

# The Power of Connection: Understanding Kitty Pong's Social Ambitions in Kevin Kwan's *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015)

**Mailani Salsabila**

(mailanisalsabila17@gmail.com)

Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an, Wonosobo, Indonesia

**Puji Laksono**

(pujilaksono@unsiq.ac.id)

Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an, Wonosobo, Indonesia

## Abstract

*This study is aimed to analyze : 1) the motivations influencing Kitty Pong to becoming a social climber in China Rich Girlfriend (2015), 2) how the power of connection in China Rich Girlfriend (2015) can be used to gain high social status, and 3) the impacts that Kitty Pong gets after becoming a social climber in China Rich Girlfriend (2015). This research uses a qualitative method to analyze the novel China Rich Girlfriend (2015) written by Kevin Kwan as the object of study. The data collection methods include reading, identifying, and selecting. The researcher utilizes A. H. Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, and John Storey's theory of consumption to analyze the data through steps of classifying, analyzing, and interpreting. The result of this research shows that the motivations influencing Kitty Pong to becoming a social climber in China Rich Girlfriend (2015) including want to acquire high status, recognized by influential people, accepted by the society, and acquire power. The power of connection in China Rich Girlfriend (2015) that Kitty Pong can use to gain high social status including economic, cultural, and social capital, also cultural fields, and habitus. The impacts that Kitty Pong gets after becoming a social climber in China Rich Girlfriend (2015) including impacts in economic, psychological, and social life.*

**Keywords:** *social climbers, consumerism, social capital*

## Introduction

In 2025, around 5.20 billion people will use social media, which is around 64% of the global population. They spend an average of 2 hours and 23 minutes per day on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and many more. They use social media to interact with family and friends, read news, find content, purchase a product, or fill their spare time.

Social media has a big impact on our daily lives. It changes how we communicate, connect, and consume information in the modern digital era. Social media provides easy access to all global information and news. It also presents a lot of content that unconsciously changes society. It can be seen in the lifestyle changes. This lifestyle includes changes in clothing models, appearance, purchasing behavior, and people's habits to fulfill their lifestyle.

However, social media also has a negative impact on society. Through the contents of their daily life, the brands they use, the food they eat, working from a café, and going to famous and fancy places, it will influence others to do the same thing because it unconsciously shapes society to normalize and accept it as a lifestyle. The community believes that society's acceptance and recognition are based on consumption, not production (Storey, 1996). They assume that the more expensive and luxurious items they have will increase their social status (Simon, 2019). They will be considered part of a high social class because of it.

Then, it leads to bad consumerism behavior. People compete to follow trends on social media by purchasing every item that is popular at that time. Every day, numerous trends emerge. They do not think twice about whether they need it or not or whether it is an important item or not; they immediately purchase it only to fulfill their ego (Mahyuddin, 2017). At the same time, a person who follows the trend has a desire to be known and get recognition from others.

Social media lets people share and show whatever they want and be whoever they want. But usually, people will only show their luxurious life, wealth, and their best achievements, so others will recognize them as good people with a happy life and a high social class. It is what Wood (2001) said as a social climber: *“the process of trying to increase personal status in a group by winning the approval of high-status members.”*

In this study, the researcher will use A. H. Maslow's Theory of hierarchy of needs, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital and John Storey's theory of consumption to analyze the character from Kevin Kwan's *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015) novel named Kitty Pong. The novel gives readers a view of the power of connection to gain higher social status and the ambitions that influence a person to become a social climber to get recognition and validation from others.

## **Literary Review**

### **A.H. Maslow's Theory of Hierarchy of Needs**

The hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory that organizes needs into five stages, starting with the most fundamental ones and going up to more complicated

ones. Maslow says that humans have to meet their most basic requirements first, such as food, drink, shelter, and safety, before they can work on other goals. After these basic requirements are addressed, people look for social wants like love, friendship, and a sense of belonging. After that, they work on their esteem needs, which are things like feeling achieved, confident, and recognized. Self-actualization, which means wanting to fulfill their maximum potential and evolve as a person, is at the summit of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943).

The actions of a social climber are directly linked to esteem needs (Murfianti et al., 2020). People who want to increase their social standing and be perceived as significant or successful by others are in this stage. They often strive to connect with those who have more social status or power, expecting that these interactions will help them move up in their society. They may also act in ways or live in ways that are aimed to impress others and get their admiration. These activities are not just motivated by a desire for approval; they signify a deep psychological necessity to be valued and accepted. It demonstrates that the behavior of a social climber exemplifies how individuals may try to satisfy their esteem needs, as articulated by Maslow.

