



**Islam Nusantara: Jurnal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture**, 07 (1), 2026: 72-94  
E-ISSN: 2722-8975  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v7i1>

## **From Tiao Wan (跳丸) to Bakwan (肉丸) and Bakso (肉酥): The Culinary History of Chaoshan Peranakan Cuisine in Java**

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**Article history:** Received: August 07, 2025, Accepted: November 29, 2025, Published: January 1, 2026

### **Abstract**

The evolution of bakso, especially the variant known as *bakwan* in Malang, illustrates the complex entanglements of Chinese culinary traditions and Javanese food culture. Historical records, early Chinese agricultural treatises, colonial accounts, and contemporary media provide a foundation for tracing meatball-making techniques and migration routes of Hakka and Teochew communities who helped shape Java's culinary landscape. Autoethnographic reflections enrich this historical reconstruction by capturing sensory memories, family traditions, and field observations from the 1980s onward. Changes in form, flavor, preparation, and commercialization highlight ongoing negotiations between halal practice, Peranakan heritage, and local taste. The argument frames bakso/bakwan as a cultural node where diaspora history, personal memory, and transregional culinary networks converge.

### **Keywords:**

Chinese Diaspora, Chinese- Javanese, Meatball, Culinary Historiography, Culinary Networks

### **Abstrak**

Evolusi bakso, khususnya *bakwan* Malang, menunjukkan keterjalanan tradisi kuliner Tionghoa dan budaya pangan Jawa. Catatan sejarah, karya agrikultural Tiongkok awal, arsip kolonial, dan media kontemporer menelusuri teknik pembuatan bakso dan rute migrasi komunitas Hakka serta Teochew yang membentuk lanskap kuliner



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Jawa. Refleksi autoetnografis memperkaya rekonstruksi ini melalui memori sensorik, tradisi keluarga, dan observasi lapangan sejak 1980-an. Perubahan bentuk, rasa, cara penyajian, dan komersialisasi menegaskan negosiasi berkelanjutan antara praktik halal, warisan Peranakan, dan selera lokal. Bakso/bakwan diposisikan sebagai simpul budaya di mana sejarah diaspora, memori personal, dan jaringan kuliner lintas kawasan saling berkelindan.

### **Kata Kunci:**

Bakso, Diaspora Tionghoa, Historiografi Kuliner, Jaringan Kuliner Tionghoa-Jawa

### **Introduction**

The dishes known as *bakso* and *bakwan*—two broth-based culinary staples deeply embedded in Indonesian food culture—embody a long and intricate history that remains underexplored in academic discourse. In daily life, Indonesians recognize these comforting meatball soups served with noodles, tofu, and dumplings. Yet beneath their widespread popularity lies a narrative of migration, adaptation, and cultural transformation that has shaped their evolution across centuries.

This article begins by examining the semantic and cultural distinctions between *bakso* and *bakwan*, particularly in Malang and Central Java. In Malang, *bakwan* denotes a local variant of meatball soup, while *bakso* commonly refers to the “Solo-style” or Central Javanese version. These regional and linguistic nuances—reflected in online discussions and ethnographic observations (Ape, 2022; Fuji, 2022; Marie, 2019; Pangestuti, 2023; Sri, 2022; Wijaya, 2021)—prompt key questions: Where do these terms originate? How did this Chinese-influenced culinary tradition become deeply localized within Javanese culture?

Through a historiographical and autoethnographic lens, this article traces the journey of *bakso* and *bakwan* from classical Chinese texts such as the *Qímín Yàoshù* to Peranakan kitchens in the Dutch East Indies, and finally to contemporary street food stalls—revealing how these dishes encapsulate Indonesia’s enduring processes of hybridity, halal adaptation, and cultural localization.

Throughout my research on the historical origins of *bakso* and its introduction to Indonesia, I have found a notable absence of rigorous academic engagement with the topic. Most writings on the history of *bakso* merely echo popular understandings widely circulated among the Indonesian public—that *bakso* originated from China. Even Denys Lombard, whose seminal works explore Chinese influences on Javanese culture, only briefly mentions *bakso*

as one of many culinary terms borrowed from Chinese (Lombard, 1996, p. 321). The etymology of bakso, even in recent studies, continues to be interpreted simplistically through Hokkien linguistic roots, where bak-so is generally translated as “ground meat,” or more specifically, “minced meat.” In some cases, the syllables bak and so are interpreted respectively as “pork” and “soup” (Rahmawati, 2016; Shintia, 2012), though this translation misrepresents the actual etymology of the term.

For instance, Arsyantie et al. (2019) mistakenly define bak as “pork” and so as “food,” overlooking that bak in Hokkien is a neutral term denoting the flesh of any four-legged animal, not exclusively pork. Moreover, pork alone poses technical challenges in forming meatballs due to its high fat content, which prevents the meat fibers from binding tightly. This difficulty is addressed in the oldest known recipe for meatballs, found in the sixth-century Chinese agricultural text *Qímín Yàoshù* (齐民要术), where pork is mixed with other meats to achieve a cohesive texture. Interestingly, in Chaoshan—the region believed to have inspired the dish—the preferred version is made entirely from beef rather than pork.

