

## **On Thoughts of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) from Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

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*Zhuxi, a prominent ancient Chinese philosopher said “human beings should seek knowledge and disciplines through studying the nature of things” (Ge Wu Zhi Zhi in Chinese Pinyin). Aesthetics, as a discipline, should reveal and elucidate aesthetic phenomena, help people understand the general characteristics and laws of beauty, beauty appreciation, and beauty creation, further improve and develop the discipline of aesthetics itself, and thereby enhance people's aesthetic appreciation ability. It also needs to enhance people's spirit, promote the aesthetic appreciation of life. Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) is certainly one of the most excellent and talented English architects in history. In fact, he was not only an architect, but also a designer, author and theorist. He was a leading figure in the English Roman Catholic and Gothic revivals. His aesthetic thoughts are very influential in the architectural world. Some of Pugin's thoughts can be explained by Yi Jing, or the Book of Changes, an oldest aesthetic classic in China. Pugin leaves an indelible mark on British architecture through his contributions to the Gothic Revival movement. His remarkable achievements and artistic contributions continue to inspire and shape the architectural landscape to this day. This article will briefly review his aesthetic thoughts from traditional Chinese aesthetic perspective. The research tools to appreciate and analyze Pugin's thoughts will be traditional Chinese aesthetic theories.*

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin**

Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) was a prominent English architect, designer, and writer, best known for his significant contributions to the Gothic Revival movement in the Victorian era. He played an essential role in transforming the architectural landscape of Britain and establishing Gothic architecture as a powerful symbol of religiosity, aesthetics, and medieval nostalgia.

Pugin grew up in a family of artists. He inherited a deep appreciation for craftsmanship and a fervent Catholic faith from his father, Augustus Charles Pugin. These influences would lay the foundation for Pugin's later works.

His first major breakthrough came in 1834 when he won a competition to design the interiors of the new Palace of Westminster. Pugin's brilliant collaboration with Sir Charles Barry resulted in the Big Ben clock tower, a typical example of Gothic Revival architecture. The Houses of Parliament remain one of his most notable achievements, creating a lasting impact on the architectural identity of London.

Pugin's artistic contributions extended beyond architecture. He was a successful designer, creating exquisite interiors, furniture, stained glass windows, and even liturgical vestments. His designs displayed intricate patterns, vibrant colors, and a meticulous attention to detail, artfully capturing the spirit of medieval craftsmanship.

## 1.2 Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Theories

The Chinese traditional culture is broad and profound. Chinese Aesthetic theories which originated from Confucianism and Taoism, advocate the belief that nature is the unity of life. People believe man and nature are inseparable. The aesthetic pursuit is human beings' spiritual experience. *Yi Jing*, or *the Book of Changes*, is the oldest aesthetic classic in China. The book is not all about aesthetic thoughts. In fact, it is a book about more complicated and profound Chinese philosophy, concerning almost life phenomena between human beings and the nature. According to the book, everything in nature has a polar of Yin and a polar of Yang. Yin and Yang represent the opposing sides of interconnected things and phenomena in the world, such as men and women, leaders and employees, etc. Anything contains both Yin and Yang aspects, which are both opposing and unified. The growth and decline of Yin and Yang refers to the quantitative change between yin and yang, such as the disappearance of Yin is accompanied by the appearance of Yang. This process reflects the occurrence and development of all things in the universe. Moreover, human beings and the nature is taken as an inherent unity. Every hexagram in the book discusses the relationship between heaven and natural world, and the core of the relationship between heaven and natural world is life. According to the book, the natural world is a Circle of Life, and from this Circle comes the love and beauty of the world. This book can be said to be about Chinese ancient people's life philosophy and life aesthetics.

Zhu Xi (1130-1200), was a Chinese scientist, philosopher, thinker, politician, educator, poet of Song Dynasty. He emphasized the study of the nature of things. According to Zhu, knowledge is acquired through experience. Human beings should investigate things to attain knowledge and to extend knowledge to the utmost. This theory is well known in China as "*Ge Wu Zhi Zhi*". Zhu encouraged people to delve deeper into the principles of things, that is, to conduct in-depth research and understanding of things. This exploration of the nature of things is comprehensive and aims to delve deeper into the essence and principles of things. This philosophy greatly influenced Chinese people's way of understanding the general characteristics and laws of beauty, beauty appreciation, and beauty creation. The theory further improved and enhanced Chinese people's aesthetic appreciation ability.

