

Representation of Economic Inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* by Kho Ping Hoo

Achmad Arfinanto Arsyadani¹

¹UIN Kiai Ageng Muhammad Besari Ponorogo

* Correspondence e-mail; arfinarsyadani@gmail.com

* WhatsApp Number

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Abstract

Economic inequality involves not only differences in income but also unequal access to and control over economic resources and the social relations arising from such disparities. These issues can be represented in literary works, including martial arts fiction that portrays social life and conflict. This study aims to analyze the representation of economic inequality in Kho Ping Hoo's *Rajawali Lembah Huai*. Using a qualitative approach and content analysis, the study examines words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, narratives, and events that represent economic inequality. Data were analyzed through identification, classification, interpretation, and conclusion by relating textual findings to the concept of economic inequality and relevant previous studies. The findings reveal three main forms of economic inequality: unequal land ownership, debt and interest relations, and inequality in labor relations. These forms are interconnected. Concentrated land ownership causes communities to lose productive assets, while economic hardship creates dependency through debt and interest. The loss of productive assets subsequently weakens the community's position in labor relations with those who control economic resources. Concentrated wealth is also associated with social power and violence used to maintain unequal economic relations. The study demonstrates that *Rajawali Lembah Huai* not only presents martial arts conflicts and adventures but also represents economic inequality and the social dynamics surrounding unequal access to economic resources.

Keywords

keyword 1; economic inequality 2; literary studies 3; Kho Ping Hoo 4 *Rajawali Lembah Huai*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Economic inequality is an important issue in social life because it concerns differences in access to and control over economic resources. Inequality is reflected not only in differences in income but also in asset ownership, economic opportunities, and relationships between groups that possess resources and those in vulnerable positions. In economics, inequality generally refers to the uneven distribution of income or

resources among individuals or groups within society (Sari & Dimova, 2024). This issue is not exclusively a concern of economics but also appears in literary works that record human experiences, social relationships, and conflicts arising from differences in class and control over resources. Previous studies have shown that literature can serve as a space for revealing, criticizing, and questioning economic inequality and the social structures that sustain it (Appelbaum & Alcalá, 2020).

Literary works do not merely function as aesthetic media but can also present the social experiences and material conditions that shape the lives of their characters. In this context, the relationship between literature and economics can be examined through the ways in which texts portray ownership, labor, poverty, wealth, exchange, and power relations arising from control over resources (Clery, 2022). Studies on the relationship between literature and economics indicate that literary texts may contain economic knowledge while also revealing how economic pressures affect human social life (LaCroix et al., 2019). Therefore, literary works can be positioned not as sources of economic data in a statistical sense but as spaces of representation that enable researchers to understand how economic issues are imagined, experienced, contested, and criticized through narrative.

Within Indonesian literature, martial arts fiction is one form of popular literature that not only presents combat and adventure but also incorporates social, political, philosophical, ethical, and cultural issues. Kho Ping Hoo is one of the Indonesian authors who played an important role in the development of this genre. His works are widely known and generally use China as their setting, featuring martial artists, conflicts over power, and various issues concerning community life. Research has shown that Kho Ping Hoo's martial arts fiction developed within the tradition of Chinese-Indonesian literature and attracted readers from diverse backgrounds (Saraswati & Maziyah, 2022). Meanwhile, another study has argued that Kho Ping Hoo's works are significant not only as products of popular literature but also because of their social and cultural contexts, particularly the systems of production, distribution, and consumption of martial arts books during his period (Suryana et al., 2023). These characteristics allow Kho Ping Hoo's works to be examined not only from the perspective of martial arts and adventure but also in terms of the social issues represented through his narratives.