A review of existing literature on Google Scholar shows that studies on bakso have largely focused on food safety (Istiqomah et al., 2016), nutrition (Putri et al., 2023), business (Mediaswanti et al., 2024), economics (Ananda et al., 2025), marketing (Tatasari et al., 2025), and tourism (Rukayah & Saadiah, 2020), with minimal historical analysis. This article thus seeks to fill that gap by tracing the etymology, migration history, and early recipes that reveal bakso’s transformation from ancient Chinese kitchens to a defining symbol of Indonesian culinary identity.

### Methods

My article employs a culinary historiographic (Clafin & Scholliers, 2013; Driver, 2009; Pilcher, 2017; Pranoto, 2010) approach combined with autoethnography (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017; Zainurin, 2021) — two methods that allow the author to weave together historical readings of food traces with personal experience as both subject and narrator. Culinary historiography here is understood as an effort to trace the dynamics of food as a cultural artifact, through an examination of classical Chinese texts, colonial literature, digital archives, and a range of popular narratives from contemporary digital media. In practice, I draw on primary sources such as the *Qímín Yàoshù*—a sixth-century Chinese culinary encyclopedia—to unpack early techniques of meatball-making, as well as secondary sources including scholarly journals, news reports from China and Indonesia, and online articles that offer fresh perspectives on the migration histories of Chinese ethnic groups such as the Hakka and Teochew, who I contended brought this *mie-*

*bakso* traditions to the Indonesian archipelago.

Autoethnography provides space for the author to reflect on childhood experiences as a descendant of families from Malang and Kudus—two regions familiar with distinct styles of *bakso*: *bakwan* from Malang and the Solo-style *bakso*. Through sensory memory and field observation of *bakso* vendors from the 1980s to the present, complemented by personal notes and visual documentation, the author attempts to trace changes in form, flavor, and marketing strategies that have shaped this culinary tradition. This combination of historical analysis and ethnographic reflection produces a narrative of *bakso/bakwan* as a site of articulation between Chinese and Javanese cultures, between halal practices and Peranakan culinary heritage, and between personal memory and global history—issues that will be discussed in the following subsections.

## **Result and Discussion**

### ***The Chinese Diaspora in the Archipelago***

The presence of Chinese communities in the Indonesian archipelago stretches back over a millennium. Early records from the Tang Dynasty in the 7th century note interactions between Buddhist monks and merchants from southern China—such as I Tsing—and maritime kingdoms like Srivijaya and Kahuripan in Java (Sen, 2003). These early visitors, arriving as sailors, craftsmen, and traders, gradually settled along Sumatra’s and Java’s coastal regions. In Ma Huan’s account of Zheng He’s voyages, these settlers were referred to as “Tang people” (唐人) (Ma et al., 1970, p. 93).

Larger waves of migration followed during the Song (10th–13th centuries), Yuan (13th–14th centuries), and Ming (14th–17th centuries) dynasties. Traders from Fujian and Guangdong sailed to the archipelago to exchange silk and ceramics for spices, sandalwood, and gold—luxuries highly prized in Chinese markets (Herman Tan, 2022; Lombard, 1996). Strategic ports such as Palembang and Sunda Kelapa became key nodes in this thriving maritime network.

Over time, many merchants settled permanently, marrying local women and forming Peranakan communities that blended Chinese and local cultural practices. A pivotal moment in this shared history came with Admiral Zheng He’s naval expeditions (1405–1433), which expanded Chinese maritime influence and deepened Southeast Asian trade and cultural relations.



**Figure 1** Reproduction of the Map of Chinese Ethnic Origins in China – Source: Herman Tan [www.tionghoa.info](http://www.tionghoa.info)

From the 17th century to the early 20th century, Chinese migration to Southeast Asia increased markedly, coinciding with the opening of global trade routes and the demand for labor in colonial territories, including the Dutch East Indies. Migrants arrived from diverse social and ethnolinguistic backgrounds, including Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochew, Hokchia, and Hainanese (Figure 1). Each group brought unique skills, cultural practices, and social networks, often settling in areas aligned with their economic opportunities (Herman Tan, 2022).

The Hokkien were among the earliest migrants, widely dispersed across port cities such as Batavia (Jakarta), Surabaya, Medan, Singapore, and Penang. Dominating trade networks, they contributed significantly to urban cultural life through language, cuisine, and social structures. The Hakka, from southern China's interior regions, primarily settled in mining and agricultural zones such as Bangka, West Kalimantan, and Riau. Renowned for resilience and work ethic, they engaged in land cultivation, tin mining, and rubber plantations.

The Teochew, originating from Chaoshan in eastern Guangdong, played a central role in agriculture, particularly pepper and gambier plantations across the Malay Peninsula, Johor, Sumatra, and Kalimantan. However, since the 1970s, younger generations increasingly favor Mandarin or Hokkien over Teochew (Herman Tan, 2022). Cantonese communities, although smaller,

settled in urban centers as metalworkers, mechanics, or workshop owners, bringing technical expertise to service and small-scale manufacturing sectors.

