



## Translation and Reception of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in China

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### Abstract

*Gulliver's Travels*, a world-famous novel, has a great influence among the Chinese readers. Based on the reception theory, this paper first attempts to present a brief translation history of the novel by analyzing its various Chinese versions in different historical periods of China, and then discuss its reception among both the professional readers and the ordinary readers in China in the light of both the professional readers' reviews on its translation published in the articles and journals of CNKI and the general readers' comments on its translation published in the "Douban Reading" website, finding that the professional readers' reviews are quite positive and the recognition and reception of the translation among the general readers is very high. Finally, the paper holds that the popularity of *Gulliver's Travels* in China contributes much to both its attractive plots and its high-quality translations.

**Key words:** *Gulliver's travels*; Chinese translation; Reception; Reception theory

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### INTRODUCTION

British writer Jonathan Swift's masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels*, a famous satirical novel, tells an absurd and bizarre story of Captain Lemuel Gulliver's fantastic

adventures of traveling around four countries with the author's rich satirical techniques and fictional fantasy. Since its first publication in 1726, *Gulliver's Travels* has been warmly sought after by readers. Over the centuries, it has been translated into dozens of languages and widely spread around the world. A movie adapted according to its content has experienced five remakes respectively in 1939, 1979, 1992, 1996 and 2010 in the United States, Australia, France and Britain, reflecting that *Gulliver's Travels* is a real classic (Jin, 2016, p.134). In China, *Gulliver's Travels* is also one of the most influential foreign literary works, and some of its translated versions have been listed as the required readings in the new curriculum of national standard.

There is no lack of researches on *Gulliver's Travels* in China, but the researches on literature are far more than that those on its Chinese translations. Previous studies on the translation of *Gulliver's Travels* mainly include the following two aspects. One is to analyze the different Chinese versions of *Gulliver's Travels* from different perspectives, such as, "A Comparative Study of the Two Chinese Translations of *Gulliver's Travels*" (Zhou, 2001), "A Review of Three Chinese Versions of *Gulliver's Travels* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory" (Chen & Shang, 2016), etc., holding that the first step to translate is to understand the full text so as to correctly convey the meaning of the original text; To some extent, the translator's understanding of the original text reflects his translation ability; Different translators are supposed to adopt different translation strategies according to different translation purposes in translating great works. The other is to discuss the factors influencing the translation of *Gulliver's Travels*, such as, "Ideology and the Deformation in Translation" (Teng & Zhuan, 2011), "Ideology and Character Deformation in Fictional Translation" (Fang, 2005), "Novel Concept and Reader Orientation: Two Factors Influencing Novel Translation in the Late Qing Dynasty" (Jiang, 2013), "Influence of

Children's Characteristics on Text Rewriting" (Zhang & Zhu, 2016), etc., pointing out that in the process of translation, the translator is influenced and restricted by ideology, reader's characteristics, chief editor's or translator's novel concept and other factors, all of which play an important role in achieving his translation effect.

It can be seen that the translation of *Gulliver's Travels* in China has been widely concerned by scholars. However, the previous studies are limited to the comparative analysis of its translated versions, and seldom focus on its translation and reception in China. Based on the analysis of various Chinese versions of *Gulliver's Travels* in different historical periods, this paper attempts to study the translation and reception of this novel under the guidance of reception theory.

## 1. OVERVIEW OF RECEPTION THEORY

Reception theory, also known as reception aesthetics theory, is an important school of western contemporary literary theory. It came into being in the 1960s, and "on the basis of phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics, the Konstanz school, with Jauss and Iser as its outstanding representatives, established reception aesthetics" (Yang, 2005, p.148). Jauss (1987, p.584), the initiator of reception theory, puts forward in *Reception Aesthetics and Reception Theory* that "literary works are fundamentally destined to be created for the receiver. In the triangular relationship regarding the author, works and readers, the reader is not a passive part of the response to literature, but a dynamic component of history". Reception theory "directly shifts the focus of criticism to the receiver of literary works -- the reader, and raises the status of the reader to an unprecedented level" (Xie, 2008, p.249). It emphasizes the role of readers, "puts the relationship between works and readers in the first place of literary research, and fully recognizes the creative role of readers in the meaning and aesthetic value of works" (Yang, 2005, p.148).

