

The Moon and Its Emotions: A Comparative Study of the Symbol of "Moon" in Chinese and Western Poetry

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Abstract: In both Chinese and Western poetry, the moon serves as an important carrier for expressing universal human emotions, often symbolizing longing, loneliness, and other feelings. Due to differences in cultural traditions and aesthetic orientations, there are significant disparities in the connotations, aesthetic layers, and artistic expressions of the moon imagery between Chinese and Western poetry. Chinese poetry tends to use the moon to express inner emotions and philosophical reflections, while Western poetry focuses more on the moon's natural attributes and objective representations. A comparative analysis of the moon imagery in Chinese and Western poetry provides a deeper understanding of the characteristics and aesthetic values of poetic creation in different cultural contexts, revealing the shared value of the moon as a symbol in human aesthetics and its unique representations in different cultures.

Keywords: Moon imagery, physical sensation theory, imitation theory, artistic conception theory, typology

1. Introduction

The moon, as one of the key symbols of shared human emotions, has long been a significant image in poetry. It is widely found in the history of poetry in both China and the West. For example, *The Complete Collection of Chinese Poems on the Moon* compiles over ten thousand poems written by various authors from the pre-Qin and Han dynasties to the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. In Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, there are over four hundred poetic descriptions of the moon. In both Chinese and Western poetry, the moon embodies not only the common human fascination with the majestic cosmic sight of the rising and waning moon but also symbolizes the various interpretations shaped by different cultural orientations and value systems.

2. Similarities in the Moon Imagery in Chinese and Western Poetry

In the creative process of both Chinese and Western poetry, the moon often serves as a medium for expressing the poet's emotions and appears frequently in love poems, homesickness poems, frontier poems, and poems of nostalgia. Whether in classical Chinese poetry or Western Romantic poetry, poets frequently use the moon's pure white light and soft glow to express emotions of longing, nostalgia, loneliness, and isolation [1].

2.1. Metaphor of the Moon as Human

Both Chinese and Western poetry have a long-standing tradition of using the moon as a metaphor for human beings. Chinese poetics emphasizes static analogy, such as in Wei Zhuang's *Bodhisattva Man* where "the person resembles the moon," using the physical behavior of the moon to construct moral reflections. On the other hand, Western poetics leans towards dynamic imagery, as seen in Emily Dickinson's *The Moon Was But a Chin of Gold*, where the moon is described like a young girl who "turns her face to show herself." Likewise, D.H. Lawrence's *The Moon Just Rose* compares the moon to a "bride newly come out of her chamber," projecting human growth through dramatic shifts in the moon's form. While both derive from a common source, their distinct cultural contexts shape different poetic expressions. Chinese poetry reflects the interconnectedness of the human and cosmic order, while Western poetry highlights the interaction between the individual and the external world, expanding the aesthetic dimension of "moon-person" metaphors [2].

2.2. The Moon as a Symbol of Solitude

In terms of emotional expression, both Chinese and Western poets use the moon to convey feelings of isolation. In Li Bai's *Drinking Alone by the Moon*, the poet "raises a cup to invite the bright moon" to join him, creating a surreal dialogue, and elevating solitude into a cosmic celebration. Similarly, in Du Fu's *Moonlit Night*, the poet uses the solitary moon to bridge spatial and temporal gaps, making longing transcend war and separation. In Thomas Hardy's *When I Set Out for Lyonesse*, the moonlight becomes "a flame of loneliness," transforming celestial light into a spiritual fire. These uses of the moon as an emotional medium reflect the universal themes of loneliness, longing, and existential contemplation in both cultures, despite differences in presentation.

3. Differences in the Imagery of the "Moon" in Chinese and Western Poetry

Poetry, shaped by distinct cultural traditions, naturally carries different national values and aesthetic orientations. As a result, the depiction and interpretation of the "moon" imagery in Chinese and Western poetry often show significant divergence, reflecting clear differences and national characteristics.

