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# Culinary culture in the development of the city brand of Asian tourist capitals: a systematic review

*La cultura culinaria en el desarrollo de la marca ciudad de las capitales turísticas asiáticas: revisión sistemática*

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## Abstract

The main objective of this systematic review is to analyze the role of culinary culture in the development of the city brand of the main tourist cities in Asia, emphasizing the role it plays in the strategies implemented to strengthen the international projection of these cities. To carry out this study, a literature review was conducted of studies published between 2020 and 2025 in national and international journals indexed in databases such as Scopus, Scielo, and Dialnet, among others. The literature review clearly established the contribution of culinary culture to the development of city branding in three of its defining elements: positioning, economic development, and enhancement of the tourist destination. In addition, the importance of implementing specific public policies to enhance this contribution was determined. In general, this study finds that a planned strategy to develop or enhance a city brand in our times must necessarily include culinary culture as a key element.

**Keywords**: culinary culture, cultural tourism, city brand.

## Resumen

La presente revisión sistemática tiene como objetivo principal analizar el papel de la cultura culinaria en el desarrollo de la marca ciudad de las principales ciudades turísticas de Asia, enfatizando en el papel que juega en las estrategias implementadas para fortalecer la proyección internacional de estas urbes. Para llevar a cabo este estudio, se realizó una revisión bibliográfica de estudios publicados entre los años 2020 y 2025 en revistas nacionales e internacionales indexadas en bases de datos como Scopus, Scielo y Dialnet, entre otras. La revisión de la literatura permitió establecer claramente el aporte de la cultura culinaria en el desarrollo de la marca ciudad en tres de sus elementos que la definen: posicionamiento, desarrollo económico y potenciamiento del destino turístico. Además, se determinó la importancia de la implementación de políticas públicas específicas para potenciar dicho aporte. En general, este estudio descubre que una estrategia planificada para desarrollar o potenciar una marca ciudad en nuestros tiempos necesariamente debe incluir a la cultura culinaria como elemento clave.

**Palabras clave**: cultura culinaria, turismo cultural, marca ciudad.

## Introduction

Currently, gastronomy has evolved from being merely associated with consumption to becoming a powerful tool for identity and tourism promotion (Hokaoglu, 2024). The world's major tourist capitals have recognized the value of their culinary culture as a strategic resource for city branding development (Nurwitarasi, 2024). As cities compete to attract international visitors, the enhancement of their cultural identity through gastronomy has solidified as a key tool for standing out in a globalized market (Marković, 2020).

The field of study related to culinary culture and city branding has gained notable relevance in recent decades, responding to the growing interest of tourists in authentic and meaningful cultural experiences, rather than limited consumption of traditional products and services (Férérol, 2018). In this context, the promotion of local

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gastronomy contributes not only to economic dynamism but also to the strengthening of social cohesion and the preservation of cultural heritage (Koufadakis, 2020).

Despite the increasing interest in gastronomy as a positioning tool for tourism, questions remain regarding the specific mechanisms by which culinary culture contributes to city branding development. While there are studies addressing the economic impact of gastronomic tourism (Talukder, 2024), there is still a lack of a comprehensive review that integrates cultural and territorial branding perspectives. This gap in academic knowledge limits the comprehensive understanding of the most effective strategies for consolidating culinary identity in city branding development.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that city branding has emerged in recent years as an interdisciplinary field integrating urban management, marketing, culture, and hospitality, offering fundamental tools for the competitive projection of cities in a globalized context. The management of a city brand requires a deep understanding of urban social and economic dynamics, as well as the symbolic values that construct place identity and experience, with culinary culture being a primary factor to consider.

The theoretical framework supporting this research is presented below.

**Culinary culture**

The term culinary culture constitutes a central category within the studies of tourism, hospitality, and cultural management, as it refers to the set of practices, knowledge, symbols, and values associated with the production, preparation, and consumption of food in specific sociocultural contexts (Kamble & Kashikar, 2025). This notion, which transcends the purely gastronomic, is inscribed within a broader framework of identity, belonging, and cultural projection, in which food functions as a symbolic language that articulates both the ordinary and the extraordinary (Omeye, 2024).

