provincial visibility and national public diplomacy objectives. Against this backdrop, this study is guided by the following research question: How does West Java province employ paradiplomacy as a soft power mechanism through cultural and religious branding, and what are its implications for Indonesia's national public diplomacy? To address this question, the remainder of this article is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis, followed by an explanation of the research methodology. The findings and discussion section then examines the three core themes identified in the data, before the conclusion synthesizes key insights and outlines directions for future research.



Source: Authors' construction (2025).

To analytically situate this study, religious branding is conceptualized not merely as an extension of cultural branding, but as a distinct value-based soft power resource within paradiplomacy. While cultural branding primarily operates through symbolic representation of heritage, arts, and local identity, religious branding mobilizes normative resources such as ethical values, moral authority, and theological narratives to generate international attraction and legitimacy. In the context of West Java, religious engagement is deliberately institutionalized and projected through paradiplomatic channels, positioning religion as an autonomous soft power resource rather than a cultural by-product. This distinction allows the framework to capture how subnational governments strategically deploy religious actors and values to shape international perceptions, while remaining embedded within broader cultural and political identities.

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical linkage between paradiplomacy, soft power, and subnational diplomacy within this study. Paradiplomacy functions as the institutional and political mechanism through which West Java engages internationally, providing the channels, partnerships, and governance structures for cross-border interaction. Within this mechanism, soft power operates as the underlying logic of attraction, drawing on non-coercive resources such as culture, values, and legitimacy. Theoretically, the study is grounded in an integrated framework that combines paradiplomacy theory and soft power theory, with particular attention to cultural and religious dimensions. Paradiplomacy is conceptualized following Kuznetsov (2020) and Tavares (2016) as the involvement of subnational governments in international relations through contacts and agreements with foreign public and private entities, encompassing economic, political, and cultural/identity-based layers (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999; Lecours, 2008). Soft power, as originally defined by Nye (2004), refers to the ability to shape preferences through attraction derived from culture, values, and legitimate policies (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004).

Within this framework, cultural and religious branding are positioned as deliberate soft power resources deployed through paradiplomatic channels. Cultural branding and religious branding are positioned as two complementary yet analytically distinct soft power resources. Cultural branding emphasizes economic-symbolic assets (e.g., batik, coffee, creative industries), whereas religious branding

operates as a value-based resource that projects norms of religious moderation, tolerance, and inclusivity.

The English for Ulama program exemplifies this linkage by transforming religious capital into international attractiveness through language training and global religious engagement. Importantly, the inclusion of female ulama introduces a gendered layer of norm projection, aligning subnational religious branding with progressive global discourses while reinforcing Indonesia's national public diplomacy narratives. Religious branding—especially the promotion of moderate and inclusive Islam—is treated as a form of value-based soft power that enhances legitimacy and attractiveness in global religious and interfaith arenas (Haynes, 2016; Ramadani et al., 2020). Gender-inclusive elements, such as the training of female ulama, are interpreted as reinforcing progressive and tolerant national narratives. This hybrid framework enables the analysis of how West Java transforms local cultural and religious assets into sources of international attraction while maintaining coherence with Indonesia's broader public diplomacy goals.

## 2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to develop an in-depth and contextual understanding of West Java province's paradiplomatic strategies, with particular emphasis on how cultural and religious branding serve as instruments of soft power. The qualitative paradigm is well suited to capturing the complexity of social processes, stakeholder perceptions, policy intentions, implementation dynamics, and contextual nuances that are difficult to address through quantitative methods alone (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2018). A single embedded case study design was employed, with West Java province selected as the primary case unit. Purposive selection was based on its status as a critical and revelatory case (Yin, 2018), given its demographic scale—a population of approximately 50.8 million in 2025 (BPS - Statistics Indonesia, 2025)—a consistent contribution of approximately 12.8% to Indonesia's gross domestic product (BPS - Statistics Indonesia, 2026), a highly active and diversified international engagement profile among Indonesian provinces, and a distinctive integration of cultural promotion with religious branding within its paradiplomatic activities. This profile makes West Java particularly suitable for illustrating how subnational actors in a decentralized unitary state can project soft power while remaining aligned with national foreign policy objectives.