## 2. Study Pugin's thoughts From Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Perspectives

In this article, traditional Chinese aesthetic theories will be used as the tools to appreciate and analyze Pugin's thoughts. Aesthetic theories in *Yi Jing*, or *the Book of Changes* and Zhu Xi's "*Ge Wu Zhi Zhi*" theory, in particular, will be used the major research instruments. Zhu wrote in *Da Xue Ju Zhang*, "The way to acquire knowledge lies in understanding and studying everything, which means that in order to acquire knowledge, one must first come into contact with things and delve deeply into their principles. Everyone has a certain level of cognitive ability, and there are always certain principles for everything in the world. However, because these principles have not been fully understood, knowledge has certain limitations." The category of "things" mentioned by Zhu Xi is extremely broad, referring to all objective things that exist and all people's behavioral activities and spiritual thoughts. It not only contains ghosts, plants, animals, but also emotions, behaviors, and so on. From Zhu's aesthetic perspective, Pugin's personal life, major architectural projects, and books should be studied carefully in order to get the utmost understanding of his aesthetic thoughts.

### 2.1 Pugin's Personal Life

Pugin was the son of Augustus Charles Pugin, who was also an architect and an influential figure in the field of architectural illustration. From a young age, Pugin showed a keen interest in architecture and design. He learned the skills of drawing and draftsmanship from his father, who recognized his son's talents and encouraged him to pursue his passion. Pugin's father was known for his expertise in the Gothic style and his works greatly influenced his son's artistic direction.

Throughout his early career, Pugin worked closely with his father, collaborating on numerous architectural projects and publications. They are very attentive to detail and historical accuracy, which earned them reputation and recognition within the architectural community.

In 1832, Pugin's father suffered a mental breakdown and was confined to an asylum. This tragical event had a profound impact on the son, both personally and professionally. He had to shoulder the responsibility of supporting his family, including his father. At the same time, he didn't abandon his architectural dream and continued to pursue it.

Despite his father's illness, Pugin made great achievements and emerged as a leading figure in the Gothic Revival movement and became renowned for his architectural designs, particularly for his ecclesiastical buildings. Pugin firmly believed in the need for a return to the architectural aesthetics of the medieval period, which he viewed as true Christian architecture.

Pugin's wife, Louisa Burton, also had a considerable impact on his life and work. The couple first met in 1831 while Pugin was working on the restoration of Salisbury Cathedral. They got married in 1832 and went on to have nine lovely kids together.

Louisa was not just a supportive wife, but also played an integral part in Pugin's career. Pugin suffered from a number of health issues throughout his life. He experienced frequent bouts of depression and anxiety, which greatly affected his mental well-being. This led to periods of intense stress and emotional instability. Additionally, Pugin struggled with physical ailments, including chronic respiratory problems, which were likely exacerbated by the poor air quality and pollution prevalent in Victorian England. These respiratory issues significantly impacted his day-to-day life and his ability to work on his architectural projects. Furthermore, Pugin's dedication to his work often led to overexertion, causing him to experience physical exhaustion and a weakened immune system. This, combined with his already compromised health, made him prone to developing more severe illnesses. His wife Louisa looked after him in his illness and supported him in desperation. She often served as his muse and worked alongside him on various projects. Pugin valued her opinion and deeply admired her taste and artistic sensibilities. Together, they collaborated on designing and decorating several notable buildings, including the St. Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham and St. Augustine's Church in Ramsgate.

Financial difficulties and Pugin's declining mental and physical health put Pugin's family into a very challenging situation. Not many friends became a constant source of support and strength for Pugin throughout his life. Despite their successful collaboration on the Palace of Westminster, for instance, the partnership between Pugin and Sir Charles Barry faced challenges and tensions over the years. Maybe this is attributed to the fact that both architects were fiercely proud of their work and had contrasting views on various architectural aspects.

Chinese philosopher Zhu Xi believed that humans themselves possess a certain level of talents, which are influenced by other things such as one's personal life. Humans need to further expand and use their existing knowledge and experience to reason and judge from the inside out, which is a process of exploring new knowledge through their own existing cognition. Through the study of Pugin's personal life, we can better understand the formation of his aesthetic thoughts.

## **2.2 Pugin's major architectural projects**

In 1834, the medieval Palace of Westminster, which housed the British Parliament, was destroyed by a big fire. The British government commissioned a competition for the design of a new palace. Barry and Pugin participated and won the competition with joint efforts.

Pugin was passionate about restoring medieval styles in modern buildings. His commitment to the Gothic style stemmed from his belief that it represented an honest and moral form of architecture. This idea was in big contrast to the industrial era's materialism and commercialism. Sir Charles Barry, on the other hand, initially pursued a more classical architectural style. However, his collaboration with Pugin on the Palace of Westminster would prove to be transformative for both architects.

Pugin focused on designing the decorative aspects and interiors of the palace. He emphasized intricate carvings, detailed ornamentation, and a sense of grandeur. His influence extended to the designing of furniture, wallpaper, and textiles for the interiors. Barry was responsible for the overall architectural framework and the external appearance of the Palace. He combined elements of the Gothic style with classical proportions, forming what is now known as the Victorian Gothic style. Pugin and Barry worked together to create a harmonious fusion of their styles that would become one of the most recognizable landmarks in the world.