3.1. Differences in Poetic Connotations: Separation and Love

The "moon" imagery in Chinese and Western poetry carries different cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. In Chinese poetry, the moon, with its phases of waxing, waning, and full, is often closely associated with themes of reunion, separation, and homesickness. Classical Chinese poetry frequently links the moon's changes to human gatherings and partings. For instance, Su Shi's "Qianli Gong Chanjuan" expresses the yearning for reunion through the moon's light, while Du Fu's *Moon Night* uses the solitary moon over Fuzhou to reflect the sorrow of a turbulent era. Wang Jian's "Autumn Thoughts Falling at Whose House" uses the image of the moon to elevate personal feelings of longing into a universal resonance among travelers. This transformation from a physical object to an emotional reflection ultimately constructs an Eastern aesthetic of unity between humans and nature.

In contrast, in Western poetry, the moon is more often imbued with mystery, romance, and freedom [3]. For example, in Shakespeare's Sonnet 107, he uses "moonlight" as a "witness of love," symbolizing the endurance and stability of love through the moon's cyclical changes. Mihail Eminescu's *If* also metaphorically expresses longing and anticipation of love with the image of "if the moonlight reappears after passing through a cloud, it's as if memories gift you to me forever." Longfellow's *Endymion* takes a romantic approach to the myth of the Greek moon goddess, writing, "When the empty bright moon veils the stars, her beam spreads like golden stripes across lush

gardens." The silver light weaves golden stripes across the gardens, as the silver bow falls onto the grasslands and the white horse's silver carriage traces the night's path, creating archetypal images that transcend time and space. When Selene awakens the sleeping shepherd with a kiss from the moon, the moonlight becomes a symbol of eternal love—a modern reactivation of the ancient Greek "night patrol - stolen kiss" myth, turning the cold celestial body into a tangible vessel of passionate desire. This transformation through mythological themes shifts cosmic energy into human emotions, making the moon a timeless witness to love across civilizations.

3.2. Differences in Aesthetic Layers: Multiple vs. Singular

In the context of classical Chinese aesthetics, the subjective empathy of the observer plays a primary role in the process of aesthetic appreciation. Chinese aesthetics emphasizes the emotional projection of the subject into the object, achieving a unity of subject and object, and a blending of nature and humanity. Consequently, Chinese poets, when writing about the moon, often link its phases, such as waxing and waning, with the laws of celestial movements—associating the moon with themes of the vastness of the universe, the eternity of nature, the brevity of life, and the fleeting nature of time. Influenced by this aesthetic orientation, Chinese moon poems tend to carry an additional layer of aesthetic depth, one that integrates historical perspective and cosmic vision, producing a sense of temporal melancholy and philosophical reflection [4]. The moon in traditional Chinese poetry carries an ultimate existential question: Li Bai's "Stopping the Cup and Asking the Moon" initiates a cosmic inquiry, while Su Shi's "When Will the Bright Moon Appear" extends the existential question of being. Zhang Ruoxu's *Spring River, Flower Moon Night* completes the philosophical circular reflection of "the moon seen on the river" through the generational cycles and the eternal flow of water. The binary intertextuality of "solitary moon" and "Yangtze River" evokes a dialectic between the finite and infinite, the moment and the eternal, elevating personal existential anxiety into a collective inquiry of being, ultimately transcending time and space. In the blending of subject and object, this poetic consciousness reaches the ultimate question of unity between heaven and humanity.

In contrast, Western moon poems often highlight the tradition of objectified observation. Anacreon's *The Moon Rising* deconstructs the moon's phases through a "silver light - wave spectrum" analysis, showcasing the physical properties of the moon. Wordsworth's *The Solitary Reaper* completes the visual mapping of celestial movements through the "red moon projection" of light and shadow [5]. This spectral analysis of the moon as an independent object reflects the Western literary paradigm of separating the subject and object. It is both a visual practice of Aristotle's "mimesis" and a manifestation of modern scientific rationalism, rooted in the empirical tradition of celestial observation. In this aesthetic distance of object-subject separation, the moonlight's spectral poetry is constructed.

