

4 The Encounter of Image and *xiang* (象) in Matteo Ricci's *Western Art of Memory* (*Xiguo Jifa*, 1596)

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On August 29, 1595, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) wrote Edouard de Sande (1547–1599), the Jesuit superior of the China mission in Macao, to report that the literati in Nanchang city marveled at his amazing memory. They even regarded it as a miracle, he boasted. How, asked his admirers, could Ricci possibly remember random Chinese characters just at a glance, no matter how many were presented to him on one page?¹ Ricci's reaction was to wonder if this would not be a good opportunity “to convert more local people to Christianity” by imparting his system of mnemonics to them—or at least to those Chinese literati who yearned to pass the civil service examinations—in an apparently Sinicized form.² As Peter Burke has noted, the Jesuits were “specialists in cultural translation” who aimed “to be ‘all things to all people.’” In that sense, “Ricci's strategy of dressing as a Chinese scholar was typical of his order.”³ The result of Ricci's deliberations was a short book in Chinese entitled *Xiguo Jifa* (西國記法 *The Western Art of Memory*, hereafter *Jifa*), which was published in 1596 and circulated among members of the Ming dynasty elite.

Jifa is a six-chapter treatise divided into three parts. In the first two chapters, Ricci treats of “Principles” (*Yuanben* 原本) and “Application” (*Mingyong* 明用), narrating the Aristotelian epistemological process of recall based on images (象記法). In the next three chapters, he explains carefully the activity of mnemonics. Initially, in chapter 3, “Setting of Position” (*Shewei* 設位), he shows how to establish appropriate places in the mind to situate or deposit already formed images. In the fourth chapter, “Building of Images” (*Lixiang* 立象), which works on the assumption that Chinese characters are images, Ricci gives specific instructions for forming images from Chinese script. In the fifth chapter, “Determining of the Material of Knowing” (*Dingshi* 定識), he turns to more practical questions and presents a series of cases in which places and images are combined into a dynamic activity of memorizing. In the last part, chapter 6, “Extension of this Material” (*Guangzi* 廣資), Ricci supplies further examples of image formation out of 120 Chinese characters.

This little treatise has attracted the attention of scholars since the 1980s, particularly because it is believed to have been the first text to introduce European rhetoric to China. The scholarship has investigated *Jifa*'s

occidental heritage, its vernacular modifications, its basic characteristics, its writing aims, and its historical reception in China. Just recently, Jaewon Ahn found that *Jifa* was strongly influenced by Johann Host von Romberch's *Congestorium artificiose memorium* (1520).⁴ Three decades before Ahn, Michael Lackner translated *Jifa* into German and provided a useful introduction. There and in a 1993 paper, Lackner explained that despite Ricci's high hopes, the influence of *Jifa* on Chinese literati turned out to be almost negligible. The reason, Lackner argued, was that "the way in which Chinese characters are transformed into *images* is an essentially tautological one, because all Chinese characters work as images, even though not all of them are images."⁵ This, it seems to me, is a rather narrow reading of a more complex problem. I suggest instead that Ricci's cultural and epistemic translation failed to bridge the gap between his Western concept of *image* and his audience's long-standing philosophical traditions around the notion of image.

In 2018, Ana Carolina Hosne's paper on "Untranslatable Images of a Classical Art of Memory in Ming China" countered Lackner's argument that, in the Chinese Jesuit version of Scholastic memory, the image is closely related to the contemporary Chinese notion of "the abstract."⁶ Instead, she finds that

as a man of the Renaissance, Matteo Ricci's mind was a mass of associations, things that "stood for" other things. So images could stand for words, arguments and concepts; but when he merged words and images by exclusively resorting to Chinese characters to condense visuality, the images in Ricci's treatise did not stand for something else, at least not for the Chinese.⁷

Against the background of Hosne's work, I will respond to Lackner's assertion by clarifying major differences between what Ricci intended by the term 象 (*xiang*, the Chinese translation of the "image" in mnemonics) in *Jifa* and what contemporary Chinese literati understood by the term. I suggest that due to his personal memorizing experience, academic training, and missionary strategies, Ricci uprooted the Chinese characters from their cultural tradition and treated them as physical images that could be perceived, memorized, and experienced using the inductive process that Aristotle outlines in *Metaphysics* I.1 and *Posterior Analytics* II.19. This distinction in the technical meaning of the term *xiang* exemplifies my argument that some basic terms are nourished by a cultural tradition and become virtually untranslatable when cross-cultural translation also involves the translation of philosophical and cosmological systems.

