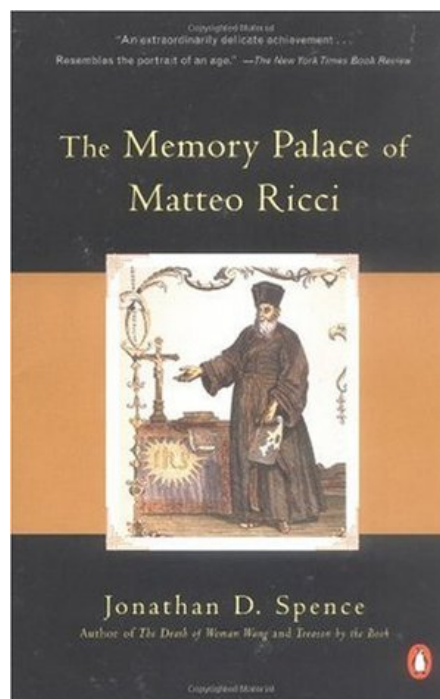




The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci

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In 1577, the Jesuit Priest **Matteo Ricci** set out from Italy to bring Christian faith and Western thought to Ming dynasty China. To capture the complex emotional and religious drama of Ricci's extraordinary life, **Jonathan Spence** relates his subject's experiences with several images that Ricci himself created--four images derived from the events in the bible and others from a book on the art of memory that Ricci wrote in Chinese and circulated among members of the Ming dynasty elite.

A rich and compelling narrative about a remarkable life, **The Memory Palace Of Matteo Ricci** is also a significant work of global history, juxtaposing the world of Counter-Reformation Europe with that of Ming China.

The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci Details

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Gavin says

On the face of it, this had all the makings of a book that would highly engross me. 16th century eastern and western history. Italy, Goa, and China were the main high points, and there is a lot here that did interest me. Perhaps the difference was Jonathan Spence was utilizing each of the four images Matteo Ricci had introduced to the Ming Chinese that would aid them in building their memory as a method of biography instead of a straight forward linear bio.

I was fascinated by the dance that Ricci maintained between respecting the Chinese belief of superiority while also trying to demonstrate both the ability of his Christian God and western knowledge and technology, but when you display a picture of a western building and indicate the living quarters on upper floors to the amusement of the Chinese elite one has to know that you are lost in a forest without a path.

Jesuits, exploration, philosophy, religion, law, the evolution of clocks, trade, and riots just as a few examples of the wide range of discussion in this book. I probably ought to read it again after about a year and perhaps I will appreciate it as some of the notes I have made might cause me to learn more about their subjects and then I'll have a better reading experience. Still, an ambitious work, and I'm glad I read it.

Ensiform says

Not a traditional biography, this book explores the 16th-century world, both European and Chinese, of Matteo Ricci in a set of themed vignettes drawn from four examples Ricci's own system of mnemonics and from four Biblical pictures he had printed. His mnemonic for "war," for example, opens a discussion of the violence Ricci read of and encountered, while his picture of Sodom leads into a discussion of Ricci's (and Ignatius of Loyola's) views on sin. The "memory palace" of the title is not Ricci's invention, but a way of remembering advocated by classical authors such as Pliny and Quintilian. (It's not a bad idea, making each mnemonic concrete by placing it within a specific context and giving it detailed form.) I must say that the non-chronological and continent-jumping style, while an admirable idea, is sometimes a bit difficult to follow; most themes and segues within themes work, while other passages seem to be simply a series of unrelated (but always fascinating) bits of information about the Eastern and Western century.

Martin says

Reviewing this biography is rather a complicated business. At first when reading the description on the dust jacket you might be inclined to think that this is a description of a 16th century missionary's life with many pieces of background information on the construction of memory palaces. In reality it is an unstructured narrative about an early Renaissance traveler to China. Granted, the usage of Matteo Ricci's writings about memory palaces as the guiding means to talk about the Far East and its exploration is quite a clever one and would have worked extremely well if the mechanism was actually used by the author as a meta-structure of the book. Ironically the structure of the book completely defeats the basic goals of a memory palace and it is

one of the most chaotic and unstructured pieces of writing ever seen.