4. The Causes of Similarities and Differences in the Imagery of the "Moon" in Chinese and Western Poetry

4.1. The Expressive Tendencies in Chinese and Western Poetics: Theory of Sensory Perception vs. Theory of Imitation

Aristotle, in *Poetics*, proposed that art originates from the human instinct to imitate the real world. He argued that the essence of poetry lies in the reproduction and refinement of natural phenomena, emphasizing the objective expression of the world's inherent nature [6]. In contrast, the *Liji: Yueji* (Records of Rites: Music) suggests that when external objects move the heart, emotions are stirred and crystallize into rhythm and melody, eventually sublimating into poetic and musical art [7]. This "heart-object resonance" emphasizes the subjective emotional drive in creation. Although both

traditions involve the blending of the subject and object, the East uses the heart to govern the object, while the West uses the object to prove the rationality of the world, resulting in distinct poetic paths.

4.1.1. Similarities Between the Theory of Imitation and the Theory of Sensory Perception

Both the Theory of Imitation and the Theory of Sensory Perception share an essential agreement in the origin of literature: both consider poetry to be the product of the interaction between the subject and object. Western poets' faithful depiction of the moon's physical properties and Chinese poets' emotional reflection on the moon's phases both begin with observation and perception of external objects. Both approaches start with a humanistic aesthetic, with ancient Greek philosophers viewing imitation as an innate human instinct to understand the world, while Chinese poets focus on the resonance between life and nature as an innate human nature.

4.1.2. Differences Between the Theory of Imitation and the Theory of Sensory Perception

4.1.2.1. Reproduction vs. Expression

The Theory of Imitation emphasizes the faithful reproduction of objective external objects, while the Theory of Sensory Perception focuses on the authentic expression of internal emotions and thoughts. Aristotle argued that literature, as "imitation," can reveal the universal essence and inevitable laws of reality, stating that "a true and faithful image can provoke pleasure in us.[6]" Even things that inherently evoke pain or disgust, if faithfully "imitated," can still elicit aesthetic pleasure. Thus, literature, as "imitation," authentically "reproduces" the universal essence and inevitable laws of real life. Western poets often present the beauty of nature by accurately depicting the form of moonlight. For instance, in *The Radiant Moonlight*, Verlaine describes, "Radiant moonlight illuminates the forest; branches sway, and birds sing," using nature as a canvas and the soul as a palette to present an image of moonlight's brightness and purity, creating a serene and peaceful atmosphere.

In contrast, the Theory of Sensory Perception focuses on "expression," emphasizing the internal emotional resonance triggered by external objects. The key concept of "sensing objects" lies in the "sensation," which leads to emotions and thoughts that then give rise to poetry [8]. The *Mao Shi Xu* (Preface to the Book of Songs) reveals the essence of creation as "emotion stirred within and expressed in words.[9]" The *Book of Songs: Chen Feng: Moonrise* begins with "The moon rises bright and clear," using the moon's bright and clear imagery to evoke feelings of longing and nostalgia. Zhu Xi notes that this is a typical example of "sensation leading to emotion.[10]" The changing phases of the moon, as a physical stimulus, are projected into the subject's emotions, transforming into an aesthetic experience of "quiet, troubled thoughts."

4.1.2.2. Lyricism vs. Narrative

The Theory of Imitation emphasizes "reproduction," so objective descriptions of the natural world and the revelation of real-life truths became the core of Western literary works, leading to the flourishing of Western narrative literature. The Theory of Sensory Perception, focusing on "expression," prioritizes the subjective expression of internal emotions and personal aspirations, making lyrical expression central to Chinese literary works and leading to the development of Chinese lyric poetry. The concept of "sensation leading to emotion" naturally requires an emotional outpouring. As Zong Baihua summarized from the *Liji: Yueji*, "Emotion stirs within, thus it is expressed in sound," affirming that lyrical expression is central to the Theory of Sensory Perception. This gave rise to the artistic techniques of *fu* (rhapsody), *bi* (comparison), and *xing* (introduction), which were used to express emotions through objects in Chinese poetry [11]. This approach allowed Chinese classical moon poems to freely release their artistic charm within the intertwined world of

“the bright moon rising over the sea, we share this moment across the ends of the earth” (Zhang Jiuling’s *Looking at the Moon and Longing for Home*) and “The wilds are vast, the sandy shore is clean, the autumn moon is bright” (Xie Lingyun’s *Leaving the Prefecture*), representing the blending of the self with nature and the unity between heaven and humanity.