Various authors have approached culinary culture as a social construct that integrates historical, territorial, and emotional elements, becoming a vehicle for transmitting cultural heritage. In this sense, food not only nourishes but also structures the individual and collective identity of a society (Byrd et al., 2017). Local cuisine, understood as both a material and immaterial expression, emerges as a key factor for differentiating tourist destinations and consolidating city brands (Lai et al., 2020).

At the intersection of culture and tourism, culinary culture is conceptualized as an experience that combines sensory pleasure with cultural authenticity, providing visitors with an intimate connection to the destination. Thus, it not only satisfies alimentary consumption but also plays a strategic role in territorial marketing and the valorization of local products. This perspective has led numerous destinations to incorporate gastronomy into their sustainable tourism development strategies (Garcés, 2024).

Other studies have explored the dynamic dimension of culinary culture, highlighting its capacity for adaptation and hybridization in the face of globalization and digitalization processes. This approach recognizes the emergence of new forms of culinary interaction, such as those mediated by social networks, which expand the reach and visibility of local gastronomic culture (Widjanarko et al., 2024).

In summary, the literature agrees that culinary culture is a multifaceted phenomenon essential for understanding the processes of identity construction and tourism positioning within the realm of hospitality. Its study requires a cross-sectional perspective that articulates history, territory, economy, and communication, making food not just a consumer product but a strategic cultural manifestation.

**City branding**

The concept of city branding is fundamental within urban management, tourism, and hospitality, as it enables the construction of a differentiated and competitive identity for cities in the global context. In an environment characterized by the increasing mobility of capital, people, and ideas, cities seek to stand out by creating and projecting strong brands that reflect their unique character, values, and value propositions for both residents and visitors (Alshaalan et al., 2024).

From its initial formulations, city branding has been understood as a more complex process than mere tourism promotion, involving the articulation of tangible and intangible elements that shape the urban experience. A city brand is defined not only by what it possesses but also by what it is and represents, integrating cultural, economic, political, and social dimensions. Thus, city branding becomes a strategic asset influencing international perception, attracting investments and talent, and consolidating sustainable tourism flows (Abd et al., 2022).

Various authors propose that city branding is structured around three levels: the physical design of the environment, symbolic identity (values, history, and culture), and communication policies (Górska-Warsewicz, 2020). This approach has been widely adopted in studies analyzing the relationship between urban image, tourist

experience, and global positioning. The literature agrees that effective city brands are those that achieve coherence between the projected and lived image, promoting authenticity and differentiation (De Jong & Lu, 2022).

Recent empirical studies have demonstrated how city branding contributes to urban revitalization, the strengthening of the creative economy, and the consolidation of competitive tourist destinations (Branding of Creative Cities, 2024; UNESCO & Bank, 2021). The objective of this study is to analyze the strategies applied to incorporate culinary culture into the development of the city brand of major tourist capitals in Asia.

**Research question**

What strategies are applied to incorporate culinary culture into the development of the city brand of tourist cities in Asia?

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach of a descriptive and exploratory nature, aimed at analyzing the relevance of culinary culture in city branding development strategies. The qualitative approach allows for a deep understanding of complex social phenomena framed in specific cultural contexts, such as urban identity and gastronomy (Creswell, 2013). The descriptive design facilitates the systematization of information regarding observed practices, while the exploratory component enables the identification of emerging patterns and research gaps (Yin, 2016).