Data collection took place in two complementary phases during 2025, drawing on multiple sources to ensure triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with two key informants from Biro Pemotda in the West Java Provincial Government—namely, the Head of Biro Pemotda and a staff member from the same division. These informants were purposively selected to capture complementary perspectives: policy-level oversight and day-to-day implementation of the province's international cooperation programs. Both interviews were carried out face-to-face in Bandung in June 2025, each lasting 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with prior informed consent. A flexible semi-structured interview guide was used, focusing on policy formulation, program implementation, criteria for selecting international partners, perceived outcomes, challenges encountered, and the degree of alignment with national diplomatic priorities. Given the limited number of informants, these interviews were substantially supplemented by document analysis.

Second, document analysis was conducted on more than 20 sources, including official provincial policy documents and annual cooperation reports from 2020 to

2025, program-specific evaluation reports, bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, publicly available materials from partner institutions (the British Council, the Indonesia Creative Cities Network, and Komite Ekonomi Kreatif dan Inovasi Jawa Barat [West Java Creative Economy and Innovation Committee]), and relevant secondary academic and policy literature on Indonesian paradiplomacy. These documents served to support interview narratives, reconstruct historical timelines, verify stated objectives, and provide additional evidence of reported outcomes and implementation challenges.

All data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, enabling the authors to understand the phenomenon in depth by identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns that emerge from the data (Christou, 2022). To illustrate how analytical themes were derived from the data, interview transcripts and policy documents referring to coordination roles, inter-agency meetings, and partner selection were initially coded as coordination mechanisms and institutional leadership. These codes were then grouped into the broader theme of institutional coordination, which explains how paradiplomatic activities are organized and maintained. Similarly, data describing international exhibitions, trade forums, and creative economy programs were coded as cultural promotion, local product branding, and economic visibility, and subsequently combined into the theme of cultural branding for economic and reputational value. References to the English for Ulama program, interfaith activities, the promotion of moderate Islam, and the involvement of female ulama were coded as religious engagement, normative projection, and gender inclusion, leading to the theme of religious branding as a value-based soft power instrument. This process shows how themes were developed directly from empirical data.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of interview transcripts and program documents revealed three core themes that characterize West Java province's paradiplomatic strategies: (1) institutional coordination as a linkage mechanism, (2) cultural branding for dual economic and reputational value, and (3) religious branding as a value-based soft power instrument.

#### 3.1. Institutional Coordination and Strategic Partnerships

The results of this study reveal an integrated paradiplomatic framework employed by West Java province, leveraging cultural and religious branding as core soft power instruments to enhance international engagement at both the subnational and national levels. Key findings indicate that Biro Pemotda acts as the pivotal coordinating entity, facilitating strategic partnerships with five primary countries—Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, and the United Kingdom—selected for their complementary strengths in economic, technological, and cultural domains (Informants, personal communication, June 26, 2025). These collaborations have yielded concrete outcomes, including human resource capacity building through civil servant training programs and pre-departure orientation for migrant workers, as well as environmental initiatives such as the deployment of public electric-vehicle charging stations and joint waste management research, indicating a commitment to sustainable development aligned with global agendas. These activities illustrate a deliberate attempt to integrate sustainable development goals into paradiplomatic practice, although interviewees noted that the scale and continuity of these projects remain heavily dependent on the individuals holding office at a given time rather than being anchored in institutionalized procedures. According to the informants,

partnership priorities and program intensity have historically shifted alongside changes in leadership within the bureau, suggesting that coordination, while formally structured through Biro Pemotda, continues to rely substantially on individual initiative and personal networks rather than standing institutional mandates. This pattern carries a direct implication for West Java's paradiplomacy, indicating that the province's soft power projection, however effective in the short term, remains institutionally fragile, since program continuity is not yet fully decoupled from individual tenure. This finding foreshadows a broader sustainability challenge, examined later in this article, in which leadership transitions emerge as a recurring risk to the durability of paradiplomatic initiatives.