Other groups also contributed. Hokchia and Hokchiu migrants from Fuzhou initially arrived as fishermen and later moved into agriculture in East Malaysia and Kalimantan. The Hainanese became notable in culinary culture, particularly kopitiam and Hainanese chicken rice, while also working in the service sector. Henghua (Puxian) migrants were active as craftsmen, drivers, and construction laborers. Smaller minorities such as the Wu, San Jiang (Mandarin), and Kwongsai maintained strong social networks through hometown associations in Penang, Sabah, and other port cities (Herman Tan, 2022).

Dutch colonial policies classified Chinese communities as "Vreemde Oosterlingen" (Foreign Orientals), segregating them from indigenous populations and Europeans. While these policies restricted political rights, they granted access to certain economic and educational sectors, inadvertently fostering a relatively autonomous Chinese middle class (Lombard, 1996).

In the 20th century, particularly after Indonesian independence, state policies affected Chinese identity. During the New Order era, forced assimilation prohibited Mandarin, closed Chinese schools and media, and mandated Indonesianized names. Since the 1998 Reformasi period, many restrictions have eased, allowing Chinese Indonesians to openly express cultural identity through celebrations like Lunar New Year (Imlek) and Cap Go Meh, as well as establishing Chinese-language schools and cultural institutions (Juliastutik, 2010).

Today, Chinese Indonesians number between 2.8 and 11 million, spread across nearly all regions of the country, participating in trade, finance, diplomacy, and popular culture. Chinese languages influenced Indonesian vocabulary, with words like *gua*, *lu*, *cengli*, and *kepo* deriving from Hokkien and Hakka (Lombard, 1996). Culinary contributions are evident in dishes such as *bakso*, *soto*, *capcay*, and traditional Javanese cakes (*jajan pasar*) (Bromokusumo, 2013; Herman Tan, 2022; Lombard, 1996; Rahmawati, 2016).

Yet, the original forms of foods and beverages introduced by early Chinese traders and farmers remain uncertain. Only in the 19th century, through the writings of Peranakan *nyai* and European *nyonya*, do we begin to see categorizations of Javanese, European, and Arab cuisines in the Dutch East Indies.

However, it is certain that since the 17th century, major ports and cities in the archipelago had already seen the presence of Chinese street food vendors, as illustrated in the 17th-century market scene sketch of Batavia by Cornelis de Bruyn shown below (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2** A sketch of the Chinese market in Batavia by Wouter Schouten and Cornelis de Bruyn, ca. 1660–1664. Among the rows of mobile food and beverage vendors stationed along the main thoroughfares of Batavia’s Chinese market, one might imagine the presence of sellers offering bakmi, soto, bubur, and other dishes. Note the distinctive style of their shoulder-pole carts (pikulan), a form that would later be adopted and modified by local street vendors across Java. It is also highly probable that these Chinese hawkers relied on flavor-enhancing condiments, most notably soy sauce (kecap), which was essential in almost every Chinese culinary preparation.

This collage draws from two works held in the Rijksmuseum: RP-T-1964- 364-4(R) & RP-T-1964-354(R).

### ***Rolling Meatball from China to the Nusantara***

Where did the culinary tradition of mobile *bakso* originate? To investigate, let us examine recent online media texts from 2023 by focusing on two interesting statements below, which will serve as a guide for the historical discussion of *bakso*. As one blogger, Demolemooin, writes:

The origins of *bakso* can be traced back to China, where similar dishes known as *bawan* or *baozi* have been familiar for centuries. These dishes were later introduced to Indonesia by Chinese immigrants in the 18th century. In this new context, *bakso* underwent significant evolution and eventually became one of the country's most iconic culinary staples.

Initially, *bakso* was known as a simple dish consisting of meatballs cooked in a broth. However, over time, it transformed into various forms,

including *bakso goreng* (fried meatballs), *bakso kuah* (meatballs in broth), and *bakso pangsit* (meatballs served with wontons). These innovations reflect the creativity of Indonesian cooks in adapting and modifying the dish to suit local tastes (demolemooin, 2023).

In examining Demolemooin’s first statement, there is no clear written evidence indicating that bakwan or 包子 (baozi) existed in the Indonesian archipelago—particularly in Java—during the 18th century. While it is not entirely inaccurate to claim that meatballs in broth have been known in China for centuries, the antiquity of such dishes is better documented through Chinese historical and culinary sources. As noted by Jae W. Park in *Surimi and Surimi Seafood* (2013), meatball-like dishes were recorded in the Chinese medical compendium *Sheng Ji Zong Lu* (聖濟總錄). However, these “meatballs” were not made from beef, pork, or poultry, but from fish paste (surimi), known as hiwan (魚圓/魚丸). Park explains that this fish-based meatball is believed to have originated during the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE) under Emperor Qin Shi Huang, with the earliest written recipe for fish balls appearing in the Song Dynasty (1111–1118 CE).