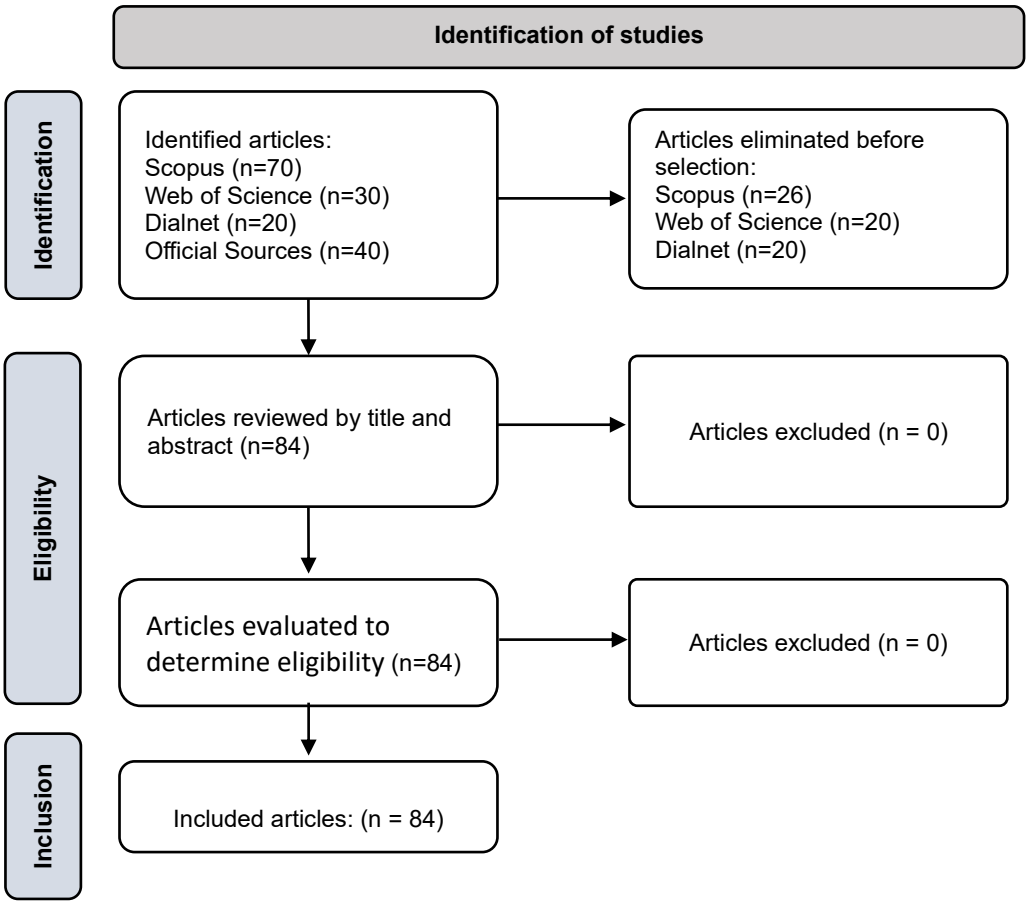
The target population consists of academic publications and institutional documents related to the topic. The sample includes six selected tourist cities chosen through purposive sampling based on criteria of high relevance in tourism rankings, documentary evidence of city branding strategies grounded in culinary culture, and the availability of published information from 2020 to 2025.

Regarding inclusion criteria, peer-reviewed academic studies, articles from indexed scientific journals, institutional and international reports, and publications in English or Spanish that explicitly included gastronomy as a strategic factor in city branding were considered.

In terms of exclusion criteria, articles focused solely on gastronomy without relation to city branding, as well as those referring to cities lacking sufficient or relevant documentation on city branding strategies, were discarded.

For the preparation of this article, a thorough analysis of approximately 250 articles and official documents, both national and international, was conducted. From these, a sample of 84 publications that met the established selection criteria and were deemed relevant for the research objectives was selected. It is important to note that sources not derived from reliable databases were excluded to ensure the quality, validity, and rigor of the information used in this study.

**Table 1: PRISMA flow diagram**




## Results

The following section explores the relationship between culinary culture and city branding with the aim of identifying the cultural and social factors that influence the perception of local gastronomy as an enhancer of city branding, as well as the strategies implemented to achieve this in the contexts of the most visited tourist cities in Asia.

