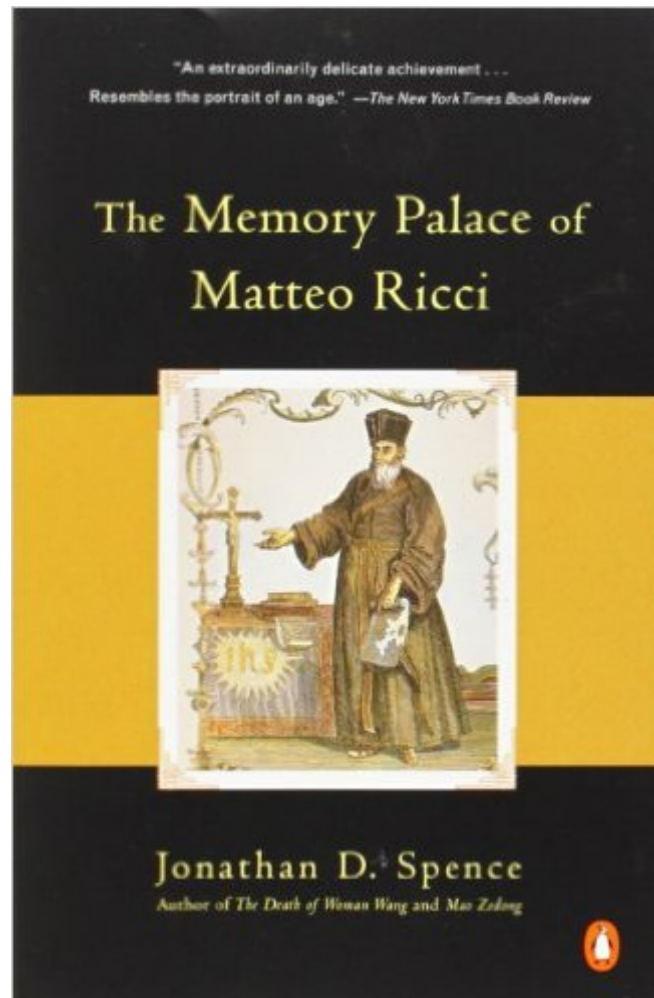


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# The Memory Palace Of Matteo Ricci



## Synopsis

From the renowned historian and author of *The Death of Woman Wang*, a vivid and gripping account of the 16th-century missionary's remarkable sojourn to Ming China. 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 fascinating 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an entertaining, well-researched BIOGRAPHY about a Jesuit missionary in China. If, like me, you were expecting a book detailing Matteo Ricci's method of enhancing his memory, you will be only partially rewarded. That subject IS brought up, with intelligent commentary, but (to use a metaphor) Ricci's mnemonics are only the 'frame' around the main 'painting'. The main painting is a thoroughly enjoyable, detailed picture of a Catholic missionary sent from Europe to China. Ricci's voyage of discovery as his ethnocentric training meets with China's equally ethnocentric culture makes for good reading. Readers interested in mnemonics will be partially rewarded. Readers will be thoroughly rewarded, if they are seeking entertaining Middle-Ages history about Catholicism, missionary work, Europe, Rome, Asia, or China.

Jonathan Spence's approach here is so effortlessly engaging, so like a work of historically informed fiction, that you can easily lose sight of just how responsible and convincing it is at the same time. Framing the book with Ricci's own mnemonic imagery gives Spence a complex but perfectly coherent lens through which to write. Spence deftly allows Ricci's own images to define the scope of the narrative as well, so he isn't burdened with scholarly asides attempting to fill in the gaps with a general history. This is a book of simple genius. I've reviewed several books on , and seldom given a five star rating. This wonderful book rates a five.

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I wrote my BA of Humanities thesis on Matteo Ricci and found Spence's book valuable for its information but mildly frustrating. "Memory Palace" is an excellence source for facts about Ricci's life for those who are not fluent in multiple languages or do not have access to the research material that Spence does. I turned to Spence for his commentary on Ricci's various writings that I did not have access to and for various tidbits of facts. Furthermore, Spence does a good job of illustrating the world that Ricci lived and worked in. For example, I was enlightened on the relationship of the Jesuits to the Portuguese King and how the Portuguese port of Macao in China operated. It was good background information to supplement the primary text I was using. However, the frustrating part of this book is its organization. While it's an interesting idea to organize it according to the first four Chinese characters in his mnemonic system (or "memory palace"), it makes for a near meaningless train of thought; I ended up skimming the lengthy chapter on "water." I'm still disappointed by the end because Spence offers no real conclusion or summary, just an enigmatic statement. I had previously read Spence's "Death of Woman Wang" and I realize that it is Spence's style to amass historical information with unorthodox organization (I think it's his selling point). It's creative, but not very useful. Fortunately, the book has an excellent index, so it's fairly easy to re-find significant passages. For those that want to read an actual narrative of Ricci's mission, I

highly recommend the English translation of Trigault's transcription of Ricci's mission journals; this was the primary text for my paper. I found it very interesting and surprisingly high in entertainment value, considering its origin. Trigault, Nicolas S. J. "China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Mathew Ricci: 1583-1610." trans. Lous J. Gallagher, S.J. (New York: Random House, Inc. 1953). Also recommended for his examination of the religious issues involved with Ricci and the other Jesuits preaching Christianity in China is Jaques Gernet's "China and the Christian Impact." To sum up, it answers this question and more, "What happens when you try to insert the Christian God into the ancient writings of a sophisticated society?" Gernet, Jaques, "China and the Christian Impact." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

This book is worth reading for the account of Ricci's memory system alone. The way the Jesuits used the power of the sensory imagination to remember texts or Chinese characters is inspirational. Spence explains the secrets of creating such a system, though this ain't no self-help book. But more interesting still was the way that Ricci used his imaginative interpretations of Chinese pictograms to convey Christian images and ideas to the Chinese; and the way that he performed memory feats to impress and gain access to high Chinese circles for his work.

I loved this book. The mixture of history, mnemonic device, theology, missionary activity, and social and political thought is entrancing. Dr. Spence has displayed the cultural and spiritual ethos, not only of the title character, but of an era, place and time. The breadth of scholarship is impressive, as are the language and imagery used to present it. I cannot speak to the accuracy of the material presented, but am so intrigued, now, by the period, that I soon will be able to. I highly recommend this book.

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