It is important to clarify the extent to which West Java's paradiplomacy reflects deliberate strategic design rather than incidental practice. Findings from this study indicate that the province does not operate under a dedicated, formally codified paradiplomacy strategy document; rather, its international engagement has evolved organically out of several cooperation programs that have been in operation for a number of years. This suggests that paradiplomacy in West Java is better understood as an emergent institutional practice rather than a top-down grand design. Nonetheless, this organic development does not imply that the activities are purposeless. Interviewees consistently indicated two underlying functional objectives: first, to introduce and promote West Java's local products and cultural assets to international audiences, and second, to expand the province's access to cooperation programs perceived as mutually beneficial. This pattern nuances the paradiplomacy literature (Kuznetsov, 2020; Tavares, 2016) by illustrating how subnational paradiplomacy in decentralized developing-country contexts can be simultaneously unplanned in form and purposive in function, with institutionalization following practice rather than preceding it.

### 3.2. Cultural Branding for Dual Economic and Reputational Value

In the realm of cultural branding, West Java has systematically promoted local assets such as specialty coffee and traditional batik in international trade forums and exhibitions, targeting markets in Japan, China, and the United Kingdom. Official trade data present a more complex picture than promotional narratives alone suggest. According to provincial trade office data, the export volume of West Java's coffee, tea, maté, and spice products—reported jointly under Harmonized System chapter 09 rather than for coffee alone—declined from approximately 47.5 million kilograms in 2017 to 30.0 million in 2024 before rising to 31.1 million in 2025, a net decrease of roughly one-third over the period (Portal Satu Data Indonesia, 2024). Separately, provincial government reports record coffee exports reaching a cumulative value of approximately USD 40 million across 2016–2021 (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah Provinsi Jawa Barat, 2022). The two are not commensurable—an annual volume series for a commodity group against a cumulative value total for a single commodity over a period ending four years earlier—and the second cannot show whether that value rose or fell; but the volume series alone is not consistent with a straightforward narrative of continuously expanding export success, and a single year's increase does not establish a reversal. The data available here do not distinguish whether the pattern reflects rising unit prices, a shift in market position, or structural constraints on volume. This nuance lends empirical weight to the structural barriers informants candidly acknowledged, including the lack of internationally recognized quality certification and standardized packaging, which continue to limit market penetration and price competitiveness. Indeed, constraints of this kind are not confined to West Java. In late 2025, Kementerian Ekonomi Kreatif

[Ministry of Creative Economy] acknowledged that national coffee marketing efforts remain largely scattered and lack a unified branding identity, and identified a consolidated national coffee branding framework as a development priority aligned with Peraturan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 12 Tahun 2025 tentang Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional Tahun 2025–2029 [Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 12 of 2025 on the National Medium-Term Development Plan for 2025–2029] (BRIN - National Research and Innovation Agency, 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that West Java's cultural branding strategy generates reputational and diplomatic visibility more consistently than it guarantees sustained export growth, which is an important qualification for assessing the economic dimension of the province's soft power strategy.

Program documentation records that micro, small, and medium enterprises from West Java exhibited at the Connecti:City 2022 expo alongside delegates from ministries, embassies, and international partner organizations, and that the province markets these enterprises' products through the borongdong.id and kreasijabar.id platforms (British Council, 2022). The initiative produced seven policy recommendations that were channeled into the Group of Twenty process, and the creative economy was subsequently acknowledged in that year's Leaders' Declaration (British Council, 2022). The diplomatic framing was explicit at the highest provincial level: Governor Ridwan Kamil described West Java as using "the creative economy as a diplomacy" (British Council, 2022). Educational exchanges, such as student programs with Australia, China, and South Korea, further support knowledge transfer and cultural immersion, preparing younger generations for global competition while fostering mutual understanding (Informants, personal communication, June 26, 2025).