One of Kho Ping Hoo's works that is particularly relevant to this context is *Rajawali Lembah Huai*. The story does not merely present conflicts among characters and martial arts battles but also depicts communities living under unequal economic conditions. In the early part of the story, for example, ordinary people are portrayed

as facing pressure from high taxes, forced labor without compensation, crop failures, and dependence on loans from landowners and officials. Under such conditions, debt with heavy interest can result in people losing their land and livelihoods. A similar situation appears in the community of Cang-cin Village, where most of the land is controlled by Hartawan Ji, while people who previously owned land are reduced to becoming cheap laborers (Kho Ping Hoo, 1986). Thus, economic issues in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* are represented not merely through differences between the rich and the poor but also through unequal land ownership, debt relations, control over labor, and the power relations associated with them.

Several studies of Kho Ping Hoo have examined his works and authorship from various perspectives. Saraswati and Maziyah (2022) examined Kho Ping Hoo from a historical perspective, focusing on his life and the development of his authorship within the Indonesian martial arts fiction tradition. Meanwhile, Suryana et al. (2023) examined Kho Ping Hoo's works from the perspective of literary sociology, particularly in relation to the production systems and models of martial arts books. These studies indicate that Kho Ping Hoo's works have received academic attention, particularly regarding the history of his authorship, the development of martial arts fiction, and the social context of production and distribution. However, studies specifically examining *Rajawali Lembah Huai* as an object for analyzing the representation of economic inequality remain limited. The work contains issues concerning land ownership, debt, interest, labor control, and relations between groups possessing wealth and communities in weaker economic positions. This situation creates an opportunity for a more focused examination of how economic inequality is represented through narrative and conflict in Kho Ping Hoo's work.

Based on previous studies and an examination of the text, this study places *Rajawali Lembah Huai* within a different area of inquiry, namely the representation of economic inequality. The analysis focuses on how unequal control over resources is constructed through land ownership, debt relations, interest payments, labor control, and power relations. Thus, this study does not view economic issues merely as a background to the story but as part of the conflict structure that shapes relationships among characters and the lives of the community depicted in the narrative.

This study aims to analyze the representation of economic inequality in Kho Ping Hoo's *Rajawali Lembah Huai*. The study focuses on how economic inequality is represented through the distribution and control of resources, particularly land ownership, debt relations, interest payments, and the economic position of communities in relation to groups possessing wealth and power. The analysis also

seeks to identify the mechanisms through which inequality is formed and the responses of characters and communities to unequal economic conditions. Thus, *Rajawali Lembah Huai* is examined not merely as a martial arts story involving conflicts among martial artists but also as a literary work representing economic issues and the social relations associated with them.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using content analysis. The qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting economic inequality as represented in the text rather than measuring it statistically. This approach enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon holistically and contextually based on the data contained in the research source (Fadli, 2021). Content analysis is used to identify, classify, and interpret textual passages related to economic inequality. In literary research, this method enables textual data to be examined systematically through thematic identification, data categorization, and interpretation of the meanings contained within the text (Saeful & Apriliya, 2021).

The primary data source of this study is Kho Ping Hoo's martial arts story *Rajawali Lembah Huai*, published by CV Gema in 1986. The research data consist of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, narratives, and events that represent economic inequality. The data include land ownership, poverty, debt, interest payments, asset transfers, labor relations, and economic relationships between communities and parties possessing wealth and power. Secondary data were obtained from books, scholarly journal articles, and previous studies relevant to economic inequality, literary studies, and Kho Ping Hoo's works.

Data collection was conducted through documentation by closely reading the text, identifying passages related to economic inequality, and recording and categorizing the relevant data according to the themes identified. Data analysis was conducted through several stages: identification, classification, interpretation, and conclusion. At the identification stage, textual passages related to economic inequality were selected. The collected data were then categorized according to the forms and mechanisms of inequality identified. Subsequently, the data were interpreted by considering the narrative context, dialogues, characters, and conflicts underlying their occurrence. The interpretations were then connected with the concept of economic inequality and relevant previous studies to explain how economic inequality is represented in *Rajawali Lembah Huai*.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that economic inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* is represented through differences in control over resources between groups possessing wealth and communities in weaker economic positions. This inequality is particularly evident in land ownership, debt relations, labor control, and power relations that enable wealthy groups to maintain their economic position. Thus, inequality in the story is not presented merely as a difference between the rich and the poor but as an economic relationship that places certain members of the community in a dependent position toward those who control resources. These three forms of economic inequality are summarized in Table 1.