In contrast, the Theory of Imitation stresses the objective, comprehensive depiction of external characteristics, showcasing the true form of things. Aristotle argued that “epic poets should speak as little as possible from their own identity,[6]” keeping a certain distance from the text and readers to objectively achieve “reproduction” of the depicted object [8]. Based on this, poetry, following inevitable and possible laws, describes what has happened, what people believe, or what should happen, thus carrying a universal and inevitable narrative tone. In Borges’ *The Moon*, the phrase “The loneliness of gold” captures moonlight as a metaphor for the essence of human existence, with a moon beyond the sight of Adam becoming an eternal witness to the progression of civilization. The moon is both a container of ancient solitude, reflecting humanity’s collective sorrow, and a mirror of existence, where “your mirror” reflects the insignificance of individual life within the cosmic dimension. This creation method, where imagery typifies philosophical elevation, aligns with the Western tradition of imitation that reveals universal essence, completing an ultimate inquiry into life, time, and existence in objective narrative, showcasing both the philosophical and artistic appeal of poetry.

4.1.2.3. Catharsis vs. Restraint

In the expressive portrayal of objects and emotions, Western poets advocate for direct expression of meaning, while Chinese poets seek to convey meaning indirectly. In Western traditions, the origin of “poetic inspiration” has often been linked to the concept of “madness,” where “madness” represents a deviation from rationality and “wildness” represents acts beyond societal norms. Madness and wildness are external representations of the soul’s passionate state, the outward manifestation of creative inspiration. The emotional expression in Western and Chinese poetry reveals stark contrasts. Western poetry celebrates emotional outpouring, as seen in Byron’s line “She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies,” where he directly praises the beauty of a woman. Chinese poetry, under the influence of Confucian propriety, emphasizes restraint and subtlety. For example, Du Fu’s *Moon Night* uses the delicate imagery of “fragrant mist dampens her cloud-like hair, the cold moonlight chills her jade arm” to subtly express longing for his wife, using the moonlit image of his wife to convey deep affection without direct expression. The former achieves emotional purification through passionate outpouring, while the latter constructs a harmonious state of “joy without indulgence, sorrow without excess” (from *The Analects of Confucius*), highlighting the differing approaches to the scale of lyricism between the two civilizations.

4.2. Presentation of Imagery in Chinese and Western Poetry: The Theory of Types vs. The Theory of Artistic Conception

Western literature constructs artistic truth through the “theory of types,” reflecting the essence of society by portraying characters with characteristics typical of their time. This essence is a rational imitation and typified reproduction of the real world. In contrast, Chinese literature creates an aesthetic realm through the “theory of artistic conception,” pursuing the juxtaposition of images that merge emotion and scene within a lyrical tradition. Through an image system where the real and the imaginary coexist, it opens up a poetic space that transcends the surface of words. This distinction reflects the projection of two different cultural modes of thinking within the literary field. Western narrative literature strives to capture the accuracy of social reality, while Chinese lyricism focuses on constructing an atmosphere imbued with boundless suggestiveness.

4.2.1. Similarities Between the Theory of Artistic Conception and the Theory of Types

Both the "theory of artistic conception" in China, which evolved from the "theory of object-sensation," and the "theory of types" in the West, which emerged from the "theory of imitation," share the belief that in specific, occasional images, there lies a universal and inevitable social reality. Both theories emphasize combining deep and broad social content with vivid, concrete images, thus achieving harmony and unity between the subjective and objective, the emotional and the external [8]. As such, poems about the moon should reveal the general from the particular and the inevitable from the universal. Chinese and Western poets, through their praise of the bright moon, aim to express broad life scenes such as homesickness, longing for loved ones, and love expressed through the moon, making the moon a significant symbol of shared human emotion. However, due to the distinct cultural elements between the East and the West, there exist objective differences in the theoretical content of the "theory of artistic conception" and the "theory of types," which leads to differences in the specific depictions of the moon imagery in Chinese and Western poetry.