### **Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu presents a key idea called capital as he investigates the interaction between people and society. Anything that helps a group or individual to acquire power or advantage in society is capital. He broadens the concept of capital to include more than only the financial; he suggests that social and cultural factors can act as great resources. He classified capital into three types: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital includes property and money. These are manufacturing components. These could be assets like houses, photographs, and ceramics, as well as land, factories, employment, and inherited money. Unlike economic capital, which can be acquired quickly, cultural capital is closely related to one's social background and access to educational or cultural settings and often needs time to build. And social capital is the networks of relationships and social connections people can use to acquire resources, support, or possibilities.

## **John Storey's Theory of Consumption**

According to John Storey, consumption is a basic aspect of daily living that goes much beyond simple shopping. He says (2022), "*All of us consume something. It's not merely another word for shopping. When we eat and drink, read a book or watch TV, visit a gallery, or spend an evening at a pub, we are consuming*". This viewpoint emphasizes that consumption covers all the ways we interact with and find value in cultural products, events, and customs. People actively interpret and form their identities with the objects they use in their daily lives, not only as passive receivers.

Storey states that consumption is a kind of cultural production rather than being about absorbing pre-existing cultural goods. It is what he says (1996): "*Culture is not something already made which we consume; culture is what we make in the varied practices of everyday life, including consumption*". It means that when we interact with literature, movies, food, fashion, or media, we are actively helping to construct and negotiate cultural meaning rather than passively absorbing fixed meanings produced by others. By means of our decisions, perceptions, and behaviors, we help to define culture itself. In this sense, consumption turns into a dynamic, participatory activity via which people and groups convey social relationships, values, and identity.

## **Social Climber**

The word "social climber" comes from the term "social climbing," which is when a person or group moves from a lower social class to a higher one within a community. A social climber is also defined as someone who does specific things or acts in certain ways to try to improve their social standing (Mahyuddin, 2017). It can be a desire to be friends with individuals who are more influential, showing off their money or achievements, or changing how they look and live to fit in with a group that is more prestigious. Most of the time, individuals plan these behaviors to gain attention, respect, or a higher status in society.

There are some factors that influence a person to become a social climber. According to Kembau (2015), those factors are:

1. The growth of the economy. It can change how individuals live and what they want. Kembau (2015) says that *"Indonesia's economy has grown over the past ten years, which has made people more able to buy things."* It means that more people can now afford to buy goods they could not before. Because of this, social climbers are more likely to buy expensive things to make themselves look better.
2. A person's social environment. It includes their friends, family, and where they fit in society. Individuals who live in a group or family of the upper class may feel like they have to live like the people around them (Mahyuddin, 2017). It can make them try harder to fit in and be accepted by dressing, acting, or spending money like the others.
3. There are psychological needs. People naturally start to look for more after their basic requirements, like food, clothing, and health, are supplied. These include wanting to be loved, accepted, respected, and heard by other people. People want to be part of a group, feel important, and do something that matters in life. These deeper needs, like relationships, recognition, and personal growth, are vital for mental health (Maslow, 1943).

Jayanti (2012) presented the characteristics of a social climber, which are actions that might indicate a person behaves like a social climber. Those are:

1. People have needs that they believe must be satisfied
2. Being in a new culture
3. Needing a lifestyle higher than ever before
4. People frequently want a better life with more hope and chances to do better
5. Social climbers build their social status by creating a certain image of themselves
6. People who try to move up their social status usually have a role model in mind
7. A social climber's behavior is greatly affected by their motivation

Some impacts might happen to you including impacts in economic sector, psychological, and social life.

## **Research Method**

The research method which is used in this research is qualitative research. Particularly, qualitative research focuses on compiling and interpreting non-numerical data to help one comprehend social and human surroundings. With the main focus on the methodical explanation and analysis of the phenomenon, qualitative methods can be connected to anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history, and sociology (Mohajan). The object in this research is a novel written by Kevin Kwan with the title *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015) that was published in the United States in June, 2015 by Doubleday. The types of data that is used are main data which are includes words, phrases, or sentences from the novel related to the problem statement and supporting data which is collected from theory books, publications, and other sources. The method of collecting data in this research is by reading the entire novel, then the researcher identifying data by underlining important data (words, phrases, or sentences) related to the problem statements, and lastly, selecting data that is appropriate to answer the problem statements. After the data are collected, the next step is analyzing data by classifying the data into each of the problem statements, analyzing the data using A.H. Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, and John Storey's theory of consumption, and then researcher interprets the result based on problem statements.

