

Subrata

by [Armando Simón](#) (March 2025)



Half-side of a Beef (Chaïm Soutine, 1922-23)

No question about it, being a taxi driver in Bandung is not

conducive to making a good living. Between the other taxis, all the countless motorcycles, and the (cheaper!) ramshackle public transports which are little better than sardine cans on wheels, it is hard to find a fare. And the traffic jams! Aduh, aduh!

One such taxi driver, Subrata, had a certain route that he patrolled looking for customers and it yielded a fair share of passengers from time to time: it was from the hospital to a cluster of stores several streets away. Now, in other countries, passengers hail for a taxi, but throughout Indonesia taxi drivers hail for passengers from the stream of pedestrians.

"Taxi?" Subrata asked the woman with a child. She ignored him.

"Taxi?" he asked the man in a suit. He ignored Subrata.

"Taxi?" he asked an old man and was likewise ignored.

"Taxi?" he asked a man with a large, thick moustache, carrying several packages.

Good luck! The man motioned to him, and Subrata instantly stopped. After he boarded, the passenger told him the address to take him to. This took him away from his usual route, but that was all right. It turned out to be a street intersection. The passenger paid up, got out, and was soon swallowed up by the crowd. Subrata drove back to his usual route, from time to time hailing a pedestrian.

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?" This time looking over his shoulder, at a pedestrian that he nearly passed, he spotted something on the back floor of the seat. He parked and picked it up. It was a plastic bag and looking inside he saw that there was a piece of meat, about a kilo's worth. Apparently, his previous passenger had stopped by the market, and picked up something for his dinner, later on that day.

What to do? Subrata did not have the moustache-man's home address, he had dropped his passenger at an intersection. He himself could not take the meat home to eat since he lived in a "closet" that barely had enough room for his bed and he usually ate at a warung nasi padang. And to throw it away was unthinkable; there were too many people in need of a good meal. He then hit on the idea of, once he came home, giving it to a neighbor of his who was in dire straits. Who knows when it had been the last time that the family had had something substantial to eat? This would be a real feast for them, for a change!

The problem was that Subrata did not know whether the meat was beef or pork and his neighbors were Moslem. They were not strict Moslems, to be sure, but still... Anyway, if they refused it, which Subrata doubted, maybe they could pass it on to someone who was not so squeamish.

He looked at it. He did not think that it was pork. It was too red and he knew that pork tended to be a deep pink. He put the bag on the floor next to him, glad that he would be doing someone a good turn. Then he resumed his routine.

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

Much later, when he returned home, he went over to his neighbor's to give them the present. He found them at home, listening to one of the melodramatic stories on the radio. They were delighted at the bounty, particularly since they recognized the meat to be beef. Of course, they invited Subrata to have dinner with them and watch a show on TV.

Next day, he was back at work, the same old routine.

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

"Taxi?"

That morning was particularly fruitful, with three passengers. And just in the morning!

His fourth passenger was a surprise. It was the same man with the thick moustache as from the previous day, and it was obvious that he recognized Subrata, or his taxi, because he called out for him to stop.

As he walked toward the cab, Subrata felt a momentary panic, then he calmed down. Well! He would simply tell the truth, what had happened. It was not his fault.

"Excuse me, I don't know if you remember me, but I took your taxi yesterday."

"Yes, I remember you."

"Did I leave a bag in your cab?"

"Yes, but sir, you have to understand that I did not know who you were, or where you lived, so there was no way that I could return it to you. I came back looking for you."

"So, what happened to it?"

“Well, I gave it to my neighbor and his wife cooked it last night for our dinner. It’s not often that we have a decent meal. I’m really sorry, but I didn’t find you.”

The man just stared at Subrata in shock. Subrata thought that he was being melodramatic, but then maybe the meat had been intended for a party, and the poor fellow did not have the money for a replacement. The thing is: the passenger’s face seemed to turn green.

“But, but, you, you don’t understand. That, that wasn’t my dinner. The, the, the doctor gave it to me yesterday as a souvenir. My father had surgery. That was a cancer that they removed from his body. Your friends—”

The color completely drained from Subrata’s face, and he fainted.

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Armando Simón is the author of *Indonesians: [Tales](#) from Parahiyangan*, from where this story originates.

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