No.	Form of Economic Inequality	Textual Representation	Economic Mechanism	Implication
1	Unequal Land Ownership	Wealthy landowners control productive land, while villagers lose access to it.	Concentrated land ownership reduces community economic autonomy.	Loss of productive assets and greater economic dependence.
2	Debt and Interest Relations	Economic hardship drives villagers to borrow for food and agricultural needs.	Debt and interest create dependency on capital owners.	Greater vulnerability and weaker bargaining power.
3	Inequality in Labor Relations	Loss of productive assets forces villagers to depend on wealthy owners for employment.	Control over land and capital strengthens employers' bargaining power.	Weak labor position and reproduction of inequality.

Table 1. Forms of Economic Inequality Represented in *Rajawali Lembah Huai*

3.1. Unequal Land Ownership

Economic inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* is represented, among other things, through unequal land ownership. Land in the story functions not only as a place of residence or agricultural property but also as a primary source of livelihood. When land ownership becomes concentrated in the hands of particular groups, people who lose access to land are placed in a weaker economic position and become dependent on landowners (Amalia et al., 2023). This condition is evident in the conversation

between Cu Goan Ciang and Kakek Coa concerning the situation of the people in Cang-cin Village. When asked about the villagers working in seemingly fertile fields, Kakek Coa explains:

“Who among us owns fertile rice fields and farmland? Not a single person in our village owns even a piece of land anymore. It all belongs to Hartawan Ji!” (Kho Ping Hoo, 1986).

This statement indicates the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a single economic group, represented by Hartawan Ji. At the same time, villagers who previously owned or controlled land no longer possess productive assets. This condition demonstrates that economic inequality in the story is not merely a matter of differences in the amount of wealth possessed but also concerns unequal control over productive resources (Li & Sunder, 2022). Land is important because it serves as a means through which people generate income and meet their basic needs. When land becomes concentrated in the hands of those possessing capital and power, people who no longer own land lose one of their primary sources of economic independence.

This inequality is also connected to the relationship between land ownership and debt. This can be seen when Kui Hwa explains Kakek Coa’s situation to her father. She states that Kakek Coa had repaid his loan and the interest, yet his rice fields and farmland had nevertheless been transferred to Hartawan Ji:

“Kakek Coa has repaid all his debts to you, including interest many times greater than the original amount of the loan. His rice fields and farmland have been handed over to you; everything has passed into your hands.” (Kho Ping Hoo, 1986).

This quotation demonstrates that the transfer of land ownership cannot be separated from the mechanism of debt. People facing economic hardship need loans to meet their daily needs and sustain agricultural activities. However, repayment obligations accompanied by interest increase their economic burden (Shohibuddin, 2019). In Kakek Coa’s case, the debt relationship ultimately involves not only a financial obligation but also the loss of land as a productive asset. Thus, debt in the story functions beyond a simple relationship between lender and borrower because it also affects the structure of economic resource ownership.

The two quotations reveal a relationship among poverty, debt, and the concentration of land ownership. People in weak economic positions require loans, while those possessing wealth have the capacity to provide loans and simultaneously acquire the assets used to settle the debt. When land is transferred to a party that already possesses considerable wealth, the concentration of resources within the same group becomes even greater. Conversely, people who lose their land become

increasingly dependent on employment provided by landowners. This pattern creates an unequal economic relationship because people's ability to generate income becomes increasingly determined by those who control productive resources.

This representation demonstrates that economic inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* is not depicted merely through individual poverty but through an unequal ownership structure. Hartawan Ji is positioned as a person who controls land and economic resources, while villagers are deprived of assets and forced to work within an economic system controlled by him. In other words, the story demonstrates that wealth inequality can develop through a process in which the accumulation of assets by one party occurs alongside the loss of productive assets by another.