Demolemooin’s claim that baozi was an early term for bakso also seems linguistically and culturally inaccurate. In Chinese cuisine, baozi refers to steamed buns with fillings, distinct from the concept of meatballs. While baozi has indeed become part of Indonesia’s culinary landscape, it bears no semantic or culinary relation to bakso.

In Indonesia, fish balls or hiwan do exist but are not as commonly sold by street vendors as beef-based bakso. They are typically served in Chinese restaurants, particularly in regions outside Central and East Java such as West Java, Banten, Sumatra, and Kalimantan. These fish balls are often served with tofu, vegetables, or otak-otak in a clear broth, or sliced thinly as garnishes in mie goreng, kwetiau goreng, nasi goreng, or cap cai. Similar dishes include pempek, a Palembang specialty made from fish paste shaped into logs and served with a sour-sweet vinegar sauce. Notable modern variations include bakso kakap (snapper fish ball soup) from Semarang and bakso ikan marlin from Pesisir Barat, Lampung.

Compared to Singapore and Malaysia, Indonesians today associate bakso primarily with beef rather than fish. Fish-based meatballs remain confined mostly to Chinese-style noodle shops. In Malang and Surabaya, Chinese-Indonesian versions of bakwan or bakso sometimes include fish balls, reflecting older culinary continuities. In contrast, in Malaysia and Singapore, fish balls (yu wan or hie wan) are central to dishes like bak chor mee (肉脞面)—a Teochew-style noodle dish known as mee pok, typically served with minced meat, fish balls, and dumplings. This bak chor mee may represent the linguistic and culinary ancestor of mie bakso in Java, especially cwie mie

(Malang-style noodles).

While Singaporean and Malaysian versions often use pork or beef, the Javanese *cwie mie* substitutes chicken for religious reasons. Both feature minced meat, wonton (*páng sit* in Hokkien), and vegetables such as lettuce or mustard greens, though Javanese adaptations add fried shallots and sweet soy sauce. Visually and conceptually, *mee pok youmian* from Singapore most closely resembles *mie pangsit Malang*, illustrating how centuries of migration and adaptation have interwoven Chinese and Javanese noodle traditions into Indonesia's culinary identity.



**Figure 3.** Kemiripan Cwiemie Malang dengan Bak Chor Mee Singapore

Demolemooin's account appears to draw from a widely circulated online narrative concerning the legend of Mengbo, a filial son from Fuzhou during the late Ming Dynasty (early 17th century). According to this story, Mengbo invented the first minced pork meatballs—called 扛丸 (*Gung Wan*)—so that his ill mother could eat meat easily. Inspired by a neighbor making mochi, he pounded pork into a paste, shaped it into small balls, and cooked them in broth. The legend first appeared in *The Epoch Times* article *Chinese Meatballs Full of Filial Piety* (Wei Lei, 2010) and was later popularized by *Merdeka.com* in 2015 (mdk/ian, 2015). The term 扛 (*Gung*) refers to the pounding motion, while 丸 (*Wan*) means “small ball” in the Minnan dialect, hence *Gung Wan* translates to “pounded meatballs.”

From these sources, traditional Chinese meatballs were called *hi-wan* (fish balls) or *gung wan* (pounded meatballs). Yet the origin of the Indonesian word *bakso*—and the related term *bakwan* or *baozi* mentioned by Demolemooin—remains linguistically complex. According to a Taiwanese online dictionary (<https://www.mdbg.net/>), 肉圆 / 肉丸 (Tai-lo: *bah-uân*)

refers to rounded foods made from minced meat or other fillings wrapped in starchy dough—essentially dumplings or dim sum served with sauce or broth. This definition aligns more closely with dumplings (*pangsit*, *siomay*) than with Javanese *bakwan* meatballs. Interestingly, the connection becomes more plausible when applied to *bakwan jagung* (corn fritters) and *bakwan Kawi Malang*, dishes that retain traces of Chinese Peranakan culinary influence (Freedman & Siu Ling, 2015; Reza, 2024).



**Figure 4.** “Bakwan Kawi sold by Wonosari vendors in Yogyakarta tends to differ from the typical version in Malang... in Yogyakarta, the main feature lies in the pangsit (fried or steamed dumplings), while the pentol (meatballs) merely serve as a complement,” said Aly Reza on Mojok.co (Left). A visual of Bakwan Kawi Malang as served in Yogyakarta – characterized by a higher starch-to-meat ratio; source: Alfalegro Jalan-jalan [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0iL3nLnW9k] (Center). Dong 水里肉圓 shui li bah wan – www.taiwan-panorama.com, photos by Jimmy Lin (Right).

The Bakwan Kawi of Yogyakarta, often associated with siomay (or dimsum/pangsit), presents a compelling parallel with Taiwanese versions of bah wan. One prominent example is 水里肉圓 (Shui Li Bah Wan), served at Dong’s eatery in Taiwan. Considered an archaic form of bah wan, this dish is believed to originate from Fan Wanju, a Beidou temple scribe, around 1898 during a great flood. Fan’s creation involved minced meat encased in a starchy dough resembling thick siomay skin, served in a rich, fatty broth. At Dong’s restaurant, patrons are advised: “Eat the skin, leave the meat, and sip the soup” (自由時報電子報, 2017). Modern versions often include radish and fish balls (JECNNY007722, 2019). Its stuffed, bun-like form explains why bah wan was sometimes confused with baozi (bakpao), visually resembling Indonesian-style siomay, such as the Bakwan Kawi sold near Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Yogyakarta (Alfalegro Jalan Jalan, 2016).