## 2. TRANSLATION AND RECEPTION OF GULLIVER'S TRAVELS IN CHINA

"Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is the first English novel translated into Chinese." (Wang, 2018, p.108) Since it was first translated into China in 1872, the Chinese versions of *Gulliver's Travels* have appeared one after another covering every period of China, making a profound impact on the history of Chinese literature. By 2019, the number of its Chinese versions has reached more than a thousand, and some of the translated versions have been listed as the required readings in the new curriculum of national standard.

### 2.1 Translation of *Gulliver's Travels* in China

#### 2.1.1 In the Late Qing Dynasty

The Late Qing Dynasty (1840-1911) is a special historical period, in which "in order to save the nation, ideology

is to some extent expressed as the means of 'seeking immediate benefits', which is reflected in the selection of translation materials" (Chen, 2013, p.38). According to Gulliver's adventures in Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa and the country of the Houyhnhnms, *Gulliver's Travels* was initially regarded as the translation of "science fiction" into China. Its Chinese translation mainly served the purpose of publicizing scientific thoughts, arousing people's awareness and enlightening people's wisdom. There were many fictional magazines in the Late Qing Dynasty, four of which had huge influence: the first is *The New Stories* edited by Liang Qichao, the second is *The All-story Monthly* edited by Wu Jianren, the third is *The Tapestry Stories* edited by Li Boyuan, and the fourth is *The Story Forest* edited by Huang Moxi. The four fictional magazines all serialized science fiction and gave it an important position. Under the active advocacy of the four magazines, other newspapers and magazines also kept up with the pace, and "the translation of science fiction presents a prosperous scene at one time" (Chen, 2013, p.40). In the Late Qing Dynasty, the translations of most science fictions were usually first serialized in newspapers and magazines and then printed as separate editions. *Gulliver's Travels* was no exception.

There were three Chinese versions of *Gulliver's Travels* in the Late Qing Dynasty. The first version entitled *Tan Ying Xiao Lu* (谈瀛小录), whose translator was unknown, was serially published in Shen Newspaper from May 21 to 24, 1872. This version was only serialized for four issues without sequels. The second version was serialized in vernacular in *The Tapestry Stories* (the fifth to the seventy-first issue), one of the four major fictional magazines. Its original Chinese name was changed from "Jiao Yao Guo" (焦饶国) to "Han Man You" (汗漫游), and the translator was also unknown. It stopped serializing in March of 1906. All the four chapters of the book were translated, but "the third chapter only included the tour in Laputa, and a section that the protagonist was swallowed by a giant whale was added to the fourth chapter" (Wang, 2018, p.108). The third version *Hai Wai Xuan Qu Lu* (海外轩渠录) was jointly translated by Lin Shu and Wei Yi and published by the Commercial Press in 1906. It was the first separate edition of the novel. The upsurge of fiction translation in the Late Qing Dynasty deeply influences the later Chinese literature.

#### 2.1.2 In the Period of the Republic of China

During the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949), people never stopped their pursuit of democracy and science. Movement with "democracy and science" as its aim and ideological trend appeared one after another, and the first to raise these two flags is the May 4th New Culture Movement. After the May 4th Movement, the pursuit of science and democracy continued to develop, and the hot exploration and pursuit of democracy and science spirit ran through the literature and art.

According to the statistics, there were 18 Chinese translations of *Gulliver's Travels* in the period of the Republic of China, among which one was annotated by **Table 1**

Yan Mei and published by China Book Company in 1916 during the May 4th Movement (Table 1).

