



# The Crafting of the 10,000 Things: Knowledge and Technology in Seventeenth-Century China

*Dagmar Schäfer*

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The last decades of the Ming dynasty, though plagued by chaos and destruction, saw a significant increase of publications that examined advances in knowledge and technology. Among the numerous guides and reference books that appeared during this period was a series of texts by Song Yingxing (1587–1666?), a minor local official living in southern China. His *Tiangong kaiwu*, the longest and most prominent of these works, documents the extraction and processing of raw materials and the manufacture of goods essential to everyday life, from yeast and wine to paper and ink to boats, carts, and firearms.

In *The Crafting of the 10,000 Things*, Dagmar Schäfer probes this fascinating text and the legacy of its author to shed new light on the development of scientific thinking in China, the purpose of technical writing, and its role in and effects on Chinese history. Meticulously unfolding the layers of Song's personal and cultural life, Schäfer chronicles the factors that motivated Song to transform practical knowledge into written culture. She then examines how Song gained, assessed, and ultimately presented knowledge, and in doing so articulates this era's approaches to rationality, truth, and belief in the study of nature and culture alike.

Finally, Schäfer places Song's efforts in conjunction with the work of other Chinese philosophers and writers, before, during, and after his time, and argues that these writings demonstrate collectively a uniquely Chinese way of authorizing technology as a legitimate field of scholarly concern and philosophical knowledge.

Offering an overview of a thousand years of scholarship, *The Crafting of the 10,000 Things* explains the role of technology and crafts in a culture that had an outstandingly successful tradition in this field and was a crucial influence on the technical development of Europe on the eve of the Industrial Revolution.

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