### 3.1 Bangkok

Various studies highlight the fundamental role of street food as an essential component of Bangkok's cultural identity, reflecting the authenticity of local life (Thai Street Food, 2020; Preaersi & Meekung, 2022). This emotional connection with typical food reinforces residents' ties to their gastronomic heritage (Intuluck, 2023), consolidating an urban identity based on everyday practices and traditional eating habits.

Gastronomy, particularly in its street form, acts as a symbolic cohesion axis, allowing Bangkok to establish itself as a city with its own cultural identity in the context of global tourism (Cheng & Jiang, 2024; Piboonrungroj et al., 2023). Visitor loyalty also constitutes an indicator of this consolidation, as they value the richness, authenticity, and accessibility of its culinary offerings. These factors reinforce the role of gastronomy not only as a tourist product but also as a symbolic manifestation of urban collective identity (Intuluck, 2023).

Regarding city branding development, the vibrant street food scene positions Bangkok as a globally recognized, accessible, and flavorful destination, with strong tourist attraction based on its culinary offerings (Thai Street Food, 2020; Preaersi & Meekung, 2022). The city is perceived as a safe and culinarily attractive destination, especially in the context of economic recovery (Piboonrungroj et al., 2023). The reaffirmation of its tourist identity is strengthened through experiential culinary tourism strategies, accessibility of offerings, and culinary authenticity. These strategies not only attract visitors but also shape travel intent and promote sustainable business practices (Preaersi & Meekung, 2022; Cheng & Jiang, 2024).

**Table 2: Bangkok: strategy, author, evidence**

| Strategy | Authors/Sources (Year) | Key Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Zoning and curation of "food districts" (Yaowarat/Chinatown, Khaosan, Ratchawat, Banthat Thong-Samyan) | Damrhrung, P. (2025) | Cases of local place branding in Banthat Thong-Samyan with curated offerings and commercial activation; enhancement of signage and routes to consolidate the "food corridor." |
| Health standardization and professionalization | Phukamchanoad, P. (2025) | Models of designated zones and hygiene requirements as responses to congestion and safety; a prelude to training schemes/visible regulations for tourists. |
| Identity narratives and everyday heritage (foodscape/OUH) | Wattananawyoo (2024) | Street food as "foodscape" and "Ordinary Urban Heritage" in the historic center (Rattanakosin) legitimizes protection and enhancement in city branding plans. |
| Digital strategy and social media-first (UGC, maps, QR) | Rewtrakunphaiboon (2022) | The digital dissemination of street food tour events raises tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention. |
| Experience-price-quality management (value-for-money) | Jeaheng et al. (2023) | Perceived quality + reasonable price + involvement → repurchase intention; anchors the promise of "high quality at an affordable price." |
| Culinary events and programming | Suwitawat et al. (2025) | Street food festivals as a support for the pro-sustainable street food narrative. |
| Multi-actor governance of food streets | Phukamchanoad (2025) | Framework of actor ecosystems (BMA, vendors, tourists) and the implications for multi-actor governance. |
| Creativity and cultural economy (creative city, micro-design) | Chulalongkorn Univ. (2024) | Place branding focused on value and sustainability; the case of Banthat Thong-Samyan is used as a demonstration of "place branding" applied to street food. |
| Sustainability and regional cooperation | UNESCO Bangkok (2024–2025) – seminars "Sustainable Gastronomical Experience..." | Regional workshops/seminars in Bangkok on sustainable gastronomy, value chains, and culinary tourism; adding international legitimacy to the brand narrative. |
| Anchoring in culinary tourism policies (macro impact) | Piboonrunroj et al. (2023) | Input-output analysis of the economic impact of culinary tourism in Thailand (a guideline for integrating gastronomy into the post-pandemic strategy). |

### 3.2 Singapore

Hawker culture reflects the ethnic diversity and cultural heritage of Singapore, serving as the foundation of its national identity (Kim et al., 2022). Its authenticity, recognized by UNESCO, reinforces the sense of belonging and urban cultural projection (National Library Singapore [NLS], 2023). The blend of culinary traditions, the presence of haute cuisine (World Gourmet Summit/IndoConnect Singapore, 2023), gastronomic digitalization (Singapore Tourism Board, 2023), and its connection to agricultural production (Singapore Food Agency, 2023) make hawker gastronomy a living, diverse, and inclusive symbol.