**Chinese Versions of *Gulliver's Travels* in the Period of the Republic of China**

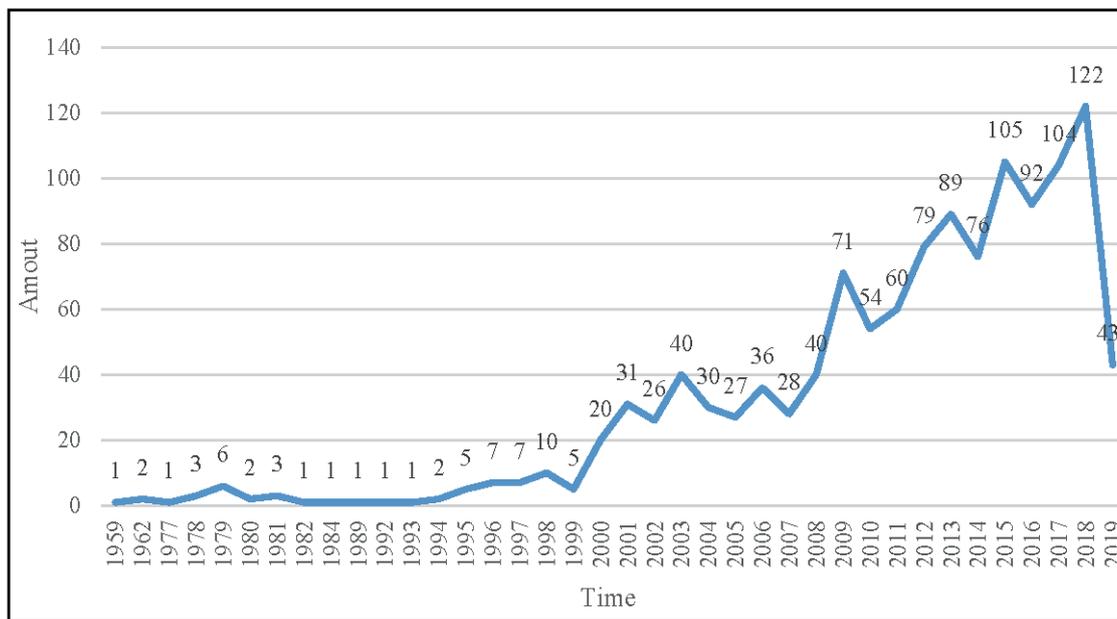
Time	Title of book	Translator	Publisher
1914	Hai Wai Xuan Qu Lu (海外轩渠录)	Lin Shu & Wei Yi (林纾、魏易)	Shanghai Commercial Press (上海商务印书馆)
1916	Gulliver's Travels (格列佛游记)	Yan Mei (严枚 注释)	Shanghai China Book Company (上海中华书局)
1933	Hai Wai Xuan Qu Lu (海外轩渠录)	Lin Shu & Wei Yi (林纾、魏易)	Shanghai Commercial Press (上海商务印书馆)
1933	Xiao Ren Guo (小人国)	Tang Xiguang (唐锡光)	New China Bookstore (新中国书局)
1933	Xiao Ren Guo You Ji (小人国游记)	Wu Jingxin (吴景新)	World Journal Bookstore (世界书局)
1934	Jia Li Hua You Ji (伽利华游记)	Wu Guangjian (伍光建 选译)	Shanghai Commercial Press (上海商务印书馆)
1935	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (格列佛游记)	Yan Mei (严枚 注释)	Shanghai China Book Company (上海中华书局)
1936	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (格列佛游记)	Xu Weisen (徐蔚森)	Qiming Bookstore (启明书局)
1936	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (photocopy) (格列佛游记) (影印本)	unknown	Qiming Bookstore (启明书局)
1939	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (sequel) (格列佛游记) (续集)	Yi Han (易寒)	Qiming Bookstore (启明书局)
1939	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (格列佛游记)	Huang Luyin (黄卢隐)	Shanghai China Book Company (上海中华书局)
1948	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (2nd Edition) (格列佛游记) (第2版)	Fan Quan (范泉)	Shanghai Yongxiang Press (上海永祥印书馆)
1948	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (格列佛游记)	Zhang Jian (张健)	Zhengfeng Press (正风出版社)
1948	Xiao Ren Guo (小人国)	Zhao Xuan (赵复 著)	Shanghai Commercial Press (上海商务印书馆)
1948	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (photocopy) (格列佛游记) (影印本)	unknown	Zhengfeng Press (正风出版社)
1948	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (full translation & photocopy) (格列佛游记) (全译本 影印本)	unknown	Zhengfeng Press (正风出版社)
1949	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (格列佛游记)	Su Qiao (苏桥)	Shanghai Book, Newspaper and Magazine Joint Publishing Office (上海书报杂志联合发行所)
1949	Ge Lie Fo You Ji (格列佛游记)	Fan Quan (范泉 缩写)	Shanghai Yongxiang Press (上海永祥印书馆)