Chinese Characters as Images in Ricci's *Jifa*

Ricci introduced the method circulating among Jesuits for enhancing memory on the basis of two premises: first, human memory is like a

storehouse with several loci (which Ricci translates as *wei* 位) in which people can store the objects they wish to remember. Second, the objects worthy of memorizing, in this instance Chinese characters, can be reduced to images (which Ricci translates as *xiang* 象). The essence of the method was to manipulate mnemonic images and deposit them in a fixed and appropriate imaginary locus. At the outset of chapter 2, “Application,” Ricci explains the general rules for applying these principles by means of four examples:

假如記“武”“要”“利”“好”四字，乃默置一室，室有四隅，為安頓之所，卻以東南隅為第一所，東北隅為第二所，西北隅為第三所，西南隅為第四所。即以“武”字，取勇士戎服，執戈欲鬥，而一人扼腕以止之之象，合為“武”字，安頓於東南隅。以“要”字，取西夏回回女子之象，合為“要”字，安頓於東北隅。以“利”字，取一農夫執鋏刀，向田間割禾之象，合為“利”字，安頓西北隅。以“好”字，取一丫髻女子，抱一嬰兒戲耍之象，合為“好”字，安頓西南隅。四字既安頓四所，後欲記憶，則默念其室，及各隅而尋之，自得其象，因象而憶其字矣。此蓋心記法之大都也。

For instance, to remember the four characters 武 [*wu*, War], 要 [*yao*, Importance], 利 [*li*, Benefit], and 好 [*hao*, Good], one could improvise an internal image of a room with four corners to place the four characters. The southeastern corner is the first, the northeastern corner the second, the northwestern the third, the southwestern the fourth. To memorize the character 武, one can first imagine such a scene in which an armed warrior holding a “halberd” [戈] in his hand desires to fight while another man tries to “halt” [止] him by holding his wrist. Then the image can be deposited in the southeastern corner. In order to memorize the character 要, one can combine the image of “an Islamic woman” [女] with the image of her coming from the “Western Xia” [西], then put it in the northeastern corner. For the character 利, one can imagine that a peasant holding a long “knife” [刀] in his hand cuts “grain stalks” [禾] on the field, and then save it in the northwestern concern. For the character 好, we can imagine that “a woman with a servant hairstyle” [丫] plays with “a child” [子] on her arms and then store the image in the southwestern corner. If the four characters assigned to four places are to be recollected later, one could recall the hall by heart and look for these images in the corners, thereby also the characters. This is the essence of mnemonics by heart.⁸

In this discussion, Ricci constructs an ingenious solution to the problem of how to set up a close association between the Chinese characters and the images required by his mnemonics in a manner that will be accessible to Chinese literati. He begins by building an imaginary mental architecture for storing mnemonic images of the Chinese characters. Then

he splits each of the Chinese characters to be remembered into several, seemingly constitutive parts, and contrives a vivid image for each part. He then combines these different parts into one striking image that is easier to memorize than the original character. This is akin to the visual alphabet he learned from European memory treatises, fashionable at the time, in which an image stood for the initial letter of its name, enabling words to be spelled out as a row of objects.⁹ Ricci's own imaginary method follows this model by combining the meanings of two pictorial constituents of one Chinese character to form a single striking story that can subsequently be deposited in a particular place of the mental palace. For instance, he breaks down the character 武, meaning "war" in Chinese, into two simple elements: the right side (戈) and the left side (止). The two sides of 武 are not, however, just simpler elements of one character, but characters in themselves, carrying their own meanings in Chinese. 戈 means a weapon named halberd, and 止 expresses the action of halting—hence Ricci's suggestion of imagining a scene where a man tries to halt a warrior holding a halberd. This complex imaginary story, containing such vivid and action-related representations of a war-like scene, subsequently has to be located in a particular room of the mental palace by the learner. In order to recall the character 武, the learner simply reenters his memory palace, returns to the place where the image was originally stored, and retrieves it. Ricci's method of memorization and recalling is thus based firmly on the dissociation and recombination of images within mental arrangements. Without the orderly arrangement of the images in an appropriate place or against an appropriate background, retrieval is deemed impossible.

Having clarified the basic rules of his mnemotechnics in chapter 2, Ricci explains its methodology in much greater detail in the next three chapters. Chapter 3, "Setting of Position," discusses the properties that a place for the images must possess:

凡記法，須預定處所，以安頓所記之象。... 處所既定，爰自入門為始，循右而行，如臨書然，通前達後，魚貫鱗次，羅列胸中，以待記頓諸象也。... 夫安象於處所，猶書字於漆板，其字有時洗去，而漆板用之無窮。故處所非象可比，最宜堅固穩妥，然後利終身之用。

It is important in mnemotechnics to determine the place that has the capacity for images Once the place is determined, you can enter into it from the door and go along the right side through it, as if you are reading a book from the beginning to the end. These places are neatly lined up in your heart like the scales of fish where the images are stored and memorized. ... Assigning the images to the places is just like writing on a lacquer board: after a certain time, the scripts are washed out, but the lacquer board can be used repeatedly. Therefore, compared with places, the images are not as useful at all.