The author freely jumps between events in the Far East and Italy or anywhere else in Europe. Some of it is related to Ricci and some of it consists of curious facts about the period. Some of the events are described in chronological order but most of them are grabbed at random and thrown together to create some kind of related text. Reading this book takes a lot of mental effort since it is up to the reader to glue all the facts and descriptions together.

From the contents of the book you start to wonder if perhaps it would be more interesting to read Ricci's own *Historie* in translation.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Matteo Ricci was a Jesuit who traveled from Italy to China in the 1500s. He came on a mission to spread the gospel. As he was highly educated in his own western culture of the time he used treasures from the western tradition to gain influence in China and win converts. He was probably viewed as an exotic bearer of ancient western wisdom by the Chinese. He used memory techniques of the ancient Greeks like Simonides and Romans like Cicero to demonstrate to the Chinese the value of the West's culture in hopes of winning converts to Christianity. The Chinese for their part could not get enough of these memory techniques as they would be of great use to memorize the classics of China and pass the prestigious Civil Service exam. Ricci spent much of his adult life in China studying the culture and adapting his Christianity to suit the local mores of China. A fascinating tale of cultural exchange.

Tony Laplume says

Like a number of other history books I've read, Spence's chronicle of Matteo Ricci's missionary efforts in China seems to have a distinct lack of perspective, although otherwise it's pretty interesting reading.

Whereas a book like Peter Ackroyd's *London* is meant to be ridiculously expansive, Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* went all over the place without seeming regard for how any of it would come across to the reader. Some of these writers simply don't seem to understand that they're not just providing a survey or trying to impress the reader with all the research they've done, but being comprehensive in the sense that their reader ends up knowing their subject as well as they do. This becomes impossible when information is cataloged instead of explored.

The memory palace of the title serves as a curious springboard for Spence. Each chapter ostensibly kicks off with an illustration Ricci chose to help the Chinese better understand the Catholic faith and its direct links to their existing culture. And yet Spence quickly segues into thoughts that more explore the world Ricci knew than the one that makes much sense either to the subject at hand or its significance for Spence's own readers. Ricci's memory palace was a technique to expand the memory, and perhaps the whole point of the book was that Spence was in fact decoding the images, but he doesn't spend a great deal of time explaining that this is what he'll do. Perhaps it's only the implication?

Clearly Spence's first love in this affair is the Chinese world itself. He's written other books to that regard. The reader could take that away as the main draw, too, but the author isn't terribly expansive about that, either, much less Ricci's life and lasting legacy. (The worst element of *Distant Mirror* was that its author chose a central figure who was more the subject of supposition than concrete fact, so I guess this is another common problem of the genre.) You can also read it as an example of faith as it was viewed in the time of the Counter-Reformation, or even the period of the early exploration of the New World.

Perhaps all these competing elements left Spence at a loss as to how to present them all, or he merely thought his book would be a curiosity, as it might be argued the Chinese ultimately embraced Ricci and his memory palace gimmick. Either way, it's not a painful read by any means, just not what it could have been.

Lynne Kelly says

If I had bought this book as a biography of Matteo Ricci or because of an interest in the history of the time, I would have rated it much higher. As I studiously avoid gruesome details of past horrors, I did not finish the book.

I bought the book because of my fascination with mnemonics and thought I was going to read about memory palaces in a historical and biographical context. Although they get a bit of a mention at the start, that is about it. The title is grossly misleading.

For those who like gory history and biography, well written and well researched, this book is likely to please you far more than it did me.

Tucker says

This is a very well written story of the life and work of Matteo Ricci. Ricci worked as a Jesuit priest in China around 1600. This book gives a flavor of life and politics in Europe, and then across the globe to India and China. There is also a taste of the technologies and science, sex, fashion, transportation, art, religion, and scholasticism. Ricci acted with surprising tolerance at some levels by adapting to the modes of Chinese culture and thought, learning Chinese and at times re-framing Christianity into Confucian ideals. However, in other ways he was also racist and conservative like the times.

Highly recommended to anyone interested in the politics of the Roman Catholic Church, spread of Christianity to China, China-western relations, or the history of the Jesuit order. I have zero interest in any of those areas, but I still found it edifying and very readable.