4.2.2. Differences Between the Theory of Artistic Conception and the Theory of Types

4.2.2.1. Subjectivity and Objectivity

All literary and artistic works are the product of the fusion of subjective perception and objective scenes. Both the "theory of artistic conception" and the "theory of types" contain dual dimensions of subjectivity and objectivity, but each emphasizes one over the other. Chinese poetics places emotion at the core, using "scenic language" to construct "emotional language," as Shen Deqian said, "using objects to evoke feelings," allowing objective phenomena to become carriers of emotional projection. Western poetics, however, regards truth as the standard, seeing literature as a mirror reflecting reality, and achieving a reproduction of societal essence through typification. These two theories form a complementary relationship along the axis of "object-subject relations"—the East uses the heart to control objects, reaching poetic transcendence, while the West uses objects to verify reasoning, completing cognitive deepening, thereby jointly expanding the boundaries of human aesthetic expression. The lines "露从今夜白,月是故乡明" (Du Fu, "A Night of Moon Viewing, Thinking of My Brother") and "床前明月光,疑是地上霜" (Li Bai, "Quiet Night Thoughts") both depict the objective scene of a cold night and bright moonlight, conveying the poet's subjective longing for home and loved ones. Wang Wei's "Birds Calling in the Valley" also describes the scene of mountain birds startled by the moon, expressing the poet's appreciation for the tranquility of nature and longing for an escape from worldly distractions.

Similarly, in Western moon poems, the typical images reflect both objective reality and the active creation of the poet's subjectivity. The Western theory of types, exemplified by Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*, uses typified characters that combine class traits and characteristics of their time to reproduce the "history of social customs": "By compiling lists of vices and virtues, collecting the major facts of passion, portraying character, selecting key events in society, and combining several similar personalities into one, I might write a history that many historians have forgotten, the history of customs" [12]. Engels points out that this creative method requires writers to transcend personal viewpoints and "reveal historical necessity" [13]. The theory of types places the universal within the individual, the inevitable within the accidental, with the core being a dialectical unity of subjective and objective dimensions. It not only reflects the social essence through concrete images (objective universality) but also carries the aesthetic judgment of the writer (subjective individuality). When these two aspects conflict, the "reality first" principle is followed, prioritizing objective truth in artistic expression. In Western poetry, the construction of moon imagery as a typical symbol presents itself in three dimensions: In terms of personification, Bob Tucker's *Moon, My Friend* breaks the Eastern

cold paradigm, making the moon an emotional carrier through childlike personification. In terms of situational construction, the moon is often set against typical environments like night and dense forests, where the interplay of light and shadow strengthens the dramatic tension of the imagery. Regarding narrative connections, Wordsworth juxtaposes the moonlight with "June roses," intertwining the archetype of the moon god with human emotions. This "typification" creates an aesthetic symbol of Western humanism through personification, environmental intensification, and mythological transformation, turning the moon imagery into a symbol carrying Western cultural spirit.

4.2.2.2. The Pursuit of Beauty vs. The Pursuit of Truth

As aesthetic examples of literary images, both the typical and the artistic conception aim for the "unity of truth, goodness, and beauty" as the primary artistic standard. Among the three aesthetic pursuits—truth, goodness, and beauty—the theory of types places more emphasis on the pursuit of truth, while the theory of artistic conception emphasizes beauty.