## **Finding and Discussion**

In this chapter, the researcher interprets the result of analyzing data from Kevin Kwan's *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015) using A.H. Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, and John Storey's theory of consumption.

### **1. Motivations Influencing Kitty Pong to Become a Social Climber**

Maslow's hierarchy of needs says that people are motivated by a range of needs, from basic survival to more complicated psychological and self-fulfillment desires. In the context of social climbing, motivation is frequently linked to

esteem, as individuals pursue not only self-respect and confidence but also external validation.

These needs show a strong psychological need to be recognized and respected by society. In *China Rich Girlfriend*, Kitty Pong is a social climber who wants to be recognized and move into the high social class. However, for her, it is not just about getting things; it is also about fulfilling her esteem needs, which means getting respect, feeling important, and being viewed as successful by others

Those motivations will be explained below:

**a) Acquire High Status**

The first motivation that influences Kitty Pong to do social climbing is to acquire a high status. Kitty Pong was a former soap opera actress from Mainland China who lived in Hong Kong, surrounded by super-rich people. She wants to join them, but her presence is never recognized. She desires to be recognized as a member of the upper class, which is why she consistently uses luxury items associated with high social status (Permatasari, 2017).

That is what Kitty Pong did in the narrative of the novel below:

“A few of the ladies coming off the elevator stared at her intently as they passed by, and she felt certain it was because of the outfit she had taken such care in choosing. She had opted for a sleeveless Giambattista Valli black-and-red floral-print dress, a red Céline knotted lambskin clutch, and Charlotte Olympia red flats with a gold buckle. Her only jewelry was a pair of cabochon ruby earrings from Solange Azagury-Patridge.” (*China Rich Girlfriend*, p. 86).

Kitty Pong is using luxury items, namely Giambattista Valli, Céline, and Charlotte Olympia. She uses the jewelry from Solange Azagury-Patridge, a British designer known for her jewelry and founder of her brand, Solange. The brands she uses are known as luxury brands that are commonly used by rich people. Kitty used it to interpret her position in society.

According to Simon (2019), a social climber distinguishes themselves by believing that luxury goods enhance their self-esteem. People work hard to improve their social position based on their achievements and merit, while social climbers try to show off their status by wearing luxury clothing, using expensive technology, or having exclusive events.

**b) Recognized by the Influential People**

It is the second motivation that influences Kitty Pong to become a social climber. She wants to be recognized not only by society in general but also considers recognition by influential people to be the most important. She does many things to be recognized by influential people, hoping that these actions will ease her social life. Some of the things she does can be seen in the narrative:

Thirty seconds later, the gavel went down on *The Palace of Eighteen Perfections*. At one hundred and ninety-five million, it was the most expensive Chinese work of art ever sold at auction. The glittering crowd burst into deafening applause as Kitty Pong preened for the cameras, the flashes going off like IEDs in downtown Kabul. One of the Russian wolf-hounds started to bark. Now the whole world would know that Kitty Pong—or Mrs. Bernard Tai, as she now insisted on being called—had indeed arrived. (*China Rich Girlfriend*, p. 27)

Kitty Pong buys the most wanted Chinese art in the auction named “*The Palace of Eighteen Perfections*.” The artwork was created by the Qing dynasty artist Yuan Jiang in 1693. Many people want to own this art because it is considered one of the most magnificent royal residences ever built. People believe that having this art can raise someone's profile because of how rare and old it is.

Another attempt that Kitty Pong makes to get recognition from influential people is donating twenty million dollars to Sir Francis Poon’s foundation, which will be used for his medical rescue missions. She donates it in the event of the Fifteen Annual Ming Foundation Pinnacle Ball that the families of Sir Francis Poon himself organized.

### c) Accepted by the Society

Kitty Pong wants to be accepted by society as the wife of Bernard Tai, one of the richest men in Asia, so that she can have the same power and opportunities in society as the other wives of a wealthy family in Hong Kong. She wants to get free of the shadow of being a former soap opera actress. So, she tried various ways to be recognized and accepted by society.

One of her attempts was to become an art collector and philanthropist. Becoming an art collector and philanthropist is often associated with a high-class lifestyle.

### d) Acquire Power

It is the last motivation that influences Kitty Pong to become a social climber. All that she wants is to acquire power. The attempts she made, from pretending she has a high status; using luxury brands and jewelry, became an art collector and philanthropist, are all to get recognized and accepted in the elite society; then she can acquire the same power as the others.

## 2. The Power of Connection Used to Gain High Status

Access to resources and opportunities in society depends much on relationships and connections. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) argues that in determining one's social standing, social capital is equally vital as economic and cultural capital. It implies that your ability to get a job, get support, or acquire knowledge might be greatly influenced by the people you know. Developing a powerful connection is not only about friendship but also a fundamental component of how wealth and power are allocated in society.