The places can be used for a lifetime, the firmer and more stable, the better.¹⁰

In the remainder of the chapter, Ricci lists thirteen qualities of eligible places—magnificence, leisure, neatness, brightness, and so on. These qualities are of utmost importance, not least because Ricci is convinced that a firm and stable memory palace must be constructed in order to master mnemotechnics.

The claim that “there is no character in this world that could not be conceived as an image” (天下無不可象之之字) marks all of Ricci’s efforts in chapter 4, “Building of Images.” To realize this claim in practice, Ricci substantially reinterprets the six Chinese principles of character formation—widely accepted by all Chinese literati at the time—on the basis of his belief that “the transition from image to writing was immanent in the history of the script.”¹¹ The six principles were explained by Xu Shen (許慎, c. 55–c. 149) in his *Shuowen jiezi* (說文解字, *Explanation of Graphs and Analysis of Characters*), which accounted for the development of the script and for relationships between characters.¹²

Ricci takes these principles on board, but he amends them to elucidate five methods of dissociating and combining characters, following the practices he presented in chapter 2. His whole project starts from the claim that the principle of the pictograph is primary in character formation:

蓋聞中國文字，祖於六書，古之六書，以象形爲首，其次指事，次會意，次諧聲，次假借，終以轉注，皆以補象形之不足，然後事物之理備焉。但今之字，由大篆而小篆，小篆而隸，隸而楷，且雜以俗書，去古愈遠，原形遞變，視昔日自然之文，反以爲怪。而時俗所尚，在古所謂謬譌無取者，咸安用無疑。故茲法取象，一以時尚習見之字爲本，特略及古書耳。

I have heard that Chinese writing is the progeny of six principles of character formation [*liushu* 六書]. The six old principles began with “pictographs” [*xiangxing* 象形], next “simple indicatives” [*zhishi* 指事], then “compound ideographs” [*huiyi* 會意] then “phonetic compounds” [*xingshen* 形聲], then “loan characters” [*jiajie* 假借] and lastly “related pairs” [*zhuangzhu* 轉注]. All the other principles made up for the insufficiencies of pictography. The principles of everything were then complete. Present-day characters [have evolved] from Greater Seal Script to Lesser Seal, from Lesser Seal to Clerical, from Clerical to Regular, with vulgar characters mixed in as well. As the distance from antiquity increases, characters mutate from their original forms. The original natural writing of old times is now instead perceived to be strange and unnatural. What is currently considered to be popular would have been considered unbearably strange in antiquity, yet it is widely used without questioning. Therefore, the

choosing of images for the [memory] technique will be based on the characters preferred by current fashion, with only occasional reference to ancient writing.¹³

Ricci takes the pictograph to be the basic principle of character formation, all subsequent principles being there largely to alleviate “the insufficiencies of pictography.” He traces the history of Chinese scripts accordingly, and sets up a map of connections between pictographs, old script, and natural writing in order ultimately to justify building images for mnemonics based on current script fashion. He does not, however, provide a distinct substantiation of his views. His thinking seems to be that although there is a decline in the use of ancient Chinese writing, and the current characters would have seemed strange to the ancients, the old and current scripts both share the same universal principles of character formation, and especially the first one: the pictography of real things.

Based on the relationship between characters and physical reality, Ricci next distinguishes three kinds of images, in preparation for reinterpreting the six principles:

凡字實有其形者，則象以實有之物。但字之實有其物者甚少，無實物者，可借象，可作象，亦以虛象記實字，蓋用象迺助記，使易而不忘。然正象與借象、作象，在我活法以通之 ...

In general, such characters that take forms out of reality are images of real things. In fact, however, there are only few characters that come from real things. If those things do not exist in the concrete, one can borrow or create images for them, and also use unreal images for memorizing those characters that refer to a real thing. The use of the image can help to memorize easily and is hardly forgotten. In our living method, however, there are real images in association with borrowed images and created images.¹⁴

This division into three categories, the real, created, and borrowed image, is crucial for Ricci’s reinterpretation of the theoretical foundations of Chinese character formation. By subsuming the six Chinese principles under these three categories, Ricci completes his reinterpretation of character formation based on images. He suggests that only those Chinese characters that mirror forms of real things are remembered by virtue of their “real images,” and he therefore considers them to be co-extensive with the category of “pictograph.” He subsumes those characters remembered by adding imaginary images to the real images, or by deducing them from the real images, under the category of “created images.” This category he sometimes also calls “simple indicatives” or “compound ideographs.” Finally, those characters that are remembered by “borrowing” images from other characters because they share certain similarities (such as phonetics, meaning, or shape) are categorized as “loan characters,”

“phonetic compounds,” or “related pairs.” Ricci finds three simple categories of his own making to reduce the traditional six principles of character formation to his theory of building images. Ultimately, he believes, no matter how complicated Chinese writing is, it can always be attributed to the imaginative modification of some real image.