The term 扛丸 (gung wan) literally means “pounded meatball,” while 扛肉丸 (gung bah wan) specifies “pounded minced meatballs.” Taiwanese dictionaries differentiate 肉脞 (bah-sao4) as finely minced meat and 肉酥 (bah-sou1) as meat pounded smooth and elastic, linguistically linking to Indonesian bakso. Another term, 肉燥 (bah cou), refers to minced pork stewed

in soy sauce, a dish distinct from bakso. Among Chinese meatballs, the one most similar to Indonesian bakso is 牛丸 (Niúwán, Hokkien: Bakwan), or beef meatballs. As noted in Elaine's article on ChinaSichuanFood.com and the Netflix documentary *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan Cuisine* (Season 1, Ep. 13), Niúwán has been popular among Cantonese and Teochew people since the early 1920s. The meat is traditionally pounded with an iron rod to achieve a bouncy texture, and Teochew recipes season the mixture with 沙茶醬 (sha cha jiang, Hokkien: satejang), a savory sauce with Indonesian connections (Zhitang, 2019; Elaine, 2021).

Two main Teochew variants exist: pure beef and beef mixed with fat and offal. The latter resembles Javanese bakso, particularly Bakso Malang or Bakwan Malang, which incorporate tendon (urat), beef fat, or bone marrow for flavor and texture. Sha cha jiang itself was created by Chinese Indonesians and brought to Taiwan in 1949, later evolving independently (Tseng, 2018). This complicates questions of origin: did Niúwán influence bakso, or did Chinese-Indonesian practices shape Taiwanese versions? Scholars remain divided. Some suggest Niúwán spread to Taiwan through Teochew and Cantonese migration from Fujian during the late Qing Dynasty (Noordjanah, 2004), while others argue returning Chinese Indonesians reintroduced bakso-like recipes after the colonial period (Dananto, 2010; Shintia, 2012). Shen Tao (2002) notes the dish surged in Taiwan after the 1950s, supporting the latter view.

Chinese sources credit the Teochew with refining Niúwán through four innovations: using an iron rod to pound meat, substituting water with broth, introducing sha cha jiang as a sauce, and adding tendon for texture. These produced two variants—pure meatballs and tendon-mixed meatballs (gdchaoshi, 2020; Mu Mu San, 2021; 自由時報電子報, 2017). This mirrors the development of bakso urat in Java. Whether tendon-based meatballs arose independently or via Teochew-Hakka influence remains uncertain. The shared vocabulary (bakwan, bakso, bah wan), techniques (pounding meat), and textures (springiness, elasticity) demonstrate deep transregional culinary dialogues. Bakwan Kawi is thus more than a street food; it is a living testament to centuries of Chinese, Peranakan, and Javanese gastronomic exchange—a culinary archive of migration, adaptation, and cultural continuity.

During the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic era (ca. 1890s–1910s), Hakka-origin meatball vendors proliferated in southern China, especially Shantou and Chaoshan. Most carried meatballs using shoulder poles (pí kǔn) or sold from small boats along the Hanjiang River, offering freshly made beef meatballs (牛丸, Niúwán). By the 1940s, Xinxing Street became a hub for beef meatball eateries, cementing Niúwán as a signature Chaoshan specialty. Folklore tells of the monk Ye Yanqing, who learned and refined Hakka beef meatball recipes, developing a style of meatballs in clear broth

with garlic, celery, and sha cha or chili sauce. Chaoshan innovations extended to pork, fish, squid, and shrimp balls, all using hand-pounding techniques.

Ancient texts like the *Zhou Li Zhushu* and *Qi Min Yao Shu* document this practice, confirming that Hakka–Teochew beef balls are direct prototypes of modern Indonesian bakso, with later adaptations like Sha Cha Jiang reflecting Javanese influence. Historical sources suggest that meatballs and fish balls have deep culinary roots. According to Jae W. Park, fish balls (Hiwan) may date back to the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE) under Emperor Qin Shi Huang, though the earliest written recipe appears in the Song Dynasty (1111–1118 CE) (Park, 2013, p. 22). Shen Tao identifies the earliest clear textual reference to meatballs in the *Qi Min Yao Shu* (533–544 CE) (Sturgeon, 2006), which also includes recipes for noodle soups and dumplings, traditional accompaniments to meatballs. Composed by Jia Sixie (贾思勰), an agricultural official of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 CE), the *Qi Min Yao Shu* contains ninety-two chapters on agriculture, food processing, and domestic recipes, including a section on “springy meatballs” called tiao wan zhi (跳丸炙, “roasted jumping balls”) (Shen Tao, 2002). This reflects the culinary sophistication of Northern Han people (北方汉人), whose cuisine later influenced southern China through migration.