Singapore projects authenticity and modernity through hawker culture, which it promotes through international events such as the World Gourmet Summit, official digital promotion strategies, and sustainable tourism policies (IndoConnect Singapore, 2023; Singapore Tourism Board, 2023; Leu et al., 2023; Singapore Food Agency, 2023). These actions consolidate its city brand as a global gastronomic hub.

**Table 3: Singapore: strategy, author, evidence**

| Strategy | Authors | Key Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Heritage as a branding pillar (UNESCO) | UNESCO ICH (2020); National Heritage Board (2020) | The inscription of hawker culture on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage transforms hawker centers into "community dining spaces" and legitimizes their use for nation branding and gastrodiplomacy. |
| Curated public infrastructure (hawker centers) | NEA – Hawker Centres Group; URA Draft Master Plan (2023–2024) | Planned and renovated hawker centers (HUP 2.0) provide climate comfort, waste management, and accessibility, transforming street food into an orderly and recognizable urban product of the Singapore brand. |
| Professionalization and generational turnover | NEA/SSG – Hawkers' Development Programme (2024) | The HDP combines training, mentoring, and apprenticeships, ensuring consistent quality and guaranteeing generational turnover among vendors. By 2024, hundreds of trained apprentices were already reported. |
| Governance and quality regulation | LegCo Research Brief (2014, updated 2025) | Licensing, hygiene, rents, and operating models consolidate a governance system that balances affordability and authenticity. The |

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| | | "social enterprise hawker centers" model was revised after criticism, maintaining cultural legitimacy. |
| Signage of excellence and narrative of "accessible high quality" | Food & Wine (2016–2021); Condé Nast Traveler (2018) | The acquisition of Michelin stars (e.g., Hawker Chan) and presence in Bib Gourmand reinforces the narrative of "fine dining at popular prices," although some cases lost their star afterward. |
| Experiential and digital marketing | Kim (2022); Chua (2024) | Studies show that the country image mediated by gastronomy and hawker culture influences tourists' choices and loyalty; enhanced by UGC, food guides, and digital platforms. |
| Hawker centers as civic spaces | Radomskaya (2022) | Hawker centers function as spaces for multicultural interaction, fostering social cohesion and reinforcing the narrative of a safe and livable city. |
| Strategic planning and review committees | Hawker Centre Review Committee (2012) | Official reports establish roadmaps for productivity, vibrancy, and labor sustainability, aligning urban policy with branding. |
| Affordability as a brand attribute | NEA (2023–2025) | The state maintains affordable prices without compromising hygiene standards, positioning hawker culture as a symbol of "good living at a fair price." |
| Hawker culture in tourism | Henderson | Empirical evidence shows that hawker centers are tourist attractions in themselves, integrated into Singapore's culinary destination proposal. |

### 3.3 Istanbul

Istanbul's cuisine, featuring iconic dishes such as kebab and meze, reflects a distinctive cultural and historical identity (Okumus & Cetin, 2018). The culinary experiences offered by the city enhance the authenticity perceived by tourists (Seyitoğlu, 2021). Its Ottoman heritage, cooking classes, culinary cruises, and festivals constitute vibrant expressions of tradition, hospitality, and festive character, establishing cuisine as a key factor in tourist intent (Seyitoğlu, 2021; Solunoğlu & Örgün, 2024). Istanbul projects itself globally through culinary marketing strategies, gastronomic education, thematic cruises, and festivals, distinguishing itself as Turkey's gastronomic capital (Okumus & Cetin, 2018; Seyitoğlu, 2021; Solunoğlu & Örgün, 2024).