These efforts exemplify how subnational actors use cultural branding to generate economic value while building attractive narratives of innovation and heritage (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004). Moreover, these efforts suggest that paradiplomacy creates opportunities for the province to secure international support, potentially contributing to increased legitimacy and greater recognition at the international level (Novialdi et al., 2021).

### 3.3. Religious Branding as a Value-Based Soft Power Instrument

In this study, subnational religious branding is treated as an analytically distinct soft power resource within paradiplomacy, characterized by the strategic mobilization of religious actors and values to project normative appeal in international arenas. Religious branding emerges as a particularly novel dimension of West Java's soft power strategy, with the English for Ulama program serving as a flagship example. Implemented through collaboration with the British Council, this initiative has trained ulama, including women, in English-language proficiency to participate in international interfaith forums, promoting messages of moderate Indonesian Islam and tolerance (Informants, personal communication, June 26, 2025). Program records indicate that participants have delivered presentations at international conferences, contributing to strengthened people-to-people ties and positioning West Java as a center for Islamic learning. The deliberate inclusion of female ulama in the English for Ulama program was frequently highlighted as both a symbolic gesture projecting progressive and inclusive values and a substantive step toward expanding women's voices in religious branding. This gender-inclusive dimension also reinforces Indonesia's image as an inclusive Muslim-majority nation (Haynes, 2016).

While the English for Ulama program promotes values of moderation and inclusivity, its effectiveness depends on maintaining substantive religious engagement rather than symbolic participation. Moreover, religious branding carries the risk of exclusivity, as emphasizing particular religious identities may unintentionally marginalize other belief systems or local religious expressions if not carefully framed within pluralistic narratives. Although West Java's initiatives highlight inclusive and moderate Islam, continued efforts are required to ensure that religious branding remains open, dialogical, and representative of Indonesia's broader religious diversity.

Integrating these findings with the theoretical framework, West Java's paradiplomacy aligns with Kuznetsov (2020) and Tavares (2016) by encompassing economic, political, and identity-based layers, in which cultural and religious elements function as soft power resources to attract international partners without coercion (Nye, 2004). However, the findings also extend this framework in three specific directions. First, whereas Kuznetsov's (2020) and Tavares' (2016) models treat cultural and identity-based engagement as a single undifferentiated layer, this study's findings suggest that religious branding operates as an analytically distinct sub-layer within it, with its own normative logic (moral authority, theological legitimacy) that is not fully captured by frameworks built primarily around economic and political motives. This implies that existing paradiplomacy typologies may need to disaggregate the cultural/identity layer further when religious actors and narratives are centrally involved. Second, the finding that West Java's paradiplomacy emerged organically rather than through formal strategic design complicates the implicit assumption in much of the existing literature that subnational international engagement follows a rational-strategic planning logic; instead, the West Java case suggests that paradiplomacy theory should more explicitly accommodate emergent, path-dependent institutionalization as a distinct mode of subnational soft power development, alongside the top-down and separatist-driven modes more commonly documented (Mukti, 2020). Third, the observed divergence between export value and export volume nuances Nye's (2004) soft power framework by illustrating that visibility and attraction, as outcomes of paradiplomacy, do not necessarily co-vary with the tangible economic outcomes that soft power is often assumed to generate; this suggests soft power theory would benefit from more explicitly separating reputational attraction from material outcomes as distinct, only loosely coupled dependent variables. Taken together, these theoretical implications suggest that paradiplomacy and soft power frameworks developed primarily from economically and politically driven cases require conceptual refinement when applied to contexts in which religious and cultural branding operate as primary, rather than secondary, mechanisms of subnational soft power.