DoctorM says

I fell in love with this book when it first came out and made a point of assigning it to World Civ students throughout my teaching career. (And note: once you've read it, you'll want to go find Frances Yates' "The Art of Memory in the Renaissance" and go further into the 'memory palace' idea...) This is a wonderful book---another reviewer here called it an "intricate puzzle-box", and that's very much what it is. It's also a traveller's tale and a *Bildungsroman* and an introduction to late Ming China and its bureaucracy and intellectual life. Spence is a fine historian of China and a skilled writer. Very much recommended.

Hadrian says

An interesting book which is something more than an ordinary biography. Matteo Ricci is an interesting character, and the Palace of Memory is a framework and a link between topics, but there is also an excellent glimpse of Ming China and the vast currents of religion and peoples and thought in that vibrant civilization.

It's very interesting to see the interactions between Ricci, who is a Christian Italian Jesuit who is trained in the classical Roman tradition, learn Chinese, interact with the mandarins, learn the Chinese language, and explain his customs to a Confucian/Taoist/Buddhist audience and not get confused with the Muslims. Also bear in mind the Chinese isolationist tendencies. It's a fun book.

Frank Kelly says

The extraordinary life of Father Matteo Ricci SJ and his wonderfully creative use of "memory palaces" as a means of understanding and learning the faith. A brilliant mnemonic device that gave Chinese students the ability to create a palace of ideas and images they could walk through in their minds.

What was also quite interesting was how controversial the use of mnemonic devices for teaching the faith. Aquinas approved of using them but later Dominicans thought they were heretical - and Ignatius of Loyola was heretical for approving the use of them!

All in all, a very good read.

Nick says

Jonathan Spence's books are unique in their balance of learning and readability. That said, the organizing principle of this book (the Jesuit Ricci's attempt to convert Ming Dynasty Chinese through a Christian mnemonic device for the Confucian examinations), tries patience. Fortunately, Spence more than compensates with his habitual ease with the subject matter. And in this book he is at home not only his usual territory of China but Ricci's youth in Italy, his long ocean voyage to China, and the intricacies of Jesuit history and economics, such the import-export business that financed their missions to the East. In the end, Ricci mastered Chinese but made few converts, despite the occasional curiosity of the rulers. Fortunately, Spence has a keen eye for paradox: not only were the Jesuits dependent on trade, Ricci himself attempted to impress Chinese rulers with opulent Christian books. Ricci attacked Buddhists, despite their superficial similarities to Christianity--fasting, works for the poor at a time when a large portion of the population was evidently starving, even homeless, a gift for theological argument--even siding with Confucians against them.(Converts burned statues of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy because many Chinese confused her with the Virgin). A tireless writer, Ricci made no mention of the large population of the poor. And, with ties to the Portuguese colony of Macao, which depended on slavery, he was active in returning fugitives who had escaped into China. Ricci was not above justifying the sale of Chinese into slavery because it might be one of God's tools for conversion. A brilliant man, no doubt, and a powerful writer, but for all that intellectual rigor, incapable of noticing his own preconceptions and blind spots.

Katie says

A fascinating book, though a little bit frustrating. I absolutely love the idea behind this book, but I think the execution only sometimes matches up to the concept's promise.

Matteo Ricci was a Jesuit missionary who spent a few decades in India and China in the later 16th century. He became quite the celebrity while he was over there, famous not only for his missionary activity but also his translation work, his creation of an immensely popular world map, his rumored skills at alchemy (rumors he tried to quash, though he didn't always try very hard), and his prodigious memory. It's the last aspect of Ricci's fame that gives Spence his framing device for the book.

The idea of a memory palace was not a new one in Matteo Ricci's time - it stretched back to ancient Rome - but it had regained a new popularity in Renaissance thought and the affective piety of Ignatius Loyola and other Counter Reformation Catholics. It's based on the idea of creating mental images of everything you need to remember, and organizing them in a mental space - a room, a palace, a city - so that you can find it when you need it. Spence takes four images from Matteo's own memory palace, along with four religious images he curated, and builds his biography from there.