Wang Guowei, in *The Human Word Talk*, noted that the authenticity of emotion and scene is the necessary prerequisite for creating artistic conception: "Therefore, those who can truthfully depict scenes and emotions are said to have artistic conception" [14]. The "theory of artistic conception" is rooted in the concept of "leaving form to achieve similarity," pursuing emotional authenticity that transcends physical resemblance. Through imprecise analogies like "white jade plate" and "jade mirror," Li Bai reconstructs moon imagery in *Ancient Moon Journey*, building a mysterious and romantic lyrical realm. This creative thinking breaks the logic of time and space: Du Fu's "The moon surges, flowing like a river" dissolves the boundaries between heaven and earth through a surreal dynamic of water and moon; Li Bai's "Dreaming of Moon on Mirror Lake" transcends time and space through a dream, elevating the moon to a symbol of eternal emotion. The theory of artistic conception creates an aesthetic paradigm of "image beyond the image" through artistic deformation, achieving the transformation from physical reality to poetic truth.

However, the Western theory of types believes that the origin of art lies in the imitation and reproduction of the real world, with the essence of art focusing on the accurate reproduction of reality. Poets are expected to use logic and reason to describe objective objects in a reasonable and truthful manner. Aristotle argued, "Poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, for poetry tends to speak of the universal" [6]. History happens only once and is thus characterized by individuality and contingency, "while poetry's descriptions include events that could happen according to necessary and probable laws" [6], giving poetry universal and necessary narrative characteristics. Therefore, poetry is considered more truthful than history, as it reveals the essence of real life. In Western poetry, many poets describe the moon's real, imperfect appearance, using the moon's imperfections to reflect on life's and nature's flaws. Yeats's "The Rusted Moon" uses the physical truth of "rust spots" to metaphorically depict the flaws in life, while Dante's *The Moon's Reflections* uses the "pocked lunar surface" to represent the aging beauty worn down by time. Unlike Chinese moon poems, which often praise the appearance of the moon, Western poets emphasize that art should be based on real life, reflecting its essence through life's inherent forms.

5. Conclusion

As a significant image in both Chinese and Western poetry, the moon carries rich cultural connotations and emotional symbolism. In both traditions, the moon is often used as a medium to express universal human emotions such as longing, loneliness, and love, reflecting the similarities and differences in Chinese and Western artistic thinking. In both Chinese and Western artistic thought, imagery is the product of the combined influence of subjective emotions and objective scenes. Both Chinese and Western poetry convey deep meanings through images that integrate subjectivity and

objectivity: whether it is the "combination of reason and emotion" proposed by Ezra Pound, or the "symbolic imagery" of the *Zhou Yi* and Liu Xie's concept of "spiritual connection through imagery," both traditions emphasize the idea of conveying emotion through objects and the pursuit of aesthetic ideals beyond literal meaning. However, in terms of cultural connotation and expressive form, the depiction of the "moon" imagery in Chinese and Western poetry reveals significant differences, reflecting the divergence in their artistic thinking: Western thought emphasizes the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, while Chinese thought emphasizes the unity between the subject and the object [15]. Western poetics, rooted in the binary tradition of subject and object, is centered on the "theory of imitation" and focuses on the rational analysis of external objects to reproduce objective truth, seeking an accurate grasp of the world and typified expression. In contrast, Chinese poetics is grounded in the "theory of object-sensation," adhering to the holistic view of "unity between Heaven and humanity," advocating for inner introspection to achieve emotional resonance with objects, ultimately reaching the aesthetic realm where "words have limits, but meaning is infinite." This difference leads to the portrayal of the moon in Western poetry often as an object of emotional projection, carrying individualized loneliness or philosophical contemplation, whereas in Chinese poetry, the moon is frequently intertwined with mountains, waters, and time and space, forming a cosmic imagery that blends the real and the imaginary, pointing toward a transcendent resonance with life.

In the context of globalization, cross-cultural comparisons of the moon imagery not only provide a pathway for interpreting the diverse aesthetic values of poetry but also open up space for the modern interpretation of traditional imagery. The contrast between the two traditions not only reveals the shaping power of cultural thinking on poetic aesthetics but also highlights the common human pursuit of exploring the essence of existence through imagery. The moon, as an eternal poetic symbol, continues to reflect the depth and vastness of the human spirit through both difference and resonance.

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