Continuous wars and political upheavals in the Central Plains led many Northern Han families to migrate southward, eventually settling in Jiangxi, Fujian, and later eastern Guangdong and Guangxi. Known as the Hakka people, these migrants preserved ancient culinary techniques—including *dǎo zhēn*—and transmitted them through generations. Shen Tao notes that even after centuries, Hakka and Teochew descendants maintained the traditional taste of their ancestors. Modern *Niúwán*, or bakso sapi, is thus a continuation of this culinary lineage, exemplifying the art of “pounded delicacies” (*dǎo zhēn*), one of the famous “Eight Rare Delicacies” (*ba zhen*, 八珍) from the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE).

The *Liji* (礼记, Book of Rites) provides further insight into Zhou-era meatball preparation. The *dǎo zhēn* method involved selecting tender cuts of beef, mutton, antelope, or venison, removing bones and sinews, and pounding the meat until smooth and elastic. The recipe states: “Use beef, mutton, antelope, deer, and similar meats; all should be from the tenderloin. Remove coarse parts, roast until cooked, strip off the bones, and pound until smooth.” This meticulous process mirrors the modern method of making *Niúwán* or bakso urat, demonstrating continuity in Chinese culinary practice spanning over two millennia (Shen Tao, 2002).

From early Hakka street vendors in Chaoshan to contemporary bakso sellers in Indonesia, the evolution of meatballs reflects centuries of migration, cultural exchange, and culinary innovation. Today, *Niúwán*, bakso, and their

regional variations stand as living testaments to the enduring artistry of hand-pounded meat, connecting modern tastes to an ancient gastronomic heritage that continues to thrive. The following recipes for meatballs, noodle soup, and dumplings are found in *Qímín Yàoshù* (齊民要術), Volume 9 (Sturgeon, 2006). Among them is *Tiào Wán Zhì* (跳丸炙), which literally means “Roasting of Jumping Balls,” a method that describes the technique of producing springy and elastic meatballs:

羊肉十斤，猪肉十斤，缕切之。生姜三升、桔皮五片、  
酱瓜二升、葱白五升，合捣，命如弹丸。别以五斤羊肉  
作膏，乃下丸炙，煮之作丸也。

Use 10 *jin* (approximately 5 kilograms) of goat meat and 10 *jin* of pork, sliced lengthwise. Finely mash 3 *shēng* of fresh ginger, 5 pieces of dried tangerine peel, 2 *shēng* of pickled vegetables (*jiànguā*), and 5 *shēng* of the white parts of scallions [for the broth]. Mix and pound [the goat and pork meat] together until they form bullet-sized balls. Prepare a broth using 5 *jin* of goat meat, then add the meatballs and boil until they become springy meatballs.

In contemporary Javanese meatball noodle soups, vendors often use dried pickled napa cabbage called *Tiānjīn dōngcài* (天津冬菜), a regional variety of *jiàngǎn cài* (箭杆菜) traditionally produced in Tianjin since the Ming Dynasty. Made from the core of *dàbáicài* (大白菜), the cabbage is washed, salted, fermented with garlic, chopped, and sun-dried, preserving its dense fiber and crunchy texture. Called *dōngcài* (“winter vegetable”), it was historically prepared for winter. Tianjin, officially named in 1404 by the Yongle Emperor, was a strategic military port and historically under Northern Wei and Song dynasties’ control, linking this preserved vegetable to deep regional and historical roots.

Speaking of meatball noodles, it is quite surprising that following the meatball recipe, the *Qímín Yàoshù* includes a recipe for noodles and dumplings from the Northern Wei Dynasty, titled *Shuǐ yǐn bó tún fǎ* (水引餛飩法), or “method for making ancient noodles and dumplings.”

麵為水引餛飩法：以極細羅篩麵，用冷肉湯和之，揉如  
杖

，切長一尺，浸水，以鐱壓之，如蔥葉薄，著湯中煮之。  
。 Use flour that has been sifted to a fine texture using a silk sieve. Mix it with cold meat broth and knead until the dough becomes firm and stick-like in consistency. Cut the dough into pieces about one *chi* long (approximately 30 centimeters), soak them in water, and then press them flat using a pot lid until they are as thin as scallion leaves. Finally, place them into boiling meat broth and cook until done.

Next, the recipe for dumplings is also recorded, with precise attention

to texture and thin-sheet techniques, under the section Bó tuō (餠飩):

餠飩授如大指許二寸一斷著水盆中浸，宜以手向盆旁授使極薄，皆急火逐沸熟煮，非直光白可愛，亦自滑美殊常。

The dumpling dough is flattened to about the width of a thumb and a length of roughly two cun (approximately 6 cm), then soaked in a basin of water. Using the hand, it is pressed along the inner side of the basin wall until it becomes as thin as possible. The dumplings are then quickly boiled over a high flame until they reach a rolling boil. The result is not only visually striking—glossy and white—but also smooth in texture, tender, and exceptionally delicious.