Since the May 4th Movement, vernacular Chinese began to replace classical Chinese. *Jia Li Hua You Ji* (伽利华游记), partly translated by Wu Guangjian and published by the Commercial Press in 1934, has been the version of vernacular Chinese. In terms of the translated titles, the 18 versions in Table 1 fall into five different categories. Among them, one is translated into *Jia Li Hua You Ji* (伽利华游记), one *Xiao Ren Guo You Ji* (小人国游记), two *Hai Wai Xuan Qu Lu* (海外轩渠录), two *Xiao Ren Guo* (小人国), and the other 12 *Ge Lie Fo You Ji* (格列佛游记). Through the collection and sorting of the Chinese versions of this novel, it is found that the translators who later translated it generally adopt the title *Ge Lie Fo You Ji* (格列佛游记), the Chinese title created during the May 4th Movement. In terms of publishers, all the 18 versions were published by the publishing houses

in Shanghai. The reason probably consists in the transfer of the central position to Shanghai after June 3, 1919 during the May 4th Movement.

### 2.1.3 After the Founding of the People's Republic of China

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the translation of *Gulliver's Travels* has been in full swing, except the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The Cultural Revolution period makes the translation of this novel disappear in this period. However, in the first year after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1977), a version of *Gulliver's Travels* appeared, which was translated by Lin Huizhu and published by Popular Book Company. Figure 1 can directly reflect the translations of this novel in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China.



**Figure 1**  
The trend of the translation of *Gulliver's Travels* since the founding of the PRC

As can be seen from the above figure, the number of Chinese versions of *Gulliver's Travels* has increased rapidly since 2000, and it kept translating dozens of versions every year, the maximum number even exceeded 100 versions in a year, and reached the peak of 122 versions in 2018. The translation of *Gulliver's Travels* flourished after the millennium, which is inextricably linked with the cultural policy implemented in China. Since the reform and opening up policy, the cultural policy of the Communist Party of China “has experienced a historical process of recovering and rebuilding, deepening and developing, consolidating and completing, innovating and strengthening, and initially formed a perfect cultural system” (Cui, 2018, p.83), marching continuously towards the construction of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics of the strategic goals. China’s increasing attention to the cultural industry has triggered the enthusiasm for the translation cause, which has greatly promoted the translation of *Gulliver's Travels* after 2000.

It is worth mentioning that *Ge Lie Fo You Ji* (updated edition), published by Beijing People’s Literature Publishing House in 1979, was included in the required reading series of the new curriculum of national standard, starting the age that *Gulliver's Travels* would become a required reading target for primary and secondary school students. According to the reception theory, the focus of literary research is shifted to the readers. In the Late Qing Dynasty, *Gulliver's Travels* was translated into China as a science fiction. Because of its fascinating plot, it has a great attraction to children, gradually making it a Children’s work in China. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese translation of *Gulliver's Travels* has shown its characteristics of Children’s Literature. In terms of editions, there