It's a hugely impressionistic work, which is the best and worst part about it. The book almost works like memory - it floats around through Ricci's life in a kind of free association adventure. One of the images includes Peter's attempt to walk on water and the chapter jumps off from there to delve through all of Matteo's water-related adventures from his first trip over to Goa to a rather harrowing journey through Chinese river rapids that ended with the drowning of his friend. An image of a peasant about to harvest - a memory image for the Chinese character for profit - leads to a discussion of trade and gift exchange. It's a kind of fascinating way to approach a biography. While each chapter has a vaguely chronological drift to it, the book as a whole does not - Matteo Ricci's death scene occurs about 2/3 of the way through. Unfortunately it can also be a little frustrating as a reader. There were loads of points where I would have loved a more detailed treatment of a topic, but the memory adventure will just sort of tumble forward into another facet of Ricci's life and world.

Despite that, though, it's worth reading for the content (which is really interesting) and for its adventurous form. I really like that Spence tried something new like this, even if it doesn't always work perfectly. When it does work, it's wonderful - he tends to close each chapter, for example, with a particularly vivid aspect of Matteo's life, frequently one involving violence. It gives the book the feeling of exploring someone's actual memory, as if a long trail of associations led back to an especially vivid moment. More history books should experiment with this sort of thing.

Philip says

This is a splendidly written account of Ricci's missionary voyage to China in the 16th century, but it is so much more. Ricci, a Jesuit priest, spent many years in China, and eventually became the first foreigner to be invited into the Forbidden City. Spence, a historian, brings in fascinating information about Ricci's native Italy and China, and the growing trade between East and West during that time. He builds the account around Ricci's use of memory devices that fascinated the Chinese, as did his knowledge of astronomy, navigation and many other fields. Spence weaves all of this into a highly readable narrative. I wish all historians were this interesting.

Lynne-marie says

I first read this book when it came out in hardcover, in 1984 and just re-read the hardcover copy that the library still preserved. Aside from the point that Spence fixes on Ricci's memory images to organize his historical information, and that the tale of Ricci's life could not be told without reference to the "memory palace" system he taught, this book is not primarily about that mnemonic trick. It is a historical tapestry of everything that touched on Ricci's life: his home of Macerata, Italy; his training in and much about the Jesuits; his posting to Goa and by some sidle-wise reasoning about Portugal and then Spain and then the state of sea travel. Spence uses Ricci and his four pictographs & six tales, published in China in 1605 by the Chinese inkstone connoisseur Cheng Dayue, as a part of his "The Ink Garden", as jumping off points to detail the world of 1550-1610, Ricci's life span, and as he progresses, he focuses more closely on China and Ricci's life there. Increasingly, the tapestry includes the politics of the Papacy and the international situation as well as the plight of the alien Jesuits in China, forbidden to ever leave, but ever suspected of sedition and treason. This is a masterly book not only for it's scholarship, but for the way the author draws its myriad threads into a coherent whole.

Bob Newman says

Stranger in a Strange Land

Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit priest, lived in China for 27 years, from 1582 to 1610, working towards the conversion of the Chinese. Do you think he bit off more than he could chew ? Maybe so. At any rate, he gave it his best. Why he was inclined to do so, and how he went about doing it, are the basic topics of this most interestingly constructed book. I would say there are several levels to consider. First, the training and background of such a missionary figure in that time, including the works of philosophy and religion that influenced him. The hardships of being a missionary are not neglected. Second, the Chinese society of that time and why Ricci's mission was basically "Mission Impossible". Third, a study in contradictions: the misunderstanding of each "side" of the other's longterm goals, the contradictory images of other faiths (Buddhism, Judaism, Islam), the clash between trade and faith in Europe, and the different concepts of morality. While globalization had begun, it had a long, long way to go. A fourth theme might be more literary: how a scholar like Spence could construct such a literary approach to history, making it sparkle and shine in ingenious ways for a reader. I was fascinated by this process. I would say that for anyone interested in history per se, this would be a five star book. However, if you are primarily concerned with China, this study is more about Europe and perhaps, "Europe meets China in the late 16th century". If you are more interested in Europe, there are probably more central works for you. Readers interested in what a 'memory palace' might be are advised to obtain a copy of the book. It's a fascinating read if not the easiest.

Albert says

This is a master class in popular historical writing. The prose is lyrical, clear, and at moments moves into the realm of literature. The book is in essence a biography of Matteo Ricci, the most famous Jesuit missionary who made inroads into China during the Ming dynasty, but it's a brilliant re-working of the biographical genre. Rather than presenting Ricci's life in straight chronological fashion, Spence organizes the narrative around 8 different images that provide a window into Ricci's world. This is "trans-national" history before

the concept even existed; Spence brilliantly juxtaposes the different developments in Europe and China, moving through geographical regions with a deft and swift touch.