In the rest of chapter 4, Ricci proceeds to set out five perspectives by means of which characters can be dissociated and combined:

至若因實具之物兼形質以成象，或壘本象以成象，或合數象以成象，或參象意而成象，復有難於作象，乃因有形之物，稍損益之以成其象，則知天下無不可象之之字，亦在乎善權巧變也歟！

In the case of a real and concrete thing, one combines the form and material as its image; or one can double the original image to make an image; or can unite several images as one image; or construct an image according to the meaning of the image. If it is still difficult to build an image, one can subtract or add images to the image of corporeal things to attain it. It is therefore obvious that there is no character in this world that could not be conceived as an image, once one has flexibly mastered the rules of the building of images.¹⁵

Chapter 4 constitutes the core text of *Jifa*, because it is here that Ricci treats thousands of Chinese characters as images and argues that, as such, they can be assigned to a particular place in a person’s mind. By combining and dissociating the real images of things and states of affairs, he believes, one can obtain an image of any Chinese character.

In chapter 5, based on various combinations of images of single characters, Ricci promises that a whole paragraph or a text can be memorized in the memory palace. He shows how to apply the art of memory in order to remember typical ancient Chinese sentences, extracted from Chinese classics such as *Analects* (論語) or *Classic of Poetry* (詩經). All the treatises he cites are set texts for the Ming dynasty imperial civil service exams—clearly, Ricci intended to catch the eye of Chinese literati who were hoping to pass the notoriously demanding exams.

In the last chapter, Ricci picks almost 120 different kinds of characters to show his skills and strategies in building images from different perspectives. His procedure reduces the complicated to the simple and replaces difficult-to-remember words with easy-to-remember images. This makes it possible to memorize a whole sentence with the help of the combinations of the images of characters without having to understand the meaning of the sentences exactly.

It is worth noting that in all Ricci’s treatments, the real images of things have absolute priority, and the created and borrowed images are of secondary importance. No matter how freely created and borrowed the images used in mnemonics, constructed by imagination, they all have a solid grounding in the real, outer world. As we saw, Ricci repeatedly

insists that the pictograph is the basic principle of character formation, and that “all the other [images] made up for the insufficiencies of pictography.”

To understand the reasons for this insistence and Ricci’s ontological hierarchy between real and borrowed images, we need to return to chapter 1, “Principles,” in which he lays a Scholastic theological and epistemological foundation for his mnemonics that explains the heritage of the particular properties Ricci assigned to “image” and the ways he used the concept in his *Jifa*:

人受造物主所賦之神魂，視萬物最為靈悟，故遇萬類悉能記識，而區別以藏之，若庫藏之貯財貨然。及欲用時，則萬類各隨機而出，條理井井，絕無混雜。……記含有所，在腦囊，蓋顛頭後，枕骨下，為記含之室。故人追憶所記之事，驟不可得，其手不覺搔腦後，若索物令之出者，雖兒童亦如是。……蓋凡記識，必自目耳口鼻四體而入。當其入也，物必有物之象，事必有事之象，均似以印印腦。

The Creator has endowed human beings with the soul, which is subtly perceptive of all things. It is therefore able to perceive all kinds of things encountered, distinguish them, and preserve them as if they were stored in a warehouse. When someone wishes to use them, every item will come into sight in order and without any confusion The place of memory is located in the brain. Behind the skull bone, below the occipital bone, there resides the room of memory. Therefore, people tend to unconsciously scratch themselves on the back of their head when they try to recall what they once memorized, but cannot recall right now. It is as if they try to pull [these memories] out. The phenomenon [of scratching] is observed even in children. ... Perceptions necessarily come through the eye, ear, mouth, and nose as well as the body. When they enter [the internal senses], the images of things and the images of states of affairs must come into being. It happens as if the brain is stamped by a seal.¹⁶

This paragraph is crucial to the epistemological foundation of Ricci’s concept of the image. Although his whole mnemonic treatise is reminiscent of Pseudo-Cicero’s *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, its theoretical foundation seems to derive from Aristotle’s *De anima*, especially concerning the role that the image plays in the process of cognition. Indeed, as a member of the Society of Jesus, Ricci had undergone rigorous academic training at the Collegio Romano, and was familiar with the Aristotelian and Scholastic traditions. His understanding of the term “image,” which he used to rewrite the six principles of Chinese character formation, may be seen as deriving from the Aristotelian epistemological context, and especially from *De anima*. As Francis Yates has noted: “For the scholastics,

and for the memory tradition which followed them, there was a point of contact between mnemonic theory and the Aristotelian theory of knowledge in the importance assigned by both to the imagination. Aristotle's statement that it is impossible to think without a mental picture is constantly brought in to support the use of images in mnemonics.¹⁷