For policy recommendations, West Java should prioritize systematic evaluation frameworks, international certification for cultural products, and expanded multi-stakeholder collaborations to address identified gaps. Future research could employ quantitative metrics to assess the efficacy of these strategies, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of paradiplomacy in developing contexts. Overall, this study suggests that West Java's use of cultural and religious branding as soft power tools may both foster local development and strengthen Indonesia's position in international relations.

These results underscore the potential for subnational entities in decentralized states such as Indonesia to act as amplifiers of nation branding, particularly through value-based diplomacy that integrates local assets with global narratives (Cornago, 2010). Challenges nonetheless remain, as documented by Rachmawati et al.'s

(2026) study of Yogyakarta's paradiplomatic initiatives, which highlights how subnational diplomacy exhibits both empowerment and limitations, producing divergent local impacts, including shifts in governance frameworks, conflicts surrounding spatial planning, and inequitable benefits for local communities.

Another challenge is that the sustainability of paradiplomatic initiatives remains vulnerable to political change at the regional level. Paradiplomacy programs are often closely tied to specific leadership visions and administrative priorities; shifts in provincial leadership may lead to reorientation, discontinuity, or reduced institutional support. These challenges suggest that the long-term impact of religious soft power initiatives depends on the institutionalization of programs, clear evaluation mechanisms, and cross-administrative commitment beyond individual political cycles.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study suggests that West Java province has developed an emergent paradiplomatic practice that mobilizes cultural and religious branding as soft power instruments to enhance its global visibility while contributing to Indonesia's national public diplomacy objectives. Through systematic promotion of local assets such as specialty coffee, traditional batik, and creative economy initiatives (e.g., Connecti: City), combined with the English for Ulama program—including its gender-inclusive dimension targeting female ulama—West Java has projected attractive narratives of cultural richness, religious moderation, tolerance, and progressive inclusivity. These efforts are institutionally anchored by the Bureau of Government and Regional Autonomy, which supports alignment with national foreign policy guidelines while enabling the province to engage strategically with key partners (Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, and the United Kingdom). The findings indicate that subnational actors in decentralized unitary states can function not merely as implementers of central directives but as proactive contributors to nation branding through localized soft power resources.

This research contributes to the paradiplomacy literature in three specific ways. First, by empirically distinguishing religious branding as an autonomous soft power resource rather than a subset of cultural branding, it extends existing frameworks (Kuznetsov, 2020; Tavares, 2016) which primarily address economic, political, and general cultural-identity layers toward a more explicit account of religious and gender-based dimensions of subnational soft power, exemplified empirically by the English for Ulama program. Second, by documenting that West Java's paradiplomacy emerged as an unplanned but functionally purposive practice, this study nuances the assumption in prior Indonesian paradiplomacy research (Pratama, 2020) that subnational international engagement is either centrally directed or driven primarily by separatist or trade motives, showing instead a third pathway of gradual institutional emergence. Third, by comparing cultural branding narratives with official trade data showing a decline in West Java's coffee-related export volume alongside reported gains in export value and visibility, this study offers an empirically grounded qualification often missing from paradiplomacy scholarship, which tends to assume that soft power visibility translates directly into economic outcomes. Together, these contributions extend the paradiplomacy literature beyond the trade- and economy-centered focus that has dominated prior Indonesian case studies (Ginanjar, 2022; Lufiah et al., 2024), toward a more integrated understanding of how cultural, religious, gender, and institutional dimensions interact within subnational soft power strategies in decentralized developing-country contexts.

Practically, the results suggest that sustained impact depends on addressing current limitations, including the need for systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, international certification of cultural products, and diversified funding to reduce dependency on external partners. Future research could extend this inquiry by incorporating quantitative impact assessment, comparative analysis with other Indonesian provinces, or longitudinal tracking of program outcomes. Ultimately, West Java's experience illustrates the growing relevance of subnational diplomacy in projecting value-based soft power and strengthening a country's international image from below.

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