**Table 4: Istanbul: strategy, author, evidence**

| Strategy | Authors | Key Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Design of street food routes | Yarmacı Güvenç, Evren & Köz (2025) | The article "Starting Route: Istanbul Street Food" proposes **official street food routes** with maps, signage, and connectivity between neighborhoods to structure a clear and accessible tourist product. |
| Use of nostalgia as a marketing element | Duran Cankül & Çıtak (2025) | The study demonstrates that **gastronomic nostalgia** (flavors, recipes, historic stalls) mediates between attributes of street food and **tourists' attitudes/intents**, suggesting its integration into the city branding narrative. |
| Valuation of authenticity | Dursun (2024) | Dursun conceptualizes the **authenticity of street food** as a competitive advantage in culinary tourism. Kurt shows that authenticity, moderated by **hedonism**, explains consumption intention among independent travelers. |
| Promotion of immersive experiences/local tours | Karagöz, Demircifci & Erkmen (2022) | The study on local restaurants in Istanbul shows that **immersive culinary experiences** impact tourist satisfaction, which can be translated to **street food tours** as a city brand asset. |
| Intangible cultural heritage/local history | Das (2024) | The analysis of **nostalgia linked to street food** and perceptions during COVID-19 highlights how culinary memories and food heritage influence destination choice, applicable to Istanbul to reinforce its cultural identity. |

### 3.4 Kuala Lumpur

Street food and traditional Malay cuisine reinforce Kuala Lumpur's cultural and urban identity, offering authentic experiences that generate emotional connections with tourists (Omar et al., 2022). Authenticity, the projection of cuisine as a form of soft power (Hussin, 2018), and its role as an emerging tourist motivation (Zainol et al., 2024) position gastronomy as a living symbol of local identity and culture.

Promotional campaigns centered on gastronomy strengthen the city brand and stimulate tourism (Tunku et al., 2021). Street food is used as a differentiating element, while local gastronomy enhances international visibility (Hussin, 2018).

**Table 5: Kuala Lumpur: strategy, author, evidence**

| Strategy | Authors/References | Key Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Curation of food corridors (Jalan Alor, Bukit Bintang) | Ab Karim et al. (2021) | A study with international tourists in **Jalan Alor** shows that attributes of street food (taste, authenticity, price, safety) impact visit intention and recommendations, reinforcing the need to curate and maintain iconic corridors. |
| Signage of excellence (MICHELIN Guide) | Michelin Guide (2022, 2023) | The arrival of the **MICHELIN Guide** in Kuala Lumpur introduced stars and Bib Gourmand, legitimizing local culinary diversity as "high-quality accessible," strengthening international branding. |
| Digitalization and eWOM | Mohd Sanip et al. (2024/2025) | Highlights the importance of **digital platforms and online reviews** to protect and disseminate culinary products; proposes strengthening the digital presence of SMEs and traditional kitchens. |
| Management and formalization of hawkers | Rahim (2025) | Discusses the need for permits/licenses and alternative spaces for vendors, integrating informality into urban governance. This reinforces authenticity without sacrificing order. |
| Culinary tourism packages and routes | Mohd Sanip (2021) | Recommends designing **multi-ethnic culinary packages** (markets, Little India, Kampung Baru, Jalan Alor) as a tourist product, linking culinary motivation with destination loyalty. |
| Multi-ethnic culinary heritage narrative | Sharif (2024) | Proposes using Malaysian culinary diversity (Malay, Chinese, Indian, Nyonya) as the **city branding axis**, reinforcing social cohesion and cultural-tourist appeal. |
| Alignment with sustainability and SDG 2040 | DBKL (2025) | Urban plans integrate gastronomy with sustainability goals (waste management, night economy, micro-enterprises), adding legitimacy to the "sustainable culinary city" narrative. |

### 3.5 Hong Kong

Culinary diversity reinforces the urban identity of Hong Kong. The culinary experience connects tourists with local culture and enhances its appeal as a multicultural destination (Lee et al., 2021; Zrnić, 2024). Michelin-starred restaurants balance authenticity with global standards (Michelin-Rated Restaurants, 2023), while street food expresses everyday life and urban youth (Lee et al., 2019). The variety of flavors reflects the city's complex social identity (Lee et al., 2021). Hong Kong employs culinary marketing strategies, haute cuisine, and street food to position itself as a competitive destination in Asia (Dursun, 2024; Lee, 2025; Michelin-Rated Restaurants, 2023). Public-private collaboration and adaptation to tourist preferences strengthen its city brand (Lee et al., 2021).