are various kinds for teenagers and children, such as “illustrated book”, “picture book”, “phonetic edition”, “teenager’s edition”, “children’s edition”, “two-color edition”, “full-color cartoon edition”, etc. In the case of the title of the series, the translated versions are frequently included in some series that are obviously target readers oriented, such as “juvenile books of foreign literary classics”, “quick reading of children’s Classics”, “juvenile books of world classic literature”, “world children’s literary classics”, “primary school students’ reading of masterpieces”, “100 children’s phonetic readings”, “new Chinese curriculum standard designated masterpieces”, “the world’s best-selling children’s literature masterpieces”, “the Chinese and foreign masterpieces for teenagers to grow up”, “the world’s literature masterpieces and teenagers to read”, “the new Chinese Curriculum Series”, “the new Chinese curriculum extra-curricular readings”, etc. As for publishers, the novel is often published by “children’s Publishing House”, “women’s and children’s Publishing House”, “Education Publishing House”, “Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing House” and other publishing institutions in different regions. All these further show that *Gulliver's Travels* has been an instructive literary work for children.

Swift might intend to reflect, through *Gulliver's Travels*, the corruption and evil of the British ruling class at that time, and to expose and criticize the cruelty and the violence of wars. Nevertheless, from the perspective of reception theory, because literary texts are usually “uncertain” in meaning and thus require readers’ participation to fill in the “blank”, the interpretation of the text is not likely to be merely the author’s original intention of creation or the understanding of its original readers, but the result of “the process of interaction

and integration between the understanding subject and object” (Yang, 2005, p.148). Therefore, the translation of *Gulliver’s Travels* in China, to some extent, could not keep the irony endowed by the author, and it thus has been transformed into a literary work that attracts children’s attention.

## 2.2 Reception of the Chinese Versions of *Gulliver’s Travels*

### 2.2.1 Professional Readers’ Reception

*Gulliver’s Travels* is well received in China, and many Chinese readers have made positive comments on it. Based on the journals and literatures of CNKI, this paper makes an analysis of the reception of the translated versions by professional readers.

*Gulliver’s Travels*, a satirical masterpiece in the 18th century, is “deeply loved by people all over the world for its unbridled fairy tale color and realistic significance of satire” (Jin, 2016, p.134). In addition, its practical significance also arouses readers’ thinking. After reading its Chinese version, Ruan (2005, p.127), from the perspective of national politics, thinks that *Gulliver’s Travels* has become “a call for fights in the Irish National Democratic Independence Movement, pointed out the treachery within the British colonists for the Irish people and the world’s colonial people, and attacked the hypocrisy of democracy and freedom advocated by the bourgeoisie for the people.” From a social perspective, this work is of educational significance to both the real society and the readers. It is “a travel novel that is of great significance to education” (Mao, 2014, p.32). Sun (2002, p.100) maintains that *Gulliver’s Travels* contains profound philosophy, thinking that “Swift’s teasing of Newton actually reveals a problem about the shortcomings of science. It is this detailed description that Swift puts forward a warning that cannot be avoided even today, that is, science is truth whereas blind worship for science often leads people to fallacy.”

In addition to its practical significance, *Gulliver’s Travels* has a great literary value. Through reading the Chinese translations, some professional readers say that it is of great research value and can be called “the history of European social evolution” (Lin, 2014, p.46), which provides a reference for later generations to study the history of British literature and the changes of European society more accurately. In this work, Swift exposes evil and ugliness while advocating beauty and goodness. “His critical and progressive thoughts have a far-reaching influence, giving full play to the social value of literary creation, and profoundly influencing British literature and culture for a long time” (Wen, 2017, p.17). In Europe of the 18th century, realism developed gradually, while *Gulliver’s Travels*, with its amazing fictional content and rich imagination, won an unexpected success. As early as the beginning of establishing the general trend of realism in Europe, *Gulliver’s Travels* created a very unique form of the satirical novel at that time, thus occupying an

important position in the development of novel style. Wu (1999, p.10) praises it by saying, “*Gulliver’s Travels* is a masterpiece with its own characteristics.” In the form of creation, the narration of *Gulliver’s Travels* is very distinctive. “In addition to the profound ideological connotation, this work is also very perfect in the form of art, and there are many descriptive techniques and artistic skills that are worth learning” (Zhao, 2015, p.101). Furthermore, the artistic structure of the novel is highly praised, “especially the travels in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, which are considered as ‘one of the great treasures of literature’” (Zhang, 2020, p.112).