One of Pugin's most iconic creations is the Palace of Westminster's clock tower, better known as Big Ben. The construction of this famous landmark began in 1834 and was completed in 1859. The tower, officially named the Elizabeth Tower, stands at a height of 316 feet (96 meters) and houses one of the most famous and accurate timekeeping mechanisms in the world. Big Ben, the nickname that originally referred to the clock's Great Bell but now represents the entire tower, has become an international symbol of British architecture and culture. Pugin had a significant influence on the overall appearance of the tower. In 1852, Pugin suffered a mental breakdown and was confined to an asylum. He was unable to witness the completion of his masterpiece, including the installation of the Big Ben. Today, Big Ben remains a beloved landmark and an architectural marvel, attracting countless tourists and photographers from around the globe. It stands as a testament to the extraordinary vision and enduring legacy of Pugin, whose unparalleled talent brought forth this magnificent structure.

### 2.3 His book “Contrast”

Pugin was a person of many talents. Apart from a designer, he was also a critical writer, working on influential treatises such as "Contrasts" in 1836, which criticized the prevailing architectural styles of his time. Pugin argued that the Gothic style was superior to the prevailing neoclassical architecture, which he regarded as soulless and devoid of true artistic and moral values. According to Pugin, Gothic architecture had a sense of moral purpose, organic unity, and authenticity that was lacking in the neoclassical style.

His thoughts very close to traditional Chinese aesthetic theories in the *Yi Jing, or the Book of Changes*. According to the book, human beings and the nature is an inherent unity. Everything in the nature has ethical purposes and moral values. Everything in the nature has a soul as an organic object. Pugin argued that neoclassical architecture, with its emphasis on symmetry, proportion, and rationality, was a reflection of a society that had lost its moral and spiritual values. He saw it as a sterile and empty style that lacked the deep meaning and religious symbolism of the Gothic style. In "Contrasts," Pugin contrasted the grandeur and beauty of medieval Gothic buildings, such as cathedrals and monasteries, with the soulless and materialistic nature of modern architecture. He argued that the Gothic style was not only aesthetically superior but also morally superior, as it reflected the true values of a Christian society. Pugin called for a revival of the Gothic style, believing that it would restore the cultural and spiritual integrity of British society.

Furthermore, Pugin's "Contrasts" extended beyond design to highlight the social inequalities of his time. He criticized the industrialization and urbanization that had led to the degradation of the working class, and he saw architecture as playing a role in perpetuating these social injustices. Pugin believed that a return to the Gothic style would foster a more harmonious and equitable society. Buildings were created not only aesthetically pleasing but also functional and supportive of the needs of the people.

Overall, Pugin's "Contrasts" criticized the degradation of British society due to the prevalence of classical architectural styles. This publication had a profound influence on the Gothic Revival movement, inspiring a return to organic and authentic designs, influencing countless architects of the time. His thoughts of taking architecture as a means to restore the moral, spiritual, and social fabric of society were in accordance with traditional Chinese aesthetic philosophy in *Yi Jing, or the Book of Changes*.

### 6. Conclusion

From traditional Chinese aesthetic perspective, Pugin's aesthetic philosophy can be explained by Zhu Xi's "Ge Wu Zhi Zhi" theory which emphasized the extended study of anything/anybody to attain knowledge. Pugin is best known for his advocacy of Gothic Revival architecture and played a crucial role in the resurgence of this architectural style in England. Pugin's aesthetic philosophy was deeply rooted in his family life, his strong religious beliefs and his fierce opposition to the industrialization of society. His dedication to the Gothic Revival movement influenced subsequent generations of architects, and his ideas continue to shape architectural discourse and practice to this day.

What is more, Pugin's architectural thoughts are in accordance with the *Yi Jing*' philosophy that regards humans and all things as an organic and inseparable whole, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. It believes that humans should respect and follow nature, coexist harmoniously with nature, and achieve harmonious unity between humans and nature. It also emphasizes that everything in the nature has ethical purposes and moral values. This is one of the important characteristics of traditional Chinese culture and an important component of excellent traditional Chinese culture. For Pugin, beauty was not merely a matter of superficial appearances; it had a profound connection to the moral and spiritual values of society. He believed that the built environment had a significant impact on people's well-being and that design should reflect and promote the ideals and values of a community. He applied his principles to interior design, furniture, and the decorative arts. He believed that every aspect of the built environment should be cohesive and unified, reflecting a consistent aesthetic vision.

Traditional Chinese aesthetic theories helped us to better understand Pugin's architectural thoughts. Due to my limited knowledge and capacity, the article cannot fully illustrate my viewpoints. Further studies will be made and the opportunities for other cross-culture researchers to contribute to this issue are many.

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