**Table 6: Hong Kong: strategy, author, evidence**

| Strategy | Authors/References | Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Reevaluation of cooked-food centres as everyday heritage | Radomskaya & Bhati (2022) – *Urban Planning* | Cooked-food centres function as **civic spaces for social mixing** and cohesion, reinforcing Hong Kong's authenticity and quality of life narrative. |
| Governance and regulation of hawkers | FEHD Annual Report (2022, 2023); LegCo Research Brief (2025) | Fixed/mobile licenses, operating hours, and community bazaars are regulated; seeks a balance between **urban order and cultural identity**. |
| Selective openings/new pitches | LegCo Paper (2023); Gov. Press Release (2024) | Hong Kong reopened processes for allocating fixed stalls and considers hawkers "tourist attractions everywhere," while maintaining limits on new dai pai dong. |
| Heritage, nostalgia, and foodscapes | Cheung, S.C.H. (2022) Hong Kong Foodways; They (2024) *China Perspectives* | Emphasizes **culinary nostalgia and urban memories** as resources for identity and storytelling. |
| Tourism and street food experiences | Lee et al. (2021) – Tourist Studies (Gen Z perceptions); Kwek et al. (2020) – *Tourism Research* | Authenticity, e-WOM, and local immersion determine the attraction of hawkers as tourist experiences. |
| Night markets and coastal areas as urban showcases | Chan (2020) – *City, Culture and Society* | The revitalization of iconic spaces (e.g., TST waterfront) can include street food as part of the city branding strategy. |

### 3.5 Seoul

Seoul's gastronomy enriches the tourist experience by integrating tradition and innovation, reinforcing the perceived authenticity of the city (Lee et al., 2020). Kimchi, as a national emblem, enhances its cultural identity and symbolizes Korean culture globally (Nihayati et al., 2022).

Social media energizes culinary consumption among young people (Kim et al., 2024), while food associated with wellness reinforces its healthy and everyday identity (Choi & Lee, 2024). Seoul promotes kimchi as a tool for gastrodiplomacy (Nihayati et al., 2022), leverages digital platforms to project itself as a connected and modern city (Kim et al., 2024), and links gastronomy with quality of life and cultural tourism (Lee et al., 2020; Choi & Lee, 2024).

**Table 7: Seoul: strategy, author, evidence**

| Strategy | Authors | Evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Traditional night markets & food festivals | SMG (2024) | Events were organized in 72 traditional markets, combining gastronomy and entertainment to attract young tourists and reinforce the "K-Food" brand. |
| Seoul Flavor Week | VisitSeoul (2023); Korea Herald (2023) | Annual festival that selects restaurants and markets, integrating **street food into cultural and tourist programming**. |
| Night markets as an urban product (Bamdokkaebi → Hangang Moonlight Market) | VisitSeoul (2023); Sehee in the World (2023) | Markets in riverside parks (Yeouido, Banpo) turn street food into an **iconic urban showcase** for tourists and residents. |
| Pojangmacha / Social Gastronomy | Ku (2021) | Food carts (pojangmacha) function as spaces for sociability and everyday authenticity, essential to Seoul's narrative. |
| Authenticity and culinary motivation | Chang (2021) | Over 80% of culinary tourists concentrate in Seoul; recommends diversifying culinary experiences and leveraging street food as a destination product. |
| Evaluation with digital data (eWOM) | Sin & Ryu (2024) – *Seoul ITS Conference* | Proposes using online reviews to measure the performance of traditional market projects, applicable to street food management. |
| Alignment with city branding (SEOUL MY SOUL) | SMG (2023) | The new slogan incorporates **K-culture and K-food** as soft power, with street food as a central attraction. |

## Discussion

In the analyzed Asian tourist cities, there is evident cross-cutting relevance of culinary culture in tourism dynamics and city branding development. In all cases, local gastronomy acts as a fundamental identity pillar and as a differentiating attraction of the destination. Typical cuisine symbolizes the cultural identity of the city and allows visitors to connect authentically with local life. In fact, the experience of "eating like a local" provides a deep cultural immersion that enriches and strengthens the city brand.