What’s more, the professional readers have specific comments on the translations and their translators of *Gulliver’s Travels*. As the book has been turned into a children’s novel in China, most of the translations published in recent years are also included in the Children’s Literature Classical Series, playing the role of “guiding little readers to find the fun of reading, increasing their language accumulation, and cultivating their reading habits” (Teng & Zhuan, 2011, p.51). Zhou (2001) compares Zhang Jian’s translation published by People’s Literature Publishing House in 1962 (hereinafter referred to as “Zhang’s version”) with Yang Haocheng’s translation published by Yilin Press in 1995 (hereinafter referred to as “Yang’s version”) and points out that the two Chinese versions “have their own characteristics and advantages”. In contrast, Zhang’s version is “more rigid, slightly slow and lengthy”, while Yang’s version “grasps the meaning and spirit of the original text profoundly, with the appropriate and accurate use of words as well as the employment of idiomatic and cohesive sentences, and keeps to the purport of the original text” (Zhou, 2001, p.178), thus achieving a higher level of translation quality. The professional readers make a high evaluation further of its high-quality translation. Wang (2014, p.32) holds that: “*Gulliver’s Travels*, as a rare masterpiece in the history of British literature, is a representative of satirical literature.” This work “establishes Swift’s important position in the history of British literature, and makes him as famous as Defoe and Fielding, together with whom he becomes the representative of the radicalism during the Enlightenment Movement in the 18th century” (Zhang, 2020, p.112). *Gulliver’s Travels* is “a classical art in the history of literature” (Lin, 2014, p.46), and it is “an insurmountable milestone of world satire” (Wang, 2015, p.54).

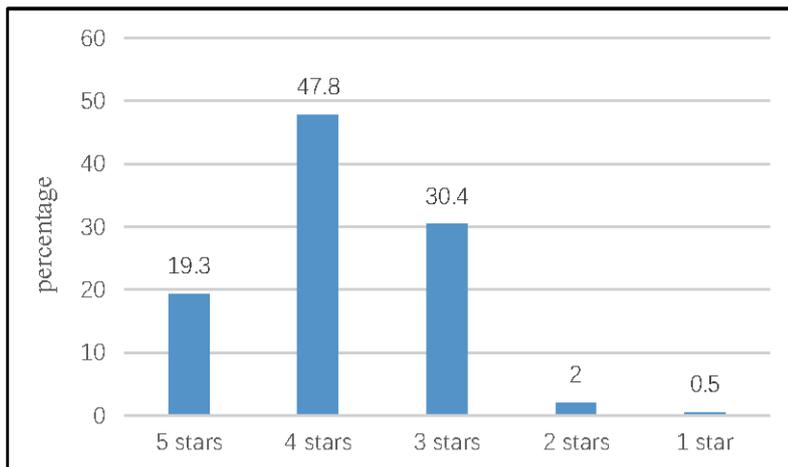
As is mentioned above, *Gulliver’s Travels* has also been listed in the required readings for the new curriculum of national standard, which highlights the high reception and wide influence of the work in China, and it is an officially recognized world masterpiece. This is undoubtedly a kind of professional reception.

### 2.2.2 Ordinary Readers’ Reception

As for the reception of ordinary readers, the following analysis is based on the online readers’ comments

published on “Douban Reading” website. “Douban Reading” is the most active reading website with the most complete information and the largest number of users in China. It focuses on providing comprehensive and refined reading services for users. The threshold of “Douban Reading” website is relatively low. Users are allowed to make their scores and comments as long as they register

and log in. What they have evaluated there may vary greatly, but after careful sorting, we find that what some of the readers have evaluated can reflect their reception. For this reason, this paper takes Yang Haocheng's translation on “Douban Reading” as a case analysis since Yang has the largest number of evaluators (totaling 11400 people) on the website up to now.



