

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

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Abstract. This article examines the moon as a poetic image across Chinese and Western traditions, treating affect (e.g., longing and solitude) as culturally mediated rather than universally fixed. We read representative texts to compare two recurring orientations: Chinese poems often make the moon a hinge for interior introspection and ethical reflection, whereas many Western poems stabilize meaning through concrete description and naturalistic framing. These are tendencies, not binaries; both corpora also contain counterexamples that complicate the contrast. Situating image use within each tradition's aesthetic priorities, the analysis shows how shared symbolism acquires different weights, producing convergences at the level of affect yet divergence in the mode of representation.

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.

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. Metaphor of the moon as human

Both Chinese and Western poetics have repeatedly cast the moon in human terms, but they do so with different emphases. In Chinese verse, writers often use relatively stable analogies in which lunar appearance or movement occasions ethical or introspective judgment—for example, Wei Zhuang's

Bodhisattva Man notes that “the person resembles the moon,” allowing physical behavior to prompt moral reflection. By contrast, many Western poems favor more kinetic personification: in Emily Dickinson’s “The Moon was but a Chin of Gold,” the moon “turns her face,” and in D. H. Lawrence’s “The Moon Just Rose,” it is likened to “a bride newly come out of her chamber,” so that shifts in phase stage human growth. These are tendencies rather than strict binaries; taken together, the examples show how cultural context steers “moon–person” metaphors toward either interiorized judgment or outward dramatic motion, shaping distinct aesthetic effects [2].

2.1. The moon as a symbol of solitude

Poets in both traditions frequently enlist the moon to register solitude, though they route the emotion through different devices. In Li Bai’s “Drinking Alone by the Moon,” the invitation to the “bright moon” stages an imagined interlocutor; the scene reframes isolation as a ritual of companionship on a cosmic scale. Du Fu’s “Moonlit Night” uses the same image to bridge distance and time, letting longing pass across war and separation. In Thomas Hardy’s “When I Set Out for Lyonesse,” moonlight becomes “a flame of loneliness,” translating celestial brightness into an inner, ember-like heat. Read together, these poems suggest a widely shared concern with loneliness and yearning, even as the representational paths—dialogue with the moon, temporal bridging, and metaphorical transmutation—diverge across cultural settings.

3. Differences in the imagery of the "moon" in Chinese and Western poetry

Because poetic traditions grow out of different histories, schools, and reading communities, the “moon” does not stabilize into a single meaning across Chinese and Western texts. Rather than proposing a rigid cultural split, this section tracks recurrent tendencies in imagery and use. We read representative poems to examine how each tradition assigns affective weight and representational stance to the moon and how those assignments shift across time, genre, and authorial intention. The aim is to specify points of overlap as well as divergence without reducing either corpus to a stereotype.

3.1. Differences in poetic connotations: separation and love

In Chinese poetry, the phases of the moon—waxing, waning, and fullness—reliably anchor themes of reunion, separation, and homesickness. Classical poems often map lunar change onto human circumstance: Su Shi’s lines associate clear moonlight with the longing to reunite; Du Fu’s “Moonlit Night” lets a distant moon carry feeling across war-time separation; and Wang Jian elevates a traveler’s private yearning into a shared horizon of sentiment. The image thus moves from physical appearance to affective reflection, reinforcing an aesthetics in which natural cycles and human bonds are read together.

By comparison, many Western poems foreground mystery, romance, or an ideal of freedom, but they do so in diverse ways. Shakespearean sonnets, for example, use moonlight to witness love’s durability; Emily Dickinson’s lyric personifies the moon to stage a shy self-disclosure; and Keats’s mythic treatments of moon-goddess lore rework desire as a meeting of mortal time and celestial recurrence. Taken together, these approaches suggest that love and separation are widely shared concerns, while the routes by which the moon carries those feelings—ritualized reunion, distant witnessing, or mythic encounter—vary with cultural frames [3].

3.2. Differences in aesthetic layers: multiple vs. Singular

Within classical Chinese aesthetics, the observer’s affective projection often guides perception: the moon’s phases invite reflections on cosmic regularity, the brevity of a human life, and the passage of

time. Li Bai's address to the moon opens a metaphysical inquiry; Su Shi's meditation on "when the bright moon will appear" extends that inquiry into shared time; and Zhang Ruoxu's Spring River, Flower Moon Night sets the solitary moon against the river's ceaseless flow, staging a dialogue between the finite and the enduring. This layering—cosmic scale, historical memory, existential thought—produces a multi-tiered aesthetic in which natural image and human reflection are read as mutually implicating [4].

Many Western treatments, by contrast, retain a greater distance between observer and object, emphasizing the moon's independent presence and the stability of outward description. Poems grounded in an observational mode—whether in classical imitation or later empiricist habits—tend to secure meaning through visible properties and spatial framing. Here the aesthetic effect is built from object persistence (the moon as a distinct entity), framing (how light and landscape are arranged), and temporal pacing (the sensed interval of rise, transit, and decline). Rather than claiming a single "singular" layer, these devices condense attention into a relatively focused visual register, against which emotion is construed through stance and scene [5].

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 criticism has often described literary representation in terms of “types”: characters and situations are shaped to crystallize recurrent features of a given social moment, so that the work’s truth claim rests on patterned observables rather than singular anecdote. This is not an exhaustive account, yet it clarifies one route by which poems and narratives secure reference—through selection, abstraction, and the repetition of recognizable traits.

Chinese poetics, by contrast, frequently speaks of *yijing* (artistic conception), where affect and scene are co-composed. Instead of fixing a social prototype, the poet stages an interplay of real and imagined elements—framing, juxtaposition, and deliberate gaps (留白)—so that meaning is inferred from resonance rather than from explicit typification. The two orientations are best read as tendencies, not binaries: one concentrates reference through type-formation; the other diffuses it through atmospheric construction. Both, however, supply workable procedures for image-making and thus shape how the moon and related motifs carry thought and feeling within their respective traditions.

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

The moon functions as a durable image across Chinese and Western poetry, yet its meanings are shaped by distinct histories of form and reading. In both traditions, poets mobilize the moon to carry longing, loneliness, and love; however, these affects are routed through different representational habits. Image-making, in each case, emerges from the interplay of inward feeling and outward scene—whether framed, as in discussions by Ezra Pound, as a calibrated relation between sensation and intellection, or, in classical Chinese poetics, as the transmission of feeling through images articulated by the *Zhou Yi* and by Liu Xie. What differs is emphasis. Many Western texts stabilize reference through observational stance and typifying procedures; many Chinese texts pursue *yijing*, where real and imagined elements co-produce an atmosphere of implication. Read as tendencies rather than fixed binaries, these routes illuminate why [15] describes Western thought as accenting subject-object separation while Chinese thought often stresses their consonance.

Under conditions of globalization, such cross-cultural comparison does more than rehearse contrasts: it clarifies how traditional images acquire new weights when reframed for modern readers. The moon continues to mediate questions about attachment, distance, and existence; its recurrent appearance marks not a single, universal value, but a shared resource that different poetics recast in line with their aesthetic priorities.

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