This is borne out by the work of another Chinese Jesuit, Giulio Aleni (1582–1649). In 1623, Aleni wrote a pamphlet, *Xingxue Cushu* (性學概述, *A Brief Outline of the Science of Human Nature*), which was adapted from the Coimbra commentaries on *De anima* and *Parva naturalia*. After introducing Aristotle's four internal senses of the soul, Aleni wrote a chapter "on mnemonics" that cites Ricci's art of memory.¹⁸ The case shows that Jesuits in China, following the Scholastic tradition, regarded the Aristotelian theory of knowledge as the basis of their mnemonics. In short, the concept of image in *Jifa* had a rich Aristotelian epistemological background, especially the theory of perception.

Considering the medieval and post-medieval transformations and developments of Aristotelian theory, the image in Ricci refers to a "sensible species," an image that is directly abstracted from the sensible thing in the world. Images thus represent an object's physical attributes, abstracted by the intellect to form a pure conceptual image, the "intelligible species." The latter represents the thing in the world in its truly essential form. Behind the single notion of the image in the Jesuit art of memory, then, there was a tremendous web of concepts related to the theory of abstraction in Scholastic epistemology. On the deepest level, the images in Ricci's mind might even be signs of the Creator, because in Scholasticism "the theory of abstraction was rooted in two basic principles: that there is a necessary correspondence between objective reality and our conception of it, and that objective reality itself is subject to an inexorable, God-given, logical order."¹⁹

Character and *xiang* in Wei Jiao's *Liushu jingyun*

Jifa is typical of the appropriation of Chinese traditional views by the Jesuits: Ricci put new Chinese wine into old bottles—bottles made up of Aristotelian philosophical theory, pseudo-Ciceronian rhetoric, and religious concern. But his transformations seemed too alien to Chinese people in the Ming dynasty, and a Confucian scholar at the time probably read something very different in Ricci's writings. That is illuminated by a contemporary Chinese scholar who discussed the topic of character formation from a Chinese point of view, Wei Jiao 魏校 (1483–1543) and his *Liushu jingyun* (六书精蕴, *Essentials of the Six Principles of Character Formation*, hereafter *Jingyun*).

Wei Jiao was the chief of education examinations at the provincial level and the chief executive of national ritual activities, and was a vigorous advocate of the Neo-Confucian School of Bodyheartminding

(*xinxue* 心學).²⁰ His book *Jingyun* was published in 1540 with the purpose of linking Chinese etymology to *xinxue*, which by the early sixteenth century had become the most influential alternative to the “Cheng-Zhu” Neo-Confucian orthodoxy associated with the brothers Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) and with Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).

The dictionary *Jingyun* is clearly embedded in Confucian thought and epistemology. Composed in an encyclopedic style, it presents the world that Chinese people inhabited and cultivated at the time. Wei Jiao selects and explains over six hundred characters in six categories: heaven and earth (the first and second *juan*), human affairs and the human body (the third and fourth *juan*), and artifacts and living beings (the last two *juan*). Each *juan* contains about one hundred closely related characters. In *juan* 3, for instance, Wei traces the etymology and meaning of 象, which is the “character” (字) written in Lesser Seal style that was prevalent in the Qin dynasty (before 221 BCE) and explains the relationship between the six principles of character formation on the basis of the Chinese understanding of “xiang and xing” (象形), as image and shape. Ricci interprets *xiang* as referring to a *real* image of a thing or state of affairs. When perception enters the internal senses, according to the Jesuit, the images of things and the images of states of affairs come into being in the human mind. The mind is metaphorically “stamped by a seal.”

There is an enormous gap between Ricci’s understanding of *xiang* and its Confucian understanding as presented by Wei Jiao. It should be noted first of all that *xiang*, a term that can be translated as “image,” “figure,” or “pattern,” has a long history in China, on which I cannot dwell here.²¹ I will limit myself to a few indications of what orthodox Confucian teachings say about it in the Confucian commentaries on the *Yijing* (易經, *Book of Changes*) and its transformations in the Ming dynasty.

