

Research Article

POLITICAL COMPARISON
BETWEEN EUROPE AND ASIA BASED ON
GULLIVER'S TRAVELS BY JONATHAN SWIFT

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Abstract

This research paper offers a comparative political interpretation of Europe and Asia through the allegorical framework of *Gulliver's Travels*. While the text is rooted in eighteenth-century European satire, its symbolic structures provide a conceptual lens for examining broader political traditions. By combining literary analysis with comparative political theory, the study explores how Swift's fictional societies reflect key political ideas such as power, authority, governance, legitimacy, hierarchy, conflict, and social order. The paper argues that European political traditions are symbolically represented through competition, institutional authority, rational governance, and ideological conflict, whereas Asian traditions may be interpreted through hierarchical authority, moral legitimacy, centralized power, and social harmony. The study also acknowledges the limitations of this binary and situates its argument within contemporary scholarship. Ultimately, it demonstrates that literary texts can function as analytical tools for comparative political inquiry.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift; Gulliver's Travels; Comparative Political Theory; Political Allegory; European Political Tradition; Asian Political Tradition; Governance

Introduction

Literature has long contributed to political understanding by expressing ideas through narrative, metaphor, and symbolism. *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) functions as a powerful satire of eighteenth-century European politics, critiquing monarchy, party conflict, war, and rationalism. In this study, **“Europe” and “Asia” are treated as broad civilizational and historical categories**, rather than strictly geographical ones. “Europe” refers primarily to early modern Western political development (seventeenth to eighteenth century), shaped by institutional competition, emerging democracy, and rational-legal authority. “Asia” is used as a **comparative civilizational category**, drawing selectively from traditions such as **Confucian East Asia, imperial China, Mughal-South Asian governance, and other hierarchical political systems**.

The term **“political traditions”** refers to enduring patterns of governance, legitimacy, authority structures, and state-society relations within these civilizational contexts. The comparison is therefore **conceptual and historical**, not empirical or contemporary.

This paper does not claim that Swift directly represents Asia. Rather, it uses his allegorical societies as **analytical models** to construct a symbolic comparison between different political logics. The central argument is that Swift's satire reflects a European political culture grounded in competition and institutional authority, while Asian traditions can be interpreted through hierarchy, moral legitimacy, and social harmony.

Analytical Framework

This study adopts an **allegorical-comparative framework**. Swift's fictional societies—Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the Houyhnhnms—are treated as **ideal-type political models**.

The mapping follows three criteria:

1. **Institutional Structure** – how power is organized and exercised
2. **Source of Legitimacy** – whether authority derives from law, morality, or hierarchy
3. **Political Behavior** – patterns of conflict, governance, and social order

For example, Lilliput is interpreted as a model of factional politics due to its emphasis on party rivalry, while Brobdingnag reflects moral kingship through its ethical critique of European governance. These models are then used to construct a **symbolic comparison** with broader political traditions in Europe and Asia.

Literature as Political Allegory

Political allegory allows fictional narratives to represent real political systems. In *Gulliver's Travels*, each society embodies a distinct political logic.

Lilliput represents factionalism and ideological division. Swift writes that political advancement depends on “the dexterity of rope-dancing,” symbolizing arbitrary criteria for power (Swift, 1726/2003). The conflict between the “High-Heels” and “Low-Heels” further reflects trivial yet intense political divisions.

Brobdingnag, by contrast, presents moral governance. The King condemns European politics as “odious vermin” engaged in corruption and violence (Swift, 1726/2008), highlighting ethical leadership.

Laputa symbolizes technocratic rationalism. Its inhabitants are so absorbed in abstract calculations that they require “flappers” to bring them back to reality, illustrating detached intellectual governance.

The Houyhnhnms represent a rational, orderly society devoid of corruption, emphasizing harmony and reason over conflict.

These allegories collectively critique European civilization while offering models applicable to comparative political analysis.

