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THE INTERPRETATION OF IMAGES IN MATTEO RICCI’S PICTURES FOR CHENGSHI MOYUAN

Images and the symbols they include were a component of the Jesuit’s evangelization method in China. We do not intend to flatten the very rich and complex tradition of images in western culture by reducing it to a mere method of evangelization. Amongst the threads making up its material, since threads often interweave, we have decided to follow one of these threads, mnemonics. Images are the visible link of mnemonics, that has been for centuries a sort of framework upon which the western system of thought was based. The broad use of images made by Catholic Church is but only one aspect of this structure. We want to research into an episode of the preaching history of the Jesuits in China: the interpretation of some images, drawn from original Flemish engravings, chosen and annotated by Matteo Ricci for a Chinese album. First at all, we will summarise the main uses of memory in western civilisation.

A tradition going back to the Greek-Latin antiquity put images of things or facts into real or virtual places. Returning to these places, in a metaphoric (by means of memory) or real way, a person is reminded of what had been previously deposited there. It was the kind of mnemonics created by the Greeks and made perfect by the Latins, such as Cicero, who remembers its legendary origins, witnessed in his De Oratore.¹ For the Latins, the memorization technique described in Ad Herennium by the pseudo-Cicero and the Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria finally became part of the Rhetoric. The memoria, together with the inventio, the dispositio and the elocutio, was

¹ See Cicero, De Oratore, II,LXXXVI, pp.351-54, see also Frances Yates, 1972, pp.3-4.
Ill. 1 - St. Peter walking on the water (From: Chengshi moyuan)