In Confucianism, the realm of experience is limited to what lies between heaven and earth. *Xiang* is first referred to in the sixty-four basic situations of the *Yijing*, whose sequences—never static—express the relations between humans and their life-world. In *Xici* (繫辭, *Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations*), part of the *Yijing* and said to have been written by Confucius, the term *xiang* is explained as follows:

The holy sages were able to survey all the confused diversities under heaven. They observed forms and phenomena, and made presentations of things and their attributes. These were called the Images [*Xiang*] The holy sages were able to survey all the movements under heaven. They contemplated the way in which these movements met and became interrelated, to take their course according to eternal laws. Then they appended judgments, to distinguish between the good fortune and misfortune indicated. These were called the Judgments.²²

In Neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty, heaven is the image of the *Qian* hexagram 乾卦, which, by virtue of its eternal motion, unremitting and endless generation, means “the highest sincerity does not cease.” Earth is the image of the *Kun* hexagram 坤卦, which is the symbol of docility and completion. The principle of the motion of eternal generation and completion equates to *Qian* and *Kun* as the way of heaven and earth. The former belongs to the category of *Yang* 陽, the latter to the category *Yin* 陰. Neo-Confucianism emphasized that “the successive movement of *yin* and *yang* constitutes what is called ‘the course (of things)’ [*Dao* 道]. That which ensues at the result of their movement is goodness; that which shows it in its completeness is the natures (of men and things).”²³ In Confucianism, *Dao* is recognized as the coherence between cosmological and moral orders. This coherence is also called *Ziran* 自然 (lit. “so of itself”), which became a standard translation for “nature” in Modern Chinese. There, the term refers to the natural environment, but before the nineteenth century, it just meant acting according to the self without prevention or letting things be as they are.²⁴ This “self” is not a tabula rasa, but emerges out of the *Li* 理 (principle) of movement of *yin* and *yang*. Zhu Xi therefore crystallized the notion of “the investigations of things and the fathoming of principles” as Confucian basic training.

In the Ming dynasty, Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), a dissenter concerning Cheng-Zhu orthodox learning, proposed that human conscience, or innate knowing of the good (*Liangzhi* 良知), is the metaphysical foundation of heaven and earth:

When I say the investigations of things and the fathoming of principles, it means directing the conscience everywhere and to everything. The conscience of my bodyheartminding is the principle of Heaven. By directing the principle of conscience into things, they also acquire their presence. Directing the conscience of my bodyheartminding is extending knowledge [*zhizhi* 致知]. Everything that acquires principles is the investigations of things [*gewu* 格物], which is *Xin* [心 bodyheartminding] and *Li* [理 principle] are combined as one.²⁵

Wei Jiao was just a follower of this new trend, as can be seen in his comments on the issue in *Jingyun*:

象形，文也，字之母也，一造化之自然也。形難虧象。有事則象其事，亦曰處事，物各付物也。或謂之指事。有意則象其意，亦曰會意。不足也而諧聲，亦曰形聲。未有字也，先有其聲，以聲合形，字以之成。因此生彼，是謂轉注。建首一類，字之原也。以同意相受，或轉其文，或轉其聲，觸類而長，字之委也。又不足也，緣類而假借焉，無不足矣！萬物與我同體，不必其在己，凡此皆字也，文若氣化矣。母生子而子又為母，字所以無窮也。

“Xiang and Xing” [Image and Shape] is the Script [*wen* 文], the mother of characters, and lets all things be themselves as they are. Shapes hardly miss the Xiang. Where there happens an affair, there is a Xiang of the affair, which also called “doing an affair,” that is, a thing presents itself adequately. This is also referred to as “simple indicative.” Where there is a meaning, there is a Xiang of the meaning, which also called “compound ideograph.” If there is still not enough for generating all characters, there is the “phonetic compound,” also called *xingsheng*. The phonetic pronunciation is prior to characters; then by combining figure and phonetic element, a character can be generated. And, the generation from “this” to “that” is called “related pairs.” The setting of a classification by “radicals” [*shou* 首] is the origin of character formation. And then, the species of characters are broadened by resorting to similar meaning, related figure, or shared phonetic element. This is the generation of character formation. If there is still not enough, then a “loan character” covers by analogy. Thus, there is enough! [Because] there is no gap between I and All things, it is not necessary that all things are in us. All above mentioned are characters. The Script seems like a phase of the transformation of Qi [*qihua* 氣化]. The mother gives birth to sons, and the sons grow up into mothers again. This is the reason that characters are endless.²⁶

This paragraph is crucial for understanding the relationship between characters and *xiang* in Confucian thought. Wei Jiao here elucidates the six principles of character formation in four steps. First, he defines what “Xiang and Xing,” the first principle of character formation, is on the ontological level: a script allowing the self-revelation of things. Then he discusses the relationship between *xiang* and the second (simple indicative) and third principle (compound ideograph), and lists three additional principles, all of which seem to lack a Neo-Confucian explanation. He claims the unity of the six principles by giving them a Neo-Confucian foundation.