These three recipes demonstrate that by the 6th century, Chinese culinary techniques for preparing meat—whether in the form of dumplings or meatballs—as well as noodles, had already reached a high level of refinement. Over time, these techniques laid the foundation for many popular dishes that were later adapted and integrated into the folk cuisines of Southeast Asia. However, a critical question arises: if the earliest written record of these recipes comes from northern China during the Northern Wei dynasty, how did such dishes come to be associated with the culinary identity of the Chaozhou people in the far south?

### ***Hakka and Teochew – The Pioneers of [Noodle] Meatballs***

Chaoshan, Chaozhou, and Teochew are three interrelated terms in the context of geography, history, and cultural identity. Chaoshan refers to a metropolitan region in eastern Guangdong Province, China, which includes three major cities: Chaozhou, Shantou, and Jiayang. This area was formally established as an administrative unit between 1958 and 1983, serving as an economic and cultural hub for the local population. Within Chaoshan, Chaozhou plays a central role—an ancient city that dates to the Sui Dynasty (590 CE).

Teochew, meanwhile, is the local dialectal pronunciation of "Chaozhou." The term not only refers to the physical city but more broadly functions as a cultural identity uniting the entire Chaoshan region. Teochew culture encompasses language (潮州話, which preserves phonetic features of Old Chinese), the arts (such as Teochew Opera/潮劇, with a 500-year history), and distinctive culinary traditions, such as Fenghuang Dancong tea and Chaoshan cuisine.

The relationship among these three terms becomes increasingly complex when examining the role of Hakka and Teochew diasporas in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia (Herman Tan, 2022). Among Chaoshanese migrant communities—especially in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam—people commonly identify themselves as "Teochew", even when their ancestral roots may trace

back to other Chaoshan cities like Shantou or Jieyang. This phenomenon stems from the historical prominence of Chaozhou as the oldest cultural center in the region, thus allowing the term "Teochew" to crystallize as a shared cultural representation.

According to various popular sources, the history of Chaoshan-style beef meatballs (bakso sapi) is closely tied to the arrival of Hakka traders in the cities of Chaozhou and, more prominently, Shantou, following the opening of Shantou port in the 1860s—a period that marked the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China (清末及民国初期) (Food Map, 2025). During this time, Hakka merchants brought with them the tradition of beef meatballs from their homelands, such as Meixian and Xingning, and began selling them on the streets of Shantou and Chaozhou. These vendors typically carried baskets on shoulder poles (pí dàn 批担), walking on foot while offering bowls of meatball soup, particularly around Handi Road (韩堤路) and the banks of the Hanjiang River. Some even sold directly from small boats lit with lanterns—an evening beacon for Hakka sailors and merchants who docked along the riverbanks (Ate Xiaochao, 2019; Food Map, 2025; Jin Ru, 2025; zh.wikipedia, 2025).

The Chaoshan people (潮汕) eventually recognized the unique flavor and high commercial value of the beef meatballs introduced by Hakka migrants. They began to imitate the dish while improving production techniques and incorporating local ingredients—such as beef bone broth and shacha jiang (沙茶酱, satay sauce)—as a signature dipping condiment. The method of pounding the meat was also refined: instead of using the back of a knife, Chaoshan cooks began using specially crafted iron rods to achieve a more elastic and springy texture (Live an interesting life, 2023). This adaptation resulted in a meatball distinct from the original Hakka version, giving rise to the Chaoshan-style beef meatball, characterized by its "crisp, chewy, and tender" texture (*cùi tán ruǎn* 脆弹软) and rich, savory taste (Tay, 2019).

Thus, it can be concluded that this culinary transformation took place in the late 19th century, specifically during the early Republic of China period, when Shantou had developed into a major trading port. It was at this time that Hakka vendors introduced beef meatballs via street carts and riverboats along the waterways of Shantou (and also Chaozhou). These meatballs were later popularized by the local Chaoshan community through regional innovations, evolving into an iconic modern dish that simultaneously spread to Southeast Asia during the same period. Scholar Shen Tao notes that to this day, people in Chaozhou refer to these fully cooked meatballs as *wan zhi* (丸炙). Based on this, Shen Tao argues that Chaoshan beef meatballs may in fact represent a direct culinary legacy of the ancient dish *tiao wan zhi* (跳丸炙), which originated in

the Yellow River region during the Wei-Jin era (specifically the Northern Wei Dynasty).

### Conclusion

Today, pork-based meatballs (*bakso*) can still be found, though rarely—partly due to the growing dominance of a Muslim-friendly market and the increasing affordability of beef. Buffalo meatballs have remained available in Kudus since the author’s childhood, possibly reinforced by the local myth of Sunan Kudus, who forbade the slaughter of cows. This tradition may have preserved a way of consuming meat once less desirable to Europeans (Budiyanto & Anggni, 2012). In the author’s childhood (1970s–1990s), two distinct sound cues signaled whether a passing hawker was selling *Bakso Malang*—also known as *Bakwan Kawi* or *Bakwan Malang*—or *Bakso Soloan* (Solo-style meatballs). *Bakso Soloan* vendors rhythmically struck porcelain bowls with a spoon, creating a sound like “Ting, ting, ting, ting, ting-ting-ting,” sometimes calling out “*so-bakso!*” Meanwhile, *Bakwan Kawi* or Malang-style vendors struck short bamboo or jackfruit wood, producing “Tik-tok, tik-tok, tik-tok tik tik tik,” and typically did not shout.