Despite its literary brilliance, the book still has a dated feel to it. At times it reads like hagiography, as Spence barely hides his enthusiasm and admiration for Ricci's life. If only he would have been a little bit more critical of Ricci and the Jesuit enterprise, this would have been a much better book. The Chinese side of the story is also strangely static, given that Spence himself is a Chinese historian. The actors in his narrative are obviously Ricci and the West, and the Chinese seem to be merely reacting to the intrusions by the West, with only a few literati seeming to take the initiative and make contact.

In spite of these flaws, this is a wonderful example of historical writing intended for a popular audience.

Tom says

One of the most brilliant biographies I have ever read, about one of the most interesting people to have ever walked the earth (in my opinion). Spence connects Ricci's Counter-Reformation Italian background with his work as a Jesuit missionary to China, all structured non-linearly, around images from Ricci's memory palace, a mnemonic technique with which Ricci could recall a random list of words forwards and backwards after one reading.

I cannot give this book higher praise.

Andrej Mrevlje says

It's the second time, after many years, that I am going through this book. Matteo Ricci was an unusual character, Spence is a complicated writer and beautiful mind.

Larissa says

Jonathan Spence is known as a master of narrative history, so I expected him to tell a well-constructed, straightforward story, one that unfurls without interruption from beginning to end. Instead, Spence created an ingenious puzzle box of a book, with chapters that interlock in unexpected ways and a chronology that continually swirls back upon itself. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci was an expert practitioner of memorization techniques, and Spence has organized his work as a series of reminiscences evoked by particular images, memories unconstrained by location or time. As such, this book isn't the most convenient source of factual information on its subject's life, but by the end readers will have learned a great deal about Counter-Reformation missionary endeavors in Asia.

If the book falls short, it's in the treatment of Chinese society and culture. Spence is a historian of China, so he may have assumed that readers would also be familiar with this context. Still, given Ricci's many contacts among the Peking literati, it would have been illuminating to see a more extensive comparison of early modern Chinese scholars with their European counterparts. It would be especially interesting to hear how the Jesuit practice of theological disputation overlapped – or didn't – with Chinese traditions of religious thought. When Ricci advanced doctrinal arguments, was he actually connecting with his audiences, or were the conceptual frameworks simply too far apart? Given that some of Ricci's friends did convert to

Christianity, what convinced them to do so (and did they understand their conversions in the same terms that the missionaries did)? While Ricci is the central figure of this work, who never sundered his attachments to European culture and values, the significance and success of his mission was ultimately determined by his Chinese interlocutors. Including more of their perspectives would have given additional richness and balance to this already finely crafted book.

Gary Bruff says

This is a biography of the Jesuit missionary who tried in the early 17th century to convert the Ming emperor to Christianity and thereby win over millions of souls. Matteo Ricci had won only limited access to the emperor and his court, so he spent a great deal of time attaining literacy in Chinese. The memory palace in the book's title refers to the method Ricci used to learn characters. Ricci envisioned a palace furnished with items which served as mnemonics for individual characters.

Although the Ming emperor was impressed with the elaborate clock which Ricci presented to him (clocks were still rather rare in 1600), and despite the emperor being amused by icons and by the stories of the Bible which Ricci rendered into Chinese, neither the emperor nor the Chinese masses seemed to be much interested in changing. The emperor considered himself to be the center of the universe, ruling the known world through the mandate of heaven. He was baffled at how the Christian god could allow his son to be tortured to death. To the Ming Emperor this was both shameful and a sign of the Jesus' weakness.

Ricci dies in Beijing more or less a failure. Spence, as always, takes the implied tack that if only the conversion had been accomplished, China would not have festered in anti-modern denial. I personally feel that China had every right to turn its back on the West, and that just because China got screwed during the Opium Wars, it does not mean that China should have modernized and westernized (and Christianized) sooner.

Students of the Taiping rebellion would appreciate that although China was not converted, a disaster like the Taiping pseudo-Christian uprising also did not swell up during the Ming era.