A common finding among the studied cities is the importance of culinary authenticity as an added value of the city brand. All cities emphasize fidelity to their culinary traditions as a means to offer genuine experiences. These experiences allow visitors to feel part of the environment, fostering emotional connections with the destination. Authenticity thus emerges as a key differentiation attribute, as the presence of indigenous dishes, techniques, and culinary rituals reinforces each city's uniqueness in the global tourism landscape.

Collectively, the six cities—Bangkok, Singapore, Istanbul, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Seoul—share several common elements in using street food as a focal point of city branding. All recognize street food as a living heritage and identity resource, associating it with authenticity, cultural memory, and social cohesion. They also highlight the need to structure the tourist experience through routes, culinary corridors, or festivals that transform scattered practices into recognizable and promotable products. Another cross-cutting aspect is the professionalization and balanced regulation of the sector, which seeks to combine hygiene standards, licensing, and multi-actor governance with the preservation of the spontaneity and popular character of culinary offerings.

Similarly, digitalization (mobile apps, reviews, user-generated content, and interactive guides) and excellence signaling—such as Michelin distinctions in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur—emerge as common tools to make street food offerings visible, validate, and legitimize them in international markets.

The differences between the cities mainly lie in their institutional management and heritage models. Singapore leads with a model of planned hawker centers recognized by UNESCO, while Bangkok combines flexible regulation with spontaneous festivals and corridors. Istanbul, on the other hand, is beginning to explore official routes and capitalize on culinary nostalgia as a marketing resource, in contrast to Kuala Lumpur, which focuses on international validation through Michelin recognitions and the promotion of a multi-ethnic narrative.

Hong Kong distinguishes itself by integrating its cooked-food centers as civic infrastructure and by a hybrid governance that balances selective openings with strict limits on the expansion of new stalls. Finally, Seoul leverages its nightlife economy, large-scale culinary festivals, and its "Seoul My Soul" campaign, linking K-food with soft power strategies.

In summary, while all cities converge in considering street food as a strategic branding resource, each adapts its strategies to its own institutional framework, cultural narratives, and international positioning objectives.

Culinary culture thus consolidates as a central component of identity and urban promotion policies in the context of contemporary global tourism.

## Conclusions

The comparative analysis shows that street food has become a central asset in the construction and strengthening of the city brand in urban contexts as diverse as Bangkok, Singapore, Istanbul, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Each of these cities adapts its culinary management and promotion strategies to its own institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic realities, demonstrating that there is no single model but multiple ways to integrate popular gastronomy into identity and tourism development policies.

Singapore represents the most institutionalized case, with a system of hawker centers recognized by UNESCO and managed under state planning that combines tradition and modernity. In contrast, Istanbul and Bangkok are advancing in the formalization of culinary routes and in valuing nostalgia and authenticity as differentiating resources. Kuala Lumpur focuses on international certification—through the Michelin Guide—and the promotion of a multi-ethnic narrative, while Hong Kong stands out for preserving its cooked-food centers and applying selective regulation that balances control and cultural continuity. Seoul, for its part, enhances its brand through festivals, night markets, and the integration of gastronomy into its soft power strategy, articulated around K-culture and its global positioning.

The experiences analyzed reveal that the key to sustainable and distinctive city brand development lies in balancing regulation, authenticity, and promotion. Integrating street food into urban policies, digital marketing, and heritage strategies allows cities to position themselves as global destinations where popular gastronomy not only constitutes an attractive tourist offering but also a significant, accessible cultural experience that represents collective identity.

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