This method began to change when shoulder poles (*pikulan*) were replaced by pushcarts or pedal carts in the early 1980s. *Bakwan Malang* vendors adopted bamboo or wooden slit-drums (*kentongan*) to create a knocking rhythm: “dhog dhog dhog dhog.” Over time, they transitioned to motorcycles, pickup trucks, and food trucks, which usually do not employ distinctive sound cues. Some *Bakwan Malang* hawkers on motorcycles still use “*tiktokan*” or *kentongan* rhythms. Meatball hawkers from Yogyakarta, Solo, and Central Java continue tapping a spoon against a bowl while calling “*so-bakso!*” In larger cities like Jakarta, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta, some *bakso* carts now offer drinks and desserts such as iced fruit cocktails, young coconut, or *cendol*.

Interestingly, in Greater Malang today, a resurgence of *bakso* vendors using shoulder poles has emerged since the early 2020s. When asked why they retain this physically demanding method, vendors explain that *pikulan* allow access to narrow alleys and residential corridors inaccessible to motorized carts. The method also evokes nostalgia and a sense of charm and affordability, appealing to customers. In Batu City, *pikul* vendors regularly pass through neighborhoods and often sell out by afternoon.

Circulating myths and online rumors debate differences between *Bakso Solo* and *Bakwan Malang*, particularly regarding broth. Some claim *bakso* broth is cloudier or that *Bakso Malang* is richer and fattier because it’s cooked with bones and offal. However, legendary establishments like *Bakwan Mentawai* (1950s) and *Bakso Pak Meh* in Araya maintain clear broths.

According to Malang-based artist Bambang AW, in 1975 the original Bakwan Pak Meh vendor roamed near Sentao School and Comboran (now Jl. Garuda), and today his grandson continues the tradition. Clarity or cloudiness depends on technique: multiple boils, straining, and cleaning offal with limewater or baking soda remove impurities, producing transparent, odor-free broth.

Bakso Solo also generally features clear broth, using balungan sekengkel (femur or rear leg bone) or sometimes ribs, meat trimmings, and offal. Historically, all cow parts could be used. Thus, broth clarity is a result of care, not a definitive marker of bakso type.

Confusion about Bakso Malang's origins is compounded by online claims that a Malaysian Chinese immigrant, Tjoen Moesliem, introduced it in 1939. Sources conflict on whether he sold near the town square or Malang Town Square (MATOS). This claim is refuted by photographic evidence showing Mbah Djo's *Bakso Geprak* operating in 1935 and Bakwan Kapasari in Surabaya since 1931. Tjoen supposedly prepared bakso using traditional hand-mixing, grinding, and pounding techniques, serving meatballs with tofu, siamay, and fried items, inspiring widespread bakso proliferation.



**Figure 5.** Mbah Djo pounding the meat- Bakso Geprak and Soto Geprak by Mbah Djo, 1935. Source: Facebook (Left); Bakwan peddler with a shoulder pole from Kapasari, Surabaya, 1931 — Source: closetdomesticbunny.blogspot.com (Center); Loen Kiem, a bakmi-bakso vendor in Bandung during the 1920s–30s — reproduction from Java First Reader for the Course of Chinese Students in the Netherlands Indies (Right).

This writing marks the initial part of a larger book project on the cultural history of *bakso* and *bakwan* in Java—two meat-based dishes brought and transformed through the long diasporic journeys of Southern Chinese peoples, especially from the Hakka and Teochew (潮州) communities. These Han Chinese from southern mainland China have long interacted with the Indonesian archipelago, particularly Java, resulting in deep cultural

entanglements. Much remains unexplored in detail: the distinctions between *bakso* and *bakwan*, how the two genres of meatballs—served in broth or as dry dumplings—mutually influenced one another, and how they developed unique characteristics that differ significantly from their Chinese counterparts. In short, the terms *bakso* and *bakwan* initially referred to stages in the process of shaping minced meat into balls. Through a figure of speech known as *pars pro toto*, these names eventually came to refer to the entire bowl of soup with its rich broth and all its components, especially the meatballs themselves.

This piece does not yet explore how shifting economic realities—ranging from the post-independence period to the 1998 monetary crisis (*krismon*)—significantly altered the ratio of meat to tapioca flour in the meatball dough, or how innovations such as increased use of chicken meat and food flavoring became widespread among *bakso* vendors. Nor does it yet answer the many other questions: When did vendors start adding *lontong* or *ketupat*? When did *siomay* begin to include noodles? When were separate chili sauce and tomato sauce combined into a single sambal? Or when did fried shallots get replaced by fried vermicelli as toppings? And what, ultimately, is the difference between *nyuknyang* from Makassar and *bakwan Malang*? These questions cannot all be answered in this article—but readers can look forward to more in my forthcoming book.

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