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“The View of the World in 1225 as one
Chinese official, Zhao Rukuo, Saw It”

In 1225, Zhao Rukuo, a trade official (also a member of the imperial clan living in Quanzhou) wrote an entirely original book about China’s foreign trade entitled, *Record of Various Foreign Peoples*. He drew on both his conversations with people living in the Quanzhou and historical records about those places. Zhao Rukuo (1170-1231) displays deep knowledge of China’s long-time trading partners like Korea, Japan, and Vietnam as well as much more distant places like Sicily, Somalia, and Tanzania. (Earlier maritime trade superintendents must have also spoken with foreign merchants, as we know from government regulations specifying how often trade officials should host dinners for visiting merchants, but they did not write down what they learned.)

Zhao’s book has two sections: the first, like the dynastic histories, gives a capsule history and list of products from 41 different countries, but he created a dramatically new format for the second section, which proceeds commodity by commodity, identifying the different countries that produced the item, and explaining variations in quality. This is a book by a trade official who had spent long hours talking to merchants and boiled their testimony down to what his readers wanted to know.

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