Interestingly, land ownership in the story is also connected to power relations. Hartawan Ji's wealth does not merely provide economic benefits but also strengthens his position within village society. He has the ability to provide loans, control land, and employ enforcers to confront people considered disobedient. This condition demonstrates that control over economic resources can develop into social and political power. Concentrated land ownership can become a source of economic, social, and political power for rural elites, including through patron-client relationships that influence local decision-making (Faguet et al., 2020). Thus, ownership of economic resources in the story has social and political consequences. Wealth enables individuals to obtain a stronger position in determining their relationships with communities that are economically subordinate to them. This demonstrates that concentrated land ownership can serve as a source of economic, social, and political power for rural elites, including through patron-client relationships that influence local decision-making (Beg, 2021).

In the context of *Rajawali Lembah Huai*, these findings indicate that Hartawan Ji's wealth does not merely constitute material ownership but also functions as a resource that strengthens his bargaining position vis-à-vis the community. Land ownership, the ability to provide loans, and the use of enforcers together create a relationship that places Hartawan Ji in a dominant position, while the villagers become increasingly dependent and vulnerable.

3.2. Debt and Interest Relations

The problem of unequal land ownership in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* does not stand alone. Rather, it is closely connected to debt relations that place poor communities in vulnerable economic positions. In the story, loans appear as a form of assistance provided by Hartawan Ji to people experiencing economic hardship. However, this relationship is not entirely social or philanthropic because the loans carry repayment

obligations and interest. This can be seen in the conversation between Hartawan Ji and his daughter, Kui Hwa, concerning Kakek Coa. Hartawan Ji justifies his actions toward Kakek Coa by stating:

“When the drought came, who lent him money for food every day and to buy rice seeds? I did! Was it not only right that he should now work for me?” (Kho Ping Hoo, 1986).

This statement indicates that the loan was provided when the community was in severe need. The need involved not only daily consumption but also productive requirements, particularly the purchase of rice seeds. The loan enabled the community to sustain its livelihood while continuing agricultural production. However, when access to capital is available only through those who possess wealth, lending relationships can create dependency between those who need capital and those who control financial resources.

In the context of rural economies, the relationship among debt, interest, and dependency is not merely an individual problem. Research on rural communities in Java shows that poorer farming households are more vulnerable to purchasing production inputs on credit and losing part of their income to interest payments (Pattenden & Wastuti, 2023). Under certain conditions, such pressure can cause households to become trapped in long-term debt. This finding helps contextualize the economic conditions represented in *Rajawali Lembah Huai*, in which the need for capital among poor communities can become a source of dependency when access to loans is controlled by parties with greater economic power.

The issue becomes more complex when debt relations are connected to the transfer of land ownership. Kui Hwa explicitly describes Kakek Coa’s situation to her father:

“Kakek Coa has repaid all his debts to you, including interest many times greater than the original amount of the loan. His rice fields and farmland have been handed over to you; everything has passed into your hands.” (Kho Ping Hoo, 1986).

This quotation demonstrates the relationship among debt, interest, and the loss of productive assets. Kakek Coa not only has an obligation to repay the loan but ultimately loses his rice fields and farmland. Thus, debt in the story becomes a mechanism that can transform a person’s economic position: from a landowner into someone who no longer possesses productive assets and must work for the party who controls them.

The relationship between debt and land transfer also receives support from research on rural economies. Based on financial and land-transfer data from villages

in Zhejiang, higher levels of debt have been associated with increased land transfers, including transfers of land to larger farming households and agricultural enterprises (Ye et al., 2021). This finding does not mean that the mechanism identified in that study is identical to the one represented in *Rajawali Lembah Huai*. Rather, it provides a framework for understanding how debt pressure can be associated with changes in land control. In the story, this relationship is represented more directly through Kakek Coa's experience of losing his land after facing debt and interest obligations.