The process of Kitty Pong to climbing the elite society in Hong Kong will describe below:

### Through Capital

Pierre Bourdieu classified capital into three types: economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Kitty Pong's action was to climb the elite society of Hong Kong in all three capitals, so the researcher tried to break them one by one.

#### a) Economic Capital

Kitty Pong's first attempt to climb the elite society of Hong Kong is by joining the auction and acquiring the most expensive Chinese art ever sold.

Thirty seconds later, the gavel went down on The Palace of Eighteen Perfections. At one hundred and ninety-five

million, it was the most expensive Chinese work of art ever sold at auction. The glittering crowd burst into deafening applause as Kitty Pong preened for the cameras, the flashes going off like IEDs in downtown Kabul. One of the Russian wolf-hounds started to bark. Now the whole world would know that Kitty Pong—Mrs. Bernard Tai, as she now insisted on being called—had indeed arrived. (*China Rich Girlfriend*, p. 27)

By displaying her wealth in this way, Kitty hopes to be seen as someone who really belongs in the world of the rich and powerful. She believes that owning such an expensive and famous work of art will make people recognize her.

Not only joining the auction, Kitty Pong also donated \$20 million at the Fifteenth Annual Ming Foundation Pinnacle Ball. She is donating to Sir Francis Poon's foundation.

Sir Francis Poon, who was awarded the Philanthropic Pinnacle Award, got the biggest surprise of the evening when Mrs. Bernard Tai (aka the former soap star Kitty Pong), overcome with emotion from Sir Francis's touching slide show about his medical rescue missions, rushed onstage and shocked the crowd by spontaneously announcing a \$20 million gift to his foundation! (*China Rich Girlfriend*, p. 78-79)

In an attempt to impress the wealthy and elite guests, Kitty Pong interrupts Sir Francis Poon and announces her big donation. However, this is seen as disrespectful and attention-seeking. According to Oktaviani et al. (2021), people who are likely to look for attention—attention seekers—can be identified as social climbers.

Kitty Pong owns the economic capital. It can be seen through her extravagant billion-dollar jewelry. Her obsession with acquiring rare and expensive jewelry demonstrates not only her wealth but also her need to get credibility in higher circles. For Kitty, this luxurious jewelry is used to get attention, respect, and position among the elite society. Her jewelry initiates to represent her financial success and her ambition to move up the social ladder (Austria et al., 2022).

## **b) Cultural Capital**

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is divided into three forms: embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state. The researcher will break down how Kitty Pong did social climbing using three forms of cultural capital.

### **1) The Embodied State**

The embodied state is described as the internalized information, abilities, and attitudes people acquire over time, often unknowingly, via socialization and schooling. This category covers linguistic competence, manners, and cultural awareness—all of which shape a person's character and perspective (Bourdieu, 1986).

Kitty made a big donation to Sir Francis Poon Foundation at the Fifteenth Annual Ming Foundation Pinnacle Ball by donating \$20 million. However, rather than getting compliments and respect from society, it provoked anger and hatred. It is because of the way Kitty announced her donation. At that time, Sir Francis Poon was on the podium after being awarded the Philanthropic Pinnacle Award, and in his speech, suddenly Kitty interrupted his speech by announcing her donation.

The way she did it by interrupting Sir Francis Poon's speech was wrong. Kitty did not realize it because she lacked cultural capital, especially in the embodied state form. She does not have a wealthy family background, and her life background as a former soap opera actress made her socialize only with people from the same background. That is why she has not acquired attitudes or manners and cultural awareness as good as the one who came from a good family background, attended a good quality school, and socialized with a good society.

### **2) The Objectified State**

Physical cultural objects like books, artwork, instruments, or technological devices constitute the objectified state. Though their value and use depend on the person's ability to understand or use them—qualities usually refined in the embodied state—these objects have cultural worth (Bourdieu, 1986).

Kitty Pong is lack of cultural capital and to address the lack of cultural capital, Corinna suggested that Kitty follow a reading program that she created. With a goal to guide Kitty's transition into someone who can confidently navigate elite society, Corinna suggests to her a well-chosen reading list, including classic literature and culturally relevant works. These books are selected not only for her literary quality but also for her ability to convey upper-class values, preferences, and manners. Through this reading, Kitty is expected to learn how to speak and act in a good way as she acquires the refined speech, knowledge, and etiquette that define high-society members.

