

RICCI'S MEMORY PALACE

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, a memory palace in an odd place and the wrong time. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

Historian Jonathan Spence picks a strange perspective from which to tell the story of Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci. Ricci went to China in 1582 and spent the remaining 32 years of his life there. The Jesuits were only a generation old when Ricci joined them. They'd been formed in answer to the Protestant Reformation, and they offered an energetic and intellectual response to everything that'd gone bad in the late medieval church.

Ricci brought blazing intelligence to the task of learning who the Chinese were and how to bring Christianity to them. He learned their language, technology, and culture.

Then, in 1596, Ricci wrote *A Treatise on Mnemonics*, in Chinese, for the governor of Jiangxi Province. In it he recreated the medieval European idea of a memory palace -- an edifice you build in your mind and furnish with mnemonic devices. Recollection is a process of walking through the rooms and associating information with their contents. Those contents must be distinct and dramatic.

Suppose a modern medical student were to build a memory palace. In one room he might put a Mountie on his horse, leading a manacled prisoner. That triggers the phrase, Some Criminals Have Underestimated Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The first letters of each word, S, C, H, U, R, C, M, and P, identify the shoulder and arm bones -- S for scapula, C for clavicle, Humerus, Ulna, Radius, and so on. He can fill his whole building with bizarre people and things to aid his memory of bones, muscles, and nerves.

The memory palace idea was important before we had millions of the new printed books -- when most knowledge had to be carried by rote. But printed books were driving out the art of memory and they were bringing in the Reformation. Now we could write it down, forget it, and look it up when we needed it.

Ricci may've been bringing modern reform to the Catholic Church, but he was also leading the Chinese back to the interior life of the medieval church, a world where the mind was supposed to operate with minimal instruction from outside influence. By now, Ricci's flamboyant tricks of memory were falling from favor. Europe was condemning them as magic and showmanship. But this was China.

So Ricci did something we might take to heart today as we buy into our computers -- our second selves, our replacement brains. For they too take us further and further from the old discipline of memory. Why memorize what we can look up? And so our inner life is gradually impoverished for lack of grist.

Ricci left his mark on China. He didn't accomplish widespread conversions, of course. But his mission did forge the first solid intellectual link between Europe and this very different culture. Part of it was a matter of calling forth an old ability that waned during the Renaissance -- and which we are absolutely fleeing from today.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

Spence, J. D., *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. New York: Viking, 1984.

I am grateful to the Rev. Joan Lepley, Portland, Oregon, for suggesting the Spence source.

For more on the history and role of memory, see Episodes [892](#) and [909](#).

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