Thus, debt in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* does not merely function as a narrative device for explaining the relationship between Hartawan Ji and the villagers. Debt becomes part of an economic mechanism that reinforces inequality. Those who possess wealth have the ability to provide loans, while poor communities need loans to maintain consumption and production. When loans carry heavy interest and become associated with the transfer of assets, the relationship results in the accumulation of resources by the lender while reducing the productive assets of the borrower.

This pattern demonstrates that economic inequality in the story develops through an interconnected process. Economic needs push people into debt; debt generates repayment obligations and interest; these obligations place pressure on their economic capacity; and productive assets may eventually be transferred to parties with greater economic power (Gunung et al., 2023). Thus, inequality does not merely exist as an initial condition between Hartawan Ji and the villagers but is reproduced through economic mechanisms that further differentiate the positions of the two groups.

3.3. *Inequality in Labor Relations*

Economic inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* is also represented through labor relations that place villagers in weaker positions than those who control productive resources. After losing their land and becoming economically dependent, people have few alternatives but to work for those who control the land (Ambarwati, 2024). This relationship is evident in the conversation between Hartawan Ji and his daughter, Kui Hwa, when Hartawan Ji justifies his treatment of Kakek Coa. He states that Kakek Coa had received a loan from him during the drought and therefore should work for him. This statement indicates that economic assistance provided to the community is subsequently used as a basis for demanding labor from the recipient.

"When the drought came, who lent him money for food every day and to buy rice seeds? I did! Was it not only right that he should now work for me?" (Kho Ping Hoo, 1986).

This statement reveals an unequal relationship between the owner of capital and people in need. Hartawan Ji does not regard the loan merely as an economic transaction but as a basis for claiming the labor of Kakek Coa. Thus, the debt relationship develops into a labor relationship that places the borrower in a subordinate position. Economic dependency limits people's freedom to determine their employment relationships because access to their livelihoods is controlled by those who possess land and capital.

The unequal labor relationship is also evident in the treatment of villagers. When Kakek Coa does not work in the fields because he is mourning at his wife's grave, two of Hartawan Ji's enforcers force him to work and even subject him to violence. Kui Hwa objects to this treatment and states that Kakek Coa has already repaid his debt along with interest far greater than the original loan. The conflict demonstrates that the economic issue in the story concerns not only the obligation to repay debt but also who has the authority to determine how a person's labor is used.

From an economic perspective, this condition can be understood as an imbalance in bargaining power within labor relations. Those who control land and capital have broader economic choices, whereas people without productive assets become more dependent on employment opportunities provided by resource owners. Such differences in bargaining power can prevent labor relations from taking place on an equal footing. Studies of rural economic inequality indicate that control over productive assets is an important factor determining the position of households within the economic structure because asset ownership provides the ability to generate income independently, while the absence of assets increases dependency on others (Ainurrahma et al., 2018).

The relationship between land control and labor is also evident when Kakek Coa and the villagers no longer possess land of their own. As previously mentioned, Kakek Coa states that none of the villagers owns land because all of it has become Hartawan Ji's property. This condition creates a hierarchical economic relationship: Hartawan Ji occupies the position of resource owner, while the community occupies the position of labor provider. Unequal ownership therefore produces inequality in labor relations.

The issue becomes even clearer when Hartawan Ji's economic power is supported by physical force. He has approximately twenty enforcers whom he uses to confront villagers considered disobedient. When the conflict with Village Head Koa develops, the number of people under his control increases after former enforcers of Village Head Koa join him. The presence of these enforcers demonstrates that wealth in the story generates not only economic capacity but also the means to maintain

unequal social relations. Economically vulnerable communities face not only dependency on the landowner but also the threat of violence when they resist the will of the more powerful party.