In the first sentence cited, Wei follows the orthodox Confucian understanding of “Xiang and Xing” as developed in the *Yijing*. There, following the explanations in *Xici*, *xiang* means “to give shape or bring into shape.”²⁷ One of the key characteristics of *xiang* in the *Yijing* is its independence of any human observer. Whether or not we look at it, it is “out there,” expressed in all things but in a variety of modes, such as the shape of a thing, the omen of an affair, the orientation of meaning, or a corporeal symbol, etc. This is why Wei Jiao wrote that “Xiang and Xing” is identical to Script in its very ontology. Script is simply the pattern of natural things in their original senses, or, to use his words, “the mother of characters” that “lets all things be themselves as they are.”

Once this first principle is clarified on the ontological level, Wei Jiao adds that *xiang* can express itself adequately in yet more shapes or models.

Besides being the very shape of things, *xiang* also runs through all the processes of performing activities and giving them meaning. Hence, he identifies the happening of a thing and its meaning with *xiang*: “Where a thing happens, there is a Xiang of the thing” and “Where a meaning, there is a Xiang of the meaning.” *Xiang* thus clearly unifies the nature of all things with human performances and activities of understanding. Yet engaging in activities according to the nature of all things also has at its root a self-revelatory component, according to which “a thing presents itself adequately” (物各付物). In short, Wei Jiao takes the principles of character formation to be identical with the principles of practice and knowing in every sense, and, as a consequence, *xiang* allows all things to show themselves as they are.

Wei Jiao goes on to discuss the remaining principles of character formation, which are related to human intervention, such as artificial combination (phonetic compound), making a connection of similarity by related pronunciation and meaning (related pairs), or giving an extant character new meaning in a specific context (loan character). Although any Chinese character can be formed on the basis of all six principles taken together, Wei seems to worry that the latter three principles are too invasive of the self-revelatory process of *xiang* to match the ontological entailments of this first principle of self-revelation. This is why he also posits an identity between the I and all other things: “there is no gap between I and All things, it is not necessary that all things are in us.”

This claim explains a tenet of the doctrine of Bodyheartminding—my Bodyheartminding is the cosmos (吾心即宇宙)—put forward by Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 (1139–92), the founder of the teaching of Bodyheartminding. Wei Jiao seems to argue that because all men and things belong to unremitting and endless generation and change, there is no distinction between I and Thing. Hence there is no absolute difference between what is made by humans, even in their minds, and what is made by nature; by extension, there is no real, outer, physical, and objective world which I need to perceive and whence I need to derive my knowledge.

In contrast to the analogy of seal and imprint from the Aristotelian tradition, then, Wei Jiao insists that “it is not necessary that all things are in us” because there is no such world that could be divided into the inner and the outer. All characters created through the six principles are characters identical to *xiang*, although some of them are characters produced by the human mind. At the end of the passage, Wei Jiao reclaims his Confucian standpoint once more by suggesting that as “a phase of the becoming of Qi,” scripts and characters, like the other things, are always in change and regenerating.

Wei Jiao’s entire discussion gives no inkling that he treats the Chinese characters as pictures, or as images that take on mental existence on the basis of being perceived from the outer physical world. The difference between Wei’s understanding of “image” and Ricci’s is thus not arbitrary

but informed by the radical disparity between Confucian and Aristotelian ontologies and epistemologies. As Roger Ames put it:

in our [Western] tradition, image in the vernacular combines the notions of perception and imagination, where the mimetic, representative, figurative, and fictive connotations of image are derived from the ontological disparity between a transcendently “real” world and the concrete world of experience. The absence of such ontological disparity in the Confucian model will mean that image is the presentation rather than the representation of a configured world at concrete, literal, and historical level.²⁸

Accordingly, in Wei Jiao’s tradition, *xiang*, being both substance and function, presents itself in the patterns of all things, the practices of human affairs, and the performances of reason and affection. Sages such as Confucius, who had the means to perceive the mysteries and movements in the sublunary world, made models for what is suitable to particular things and put forth rules and rituals for human society. The words bearing the sages’ comprehension of various modes of *xiang* were inscribed in the Chinese classics, which were then passed down from generation to generation. The ancient classics already contained all possible wisdom; their continued cultivation through an education of the next generation prepared the initiated to comprehend their depths, embodying the patterns so that “the spontaneous responsiveness and conscientious action of the sage took over.”²⁹

In this tradition, contrary to Ricci’s art of memory based on image, the recitation of the sages’ teachings was taken to be the primary step of education. As Zhu Xi said: “Children’s learning is non-stop reciting based on previous words, which could cultivate their intuitive knowledge and ability.”³⁰ Thus, it is hard to say there is anything that is totally new, because all things have already revealed themselves in a previous recitation of the sages’ teachings.

An Untranslatable Term?