European Political Traditions through Swift’s Symbolism

European political culture is characterized by **competition, institutional conflict, and ideological rivalry**. Lilliput exemplifies this through factional struggles and symbolic disputes, such as the absurd war over egg-breaking customs (Swift, 1726/2003).

Legitimacy in European systems is often derived from **institutions and legal frameworks**, rather than moral authority. This aligns with theories of rational-legal authority (Weber, 1978).

Laputa further reflects Europe’s emphasis on rationality and bureaucracy. Its rulers prioritize abstract knowledge over practical governance, illustrating the strengths and limitations of technocratic authority.

Together, these representations depict a political culture defined by **institutional complexity, rational governance, and continuous contestation**.

Asian Political Traditions in Comparative Perspective

In contrast, many Asian political traditions emphasize **hierarchy, centralized authority, and moral legitimacy**. This study draws particularly on **Confucian political philosophy, imperial Chinese governance, and South Asian monarchical traditions**.

Brobdingnag can be interpreted as a model of **Confucian-style moral rulership**, where the king prioritizes justice and ethical responsibility. His rejection of European political practices reflects a governance model rooted in virtue rather than institutional competition.

Confucian thought emphasizes that rulers derive legitimacy from moral conduct (Sen, 2009). Similarly, imperial systems in Asia often stress stability, continuity, and hierarchical order (Fukuyama, 2014).

Thus, the contrast emerges:

- Europe emphasizes **competition and institutional authority**
- Asia emphasizes **order, hierarchy, and moral governance**

Power and Authority

European political systems distribute power across institutions, creating a structure of **checks, balances, and negotiation**. Swift’s depiction of constant rivalry reflects this fragmentation.

In contrast, many Asian traditions emphasize **centralized authority**, where power is stabilized through hierarchy and cultural norms. Authority is often accepted as part of a moral order rather than continuously contested.

War, Conflict, and Political Culture

Swift portrays war as irrational and politically manipulated, as seen in the Lilliput-Blefuscu conflict over trivial religious differences (Swift, 1726/2003).

European political identity is thus associated with **conflict and competition**, while many Asian traditions emphasize **diplomacy, balance, and strategic restraint** (Huntington, 2006).

Society and the State

European political philosophy often conceptualizes the state as a **social contract**, where citizens actively challenge authority (Locke, 1988).

In many Asian traditions, the state is viewed as a **moral guardian**, emphasizing harmony and ethical responsibility. Citizens participate in maintaining social order rather than opposing authority.

Limits of the Europe–Asia Binary

It is important to acknowledge that the Europe–Asia comparison presented here is **highly simplified**. Both regions contain significant internal diversity. Europe includes absolutist monarchies as well as democratic systems, while Asia encompasses democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid regimes.

Moreover, political traditions evolve over time and are influenced by globalization, colonial history, and modern institutions. Therefore, this binary should be understood as a **heuristic framework**, not a definitive classification.

Position within Existing Scholarship

This study builds on existing scholarship that interprets *Gulliver's Travels* as political satire (Rawson, 2005; Damrosch, 2013), but extends it by applying a **comparative political lens**. While earlier studies focus primarily on European critique, this paper reinterprets Swift's allegory as a tool for **cross-civilizational analysis**.

Recent scholarship (2021–2025) has increasingly emphasized the global relevance of literary texts in political theory, particularly in comparative and postcolonial contexts. This study contributes to that discourse by demonstrating how Swift's work can be used to explore broader patterns of political organization beyond Europe.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that *Gulliver's Travels* can function as a symbolic framework for comparative political analysis. Swift's allegories reflect a European political culture based on competition, institutional authority, and rational governance, while offering a conceptual contrast with Asian traditions emphasizing hierarchy, moral legitimacy, and social harmony.

Although the comparison is interpretive and symbolic, it highlights how literature can transcend its historical context and serve as a tool for understanding global political diversity. Swift's work remains a timeless resource for both literary and political analysis.

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