**Figure 2**  
**Scores on Yang's version(1995) of *Gulliver's Travels* in “Douban Reading”**

As is shown in the figure above, nearly half of the readers give a 4-star rating, and the readers giving 3-star ratings and above take up 97.5%, and only 2.5% of the readers give 1-star and 2-star ratings. It is not difficult to see that ordinary readers have a high evaluation of *Gulliver's Travels*. The comments given by the ordinary readers can roughly fall into the following four categories: (1) They make very high evaluations of the overall translation. Through some comments, it can be seen that the translation gives readers a good reading experience, making them feel “very happy” and “have a different taste” while reading. It is the “gospel” for the readers who do not understand English. The high-quality translation enables the readers to realize what they did not understand before. Although the book is short, it is a rare masterpiece with “high-quality”. It has a “never declining artistic charm” and is “worth reading”. Furthermore, some readers say that they have rather limited personal experiences at present so that they are not able to understand the novel deeply, but they will read the book again in the future. (2) They highly evaluate the translator. To some extent, a successful translation owes to its translator. Many readers believe that the translator Yang Haocheng made an “appropriate and accurate” choice of words and conveyed the spirit of the original work “faithfully”, eliminating some difficulties arising from cultural differences between China and the west. (3) They made in-depth discussions about the content of the work. Most of the readers are keen to explore the story itself and are interested in the four countries that Gulliver traveled, so they have a wide discussion. They believe

that Swift has created a fantasy world and successfully created a group of “vivid and grotesque” images, such as the “houys” (慧骃) and the “yahoos” (耶胡), etc. Quite a few readers are very familiar with the stories of Lilliput and Brobdingnag, but after having a rereading of the book when they are grown-ups, some readers think more about the story of the Houyhnhnms. Although the book “satirizes British politics at that time”, it still has its “educational significance” and “reference function” today. In addition, almost every household knows the famous first two chapters of the book -- Lilliput and Brobdingnag, because they are “lively” and “full of childlike interest”, leaving a beautiful childhood memory in the hearts of the readers, which has been “deeply impressed” so far. (4) They highly praise the author of the original book. Driven by the Chinese translation of the book, readers have a deeper understanding of the inspiration the author has given to the novel. They speak highly of Swift's excellent satirical ability, praising his imagination as being “exquisite and admirable” as revealed in the detailed description of stories.

However, when a work is translated into China, it inevitably gives rise to some disputes. Besides, the ordinary readers vary greatly in understanding the text. Among many of their comments on Zhang's version, there are also some negative comments. Some readers think that there are some problems in the translation, such as “the language is difficult to understand” and “the sentences are not smooth enough”. Some readers also point out that the author Swift “attacks the social evils excessively”. As a satirical novel, Swift does give a “satire”, but it is “not

readable” and the language is “not attractive”. Others say that the translation is not suitable for their reading because there is “no hope” in it, and that after reading it, they feel “heavy-hearted” and “pessimistic”.

By contrast, the evaluation of ordinary readers is more subjective and has a strong personal preference, while professional readers have a more comprehensive consideration. In general, most of the Chinese readers appreciate *Gulliver's Travels*. Moreover, the fact that the work is listed as a required reading in the new curriculum of national standard for primary and secondary school students could be regarded as its best reception among the Chinese readers.

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## CONCLUSION

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Through a detailed discussion above about its translation in China, this paper finds that there are more than a thousand Chinese translations of *Gulliver's Travels*, that it has its impact in various historical periods, and that it has gradually become such a children's novel in China that is included in the required reading list of the new curriculum of national standard. Through sorting out the comments given by professional readers and ordinary readers, it can be seen that most of the readers make a quite positive evaluation on *Gulliver's Travels*. Therefore, it is safe to say that China witnesses a high degree of the translation and reception of *Gulliver's Travels*. Its success, on the one hand, benefits from the attractive plot of the work itself; on the other hand, contributes much to the guideline of Chinese cultural policies and retranslations of the novel by many top Chinese translators.

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