### **3) The Institutionalized State**

The institutionalized state is the recognition and legitimization of cultural capital through formal procedures, especially in the form of academic credentials and certificates. These institutional indicators not only confirm a person's cultural capital but also help to transform it into economic or social benefits inside organized institutions, including the employment market or higher education (Bourdieu, 1986).

Kitty Pong lacks a lot of cultural capital. The novel *China Rich Girlfriend* does not mention her academic credentials. It specifically drains her of cultural capital in its institutionalized state form.

### **c) Social Capital**

Kitty Pong's first attempt to climb the elite society is through her marriage with Bernard Tai—one of the richest men in Asia who gets his wealth from his family. It helps Kitty to acquire the economic capital and soon will help her to build a relationship with others from elite society.

After marrying Bernard Tai, Kitty has the economic capital that she can use to make a relationship with the social consultant—Corinna Ko-Tung—who will help her to rebrand her image and integrate her into the elite society.

Corinna helps Kitty in many aspects, especially helping her to build a relationship with influential people by attending exclusive places and exclusive events.

### **3. The Impacts of Becoming a Social Climber**

Becoming a social climber has a significant impact on a person's behavior, relationships, and psychological well-being. Oktaviani et al. (2021) presented some impacts, including social, psychological, and economic issues, from a person who becomes a social climber. Kitty Pong is more impacted in the social and psychological spheres. Those will be explained below:

#### **a) Impact on Social Life**

Since Kitty Pong adopted the social climber behavior, she started to lie about her life background and manipulate others to get attention and acceptance from the elite society. It impacts on her social life, such as making it hard to make a genuine relationship because a person lies and manipulates others about her life, breaks people's trust, and ruins a relationship.

#### **b) Impact on Psychological**

The way Kitty Pong behaves as a social climber illustrates how mental health can suffer under pressure to maintain an idealized image and get acceptance from the higher class. She keeps trying to fit into high society by changing her looks, way of life, and even personality. Her emotional suffering gets worse by repeated rejection by high society despite all her attempts to look and behave like they do. She changes herself, but it is never enough to earn the real respect she wants. This continuous struggle results in a cycle of anxiety, insecurity, and depression.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the result of the analysis in the previous chapter, the researcher concludes that social climbing commonly found in the society, as portrayed in

Kitty Pong the character in the novel *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015). The researcher concludes three focuses on the discussion. Those are the motivations influencing Kitty Pong to become a social climber including wants to acquire high status, recognized by the influential people, accepted by the society, and acquire power. Kitty Pong used economic, cultural, and social capital to climb the social ladder. The researcher found that Kitty Pong lacks of cultural capital which made her hard to fit in the elite society. Moreover, becoming a social climber has some impacts on economic, social, and psychological. Based on the novel *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015), Kitty Pong got impacted in her social life and psychological.

## References

- Angus, J., Kontos, P., Dyck, I., Mckeever, P., & Poland, B. (2005). *The personal significance of home : habitus and the experience of receiving long-term home care*. 27(2), 161–187. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2005.00438.x>
- Austria, E. G., Dacara, B. C. D., Peralta, A. G. S. (2022). *Analyzing Consumer Behavior Towards Luxury Jewelry Brands*. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jbms>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 46-58). New York: Greenwood.
- Jayanti, N., A. (2012). *Komunikasi Kelompok "Social Climber" Pada Kelompok Pergaulan di Surabaya Townsquare (Sutos)*. Jurnal E-Komunikasi.
- Kwan, Kevin. (2015). *China Rich Girlfriend*. United States: Doubleday.
- Mahyuddin. (2017). *SOCIAL CLIMBER DAN BUDAYA PAMER : PARADOKS GAYA HIDUP MASYARAKAT*. 2, 117–136.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 370-396.
- Mohajan, K. H. (n.d.). Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Science and Related Subjects. *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*, 23-48.
- Murfianti, F., Mayangsari, I. D., & Design, V. C. (2020). *Social Climber and Hyperreality (Revisiting Maslow Theory in The Contemporary of Indonesia)*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.2-11-2019.2294880>

- Oktaviani, G., Nisaa, K., Nadhirah, N. A., Indonesia, U. P., & Nadhirah, N. A. (2021). *Journal of Education and Counseling*. 1(2), 107–114.
- Permatasari, D. (2017). Social Climber Phenomenon Among Students (Phenomenological Study in Students in Surakarta).
- Simon. (2019). *Fenomena Social Climber Ditinjau*. 2(2), 303–324. <https://doi.org/10.34081/fidei.v2i2.55>
- Storey, J. (1996). *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Storey, J. (2022). *Consumption*. London: Routledge.