In this context, economic inequality has a broader dimension than wealth distribution alone. Control over assets enables Hartawan Ji to control the community's sources of livelihood, while his wealth also allows him to use force to maintain his position. The relationship between resource ownership and power demonstrates that concentrated land ownership can become a source of economic, social, and political power for rural elites. Thus, land ownership in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* cannot be separated from Hartawan Ji's ability to regulate labor relations and confront members of the community who oppose his interests.

Nevertheless, the story does not portray the community as entirely passive in the face of these economic relations. The emergence of Cu Goan Ciang and other characters who side with the community becomes a turning point in a structure previously dominated by the wealthy. When these characters reject the violence of the enforcers and attempt to drive them out of the village, the economic conflict develops into a more explicit social conflict. This indicates that the representation of economic inequality in the story is also connected to resistance against relations perceived as oppressive.

Thus, control over labor constitutes part of the mechanism that reinforces economic inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai*. The loss of land makes the community dependent on resource owners for their livelihoods, while debt strengthens their subordinate position. Under these circumstances, Hartawan Ji's wealth functions not merely as accumulated assets but also as an instrument for obtaining labor and maintaining power over the community (Gafuraningtyas et al., 2024). Economic inequality in the story ultimately forms a layered relationship: land ownership produces economic dependency, dependency weakens the community's bargaining position, and economic power is subsequently reinforced by social authority and the use of violence.

The representation of economic inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* does not stop at portraying the community as a group experiencing economic pressure. The story also depicts responses to this structure through the actions of Cu Goan Ciang, Koa Hok, Koa Sek, Kui Hwa, and the people of Cang-cin Village. Their resistance is directed primarily against resource control and the actions of the enforcers rather than against Hartawan Ji's family as a whole. This demonstrates that the conflict constructed by Kho Ping Hoo is not simply a confrontation between the rich and the

poor but also a critique of the use of wealth and power to maintain unequal economic relationships. The story presents economic inequality as a structural issue capable of generating social tension when those in weaker positions begin to reject relationships that have long placed them in dependency.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Kho Ping Hoo's *Rajawali Lembah Huai* represents economic inequality. The inequality is not portrayed solely through differences between the rich and the poor but also through unequal control over resources and the economic relationships formed between the two groups. The inequality appears in three main forms: unequal land ownership, debt and interest relations, and inequality in labor relations. These three forms are interconnected and collectively depict the increasingly dependent economic position of communities in relation to those who control resources.

Unequal land ownership constitutes the most fundamental form of the problem. The concentration of land in the hands of Hartawan Ji causes the community to lose productive assets that previously served as sources of livelihood. This condition is subsequently connected to debt relations. Loans provided to people experiencing economic hardship, accompanied by interest, can ultimately contribute to the transfer of land to parties possessing greater economic power. Thus, debt in the story functions not merely as a financial obligation but also as one of the mechanisms reinforcing the concentration of asset ownership.

The loss of land weakens the community's position in labor relations with those who control the land. Dependence on resource owners limits the community's bargaining power, while Hartawan Ji can use his wealth and ownership to obtain labor and maintain his position. These economic relations are further reinforced by the presence of enforcers, demonstrating that wealth in the story functions not only materially but also as a source of social power and a means of maintaining unequal relationships.

At the same time, *Rajawali Lembah Huai* does not portray the community as entirely passive in the face of inequality. The emergence of Cu Goan Ciang, Koa Hok, Koa Sek, Kui Hwa, and the people of Cang-cin Village demonstrates responses to and resistance against the use of wealth and power perceived as oppressive. Their resistance is directed primarily against practices of violence and forms of control that harm the community, while also affirming an aspiration for a more peaceful and prosperous social life.

The representation of economic inequality in *Rajawali Lembah Huai* can therefore be understood as a layered process: the concentration of land ownership creates unequal control over assets; economic needs generate dependency through debt and interest; the loss of productive assets intensifies dependency in labor relations; and concentrated wealth is subsequently reinforced by social power and violence. This study demonstrates that Kho Ping Hoo's martial arts fiction not only presents martial arts conflicts and adventures but also represents economic issues and social inequality through conflicts within community life.

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