In *Jifa*, based on his reinterpretation of 象形, the first of the six principles of character formation, Ricci transformed Chinese characters into various kinds of images made of lines or strokes and related to physical reality. This vital transformation made, he could work with the term in the Chinese language but using a conceptual framework of Aristotelian provenance. More particularly, he integrated *xiang* into an Aristotelian cognitive theory of image, memory, and experience. His success in theory, however, failed to exert the expected influence on Chinese literati in practice. Ricci’s pamphlet did not survive in China, although millions of people were eager to find shortcuts to pass the imperial examinations. Nevertheless, the transient encounter of “image” and *xiang* in *Jifa* opened

the curtain of intercultural communication between the Occident and the Orient that has survived until today.

Seventy-eight years after the death of Ricci, a French Jesuit named Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730) arrived in Beijing to inherit Ricci's enterprise. This time, he regarded Wei Jiao as his interlocutor and tried to rebuild the philosophical basis of *Jinyun* by laying a Christian foundation for the *Yijing*.³¹ With the deepening of dialogue and communication, the apparently untranslatable basic concepts nourished by a cultural tradition were eventually relocated into a new place and endowed with new meanings, in a kind of "cultural transplantation" in Floris Cohen's sense. As Cohen argues, processes of transformation or cultural transplantation offer the most potent boost to novelty and creativity. An influx of foreign people, foreign ideas, and foreign practices may—under the right circumstances—greatly enhance the chance of novel things happening to ideas or habits that were worn out in their original setting.³²

In short, the word "untranslatable" is not as negative as it may sound.³³ It is the untranslatable that makes differences and diversities possible. In the Confucian horizon, the two opposing principles in nature, *yin* and *yang*, are the origin of change and generation. "Harmony without uniformity" (和而不同) is the premise and condition for novelty and creativity in the future.

Notes

- 1 Ricci, *Lettere dalla Cina*, 163.
- 2 Ricci, *Commentari della Cina*, 250.
- 3 Burke, "Cultures of Translation," 15.
- 4 Ahn, "On *Xiguo Jifa*," 118.
- 5 Lackner, "Jesuit Memoria," 205.
- 6 Lackner, *Das vergessene Gedächtnis*, 16–17.
- 7 Hosne, "Matteo Ricci's *Occidental Method*," 154.
- 8 Ricci, *Xiguo Jifa*, 146.
- 9 Ricci's explanations inherited the basic pattern of the art of memory from the tradition of rhetoric, as becomes clear by comparison with a discussion in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (late 80s BCE): [Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III. 17, trans. Caplan, 209, 213, 217.
- 10 Ricci, *Xiguo Jifa*, 148–49.
- 11 Rusk, "Old Scripts," 76.
- 12 For the six principles of character formation, see Xu, *Chinese Words*, 39–40; Rusk, "Old Scripts," 77; Xu, *Shuowen jiezi*, 314–15.
- 13 Ricci, *Xiguo Jifa*, 151. Translation emended from Rusk, "Old Scripts," 76–78.
- 14 Ricci, *Xiguo Jifa*, 151.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 154.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 143.
- 17 Yates, *Art of Memory*, 32.
- 18 Aleni, *Xingxue Cushu*, 269–85, 293–97.
- 19 Smith, "Knowing Things," 731; see also Smith, "Perception."
- 20 Huang, *Mingru xue'an*, 46–62.

- 21 That history is examined at length for Daoist and Zenist Chinese by Robinet, *World Upside Down*, 26–32; Wang, *Returning to Primordially Creative Thinking*, 233–305.
- 22 *I Ching*, 596–97. Translation emended.
- 23 Ding, “Possibility of the Recommencement,” 43, quoting and explicating the *I Ching*.
- 24 Lloyd and Sivin, *The Way and the Word*, 200.
- 25 Wang Yangming, *Qunji*, 44–45.
- 26 Wei Jiao, *Liushu jingyun*, vol. 3, 46a–b. Before Wei, Wang Anshi (1021–1086) in his *Zi Shuo* (字說 Explanations of Characters) also argued that “although characters are devised by man, they are in fact based on nature.” See Mittag, “Becoming Acquainted with Nature,” 324.
- 27 Peterson, “Making Connections,” 81.
- 28 Ames, “Meaning as Imaging,” 228.
- 29 Lloyd and Sivin, *The Way and the Word*, 193.
- 30 童稚之學，不止記誦，養其良知良能，當以先入之言為主。Zhang, *Xiaoxue jijie*, 94.
- 31 Chan, *Chinese Books*, 518–22.
- 32 Cohen, *Modern Science*, 45–46.
- 33 Quite independently of my conclusions here, I have been anticipated in this notion of “untranslatable” by Barbara Cassin. Cassin, “Introduction,” xvii.

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