Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Source-Text Variation and the Construction of Historical Geographical Knowledge in English Translations of the Xiyou lu

Hongxia Liu

m18242038720@163.com

Inner Mongolia University

Article

Keywords: Xiyou lu, source-text variation, retranslation, historical geography, paratexts, knowledge circulation

Posted Date: November 25th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11849723/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This article examines the construction and circulation of historical geographical knowledge in English presentations of Yelü Chucai's Xiyou lu by Bretschneider, de Rachewiltz, Strassberg, and Yang. It combines textual comparison, analysis of translations and annotations, and tracing of documented reuse. The findings show that abbreviated sources, textual variants, and editorial emendations explain some, but not all, differences. Translators' interpretations of syntax, reference, and measured objects additionally reshape classifications, causal explanations, political dependence, and quantitative relationships. Main text and annotations jointly organize evidential certainty: general equivalents may accompany detailed arguments, while precise names and figures may depend on disputed interpretations. During circulation, statements and supporting evidence can become separated; earlier readings persist after correction, and readers selectively quote or scrutinize translations and annotations. The article argues that translation comparison must reconstruct how geographical claims emerge through textual transmission, editing, interpretation, and reuse, rather than assume that later translations necessarily improve accuracy.

1. Introduction

A historical traveler's description can become several different kinds of evidence in translation. A statement about mulberry trees may become an explanation of unsuitable vegetation or of limited local expertise. A quantity may describe grain harvested or water supplied. The names of two cities may remain recognizable while their political relationship is reversed. Such changes matter because translations of premodern travel writing are read both as literary representations of unfamiliar places and as sources for historical reconstruction. The question is how to establish which changes arise from the transmitted text, which from interpretation, and which from subsequent use.

Yelü Chucai's □□□□ *Xiyou lu* □□□, hereafter Record of a Journey to the West, makes this question unusually visible. Written after his travels during the Mongol expansion into Central Asia, the work combines descriptions of cities, products, and customs with a longer religious polemic. For centuries, access to parts of the work depended on quotations and excerpts. Complete manuscript witnesses became available to modern scholarship through their discovery in Japan in 1926 and publication in 1927. English presentations consequently emerged under different textual conditions: Bretschneider's nineteenth-century geographical extract, de Rachewiltz's annotated study of 1962, Strassberg's literary selection of 1994, and Yang's digital presentation. Comparing their wording against one modern Chinese edition alone would obscure those conditions.

The source-text problem is already established in translation research. Ivaska and Huuhtanen (2020) show that translations associated with the same work may derive from different textual versions, making classifications and comparisons dependent on what counts as the source. Emmerich (2017) likewise challenges the assumption that the original precedes mediation as an entirely settled object. These arguments are especially consequential for historical writing. An editorially established character can

determine whether an English sentence describes a pack animal or an elongated fruit; its implications extend beyond lexical variation to what later scholars can claim about a place.

Retranslation research provides a necessary caution about chronology. Berman's (1990) account of retranslation as a space of accomplishment poses a question that subsequent work has complicated: what kind of improvement is being claimed? Koskinen and Paloposki (2010) and Deane-Cox (2014) support examining changing conditions and relations between versions rather than assuming linear progress. Here, source orientation and translator visibility, familiar from Toury (2012) and Venuti (1995), cannot substitute for checking an individual assertion. Xu's (2012) study of a scholar translator's explanations and endnotes makes expertise and visibility relevant comparative questions; neither establishes accuracy in advance.

Paratext research supplies a further dimension. Notes, introductions, and other framing materials participate in translation rather than merely surrounding an autonomous target text (Batchelor, 2018). In the *Xiyou lu*, an apparently general equivalent can accompany a highly specific classification in a note. Conversely, an explicit modern designation can enter the translation without an explanation of how it was established. The evidential content of a translation therefore cannot be inferred from the specificity of its main-text vocabulary alone. McKenzie's (1999) attention to the relationship between textual form and meaning helps explain why the placement of a reading in the text or apparatus also matters.

Genette's (1987/1997) account of textual thresholds helps identify these locations, while Tahir Gürçağlar (2002) and Kovala (1996) place framing within translation research and wider cultural interpretation. Appiah's (1993) thick translation raises the related issue of contextual explanation. Washbourne's (2025) study of marginalia further highlights notes as acts of reading and rewriting. Published explanatory notes, however, are selected public arguments; they do not disclose every stage of a translator's private deliberation.

This article asks three questions. First, which differences among the English presentations can be explained by their Chinese textual bases, and which require an account of interpretation? Second, how do wording, syntax, and paratexts turn descriptions and ambiguities into geographical propositions? Third, what happens to those propositions and their qualifications in documented quotation, republication, and scholarly citation? The argument is that identifying source texts is necessary but insufficient. Comparison must also reconstruct what a sentence asserts, what evidence supports that assertion, and what subsequent users retain. This approach contributes to translation history by making responsibility for individual knowledge claims traceable across editorial, translational, and citational acts.

Hou's (2025) comparison of a medieval Chinese account of Angkor and three English renditions offers a particularly close precedent: travel records and their paratexts participate in remembering places. This article shifts the question from the reconfiguration of heritage memory to the evidential status of geographical assertions. Regional scholarship supplies context for those assertions: Biran (2005) examines the Qara Khitai's position between Chinese and Islamic histories, Allsen (2001) studies

exchanges under Mongol rule, and Park (2012) investigates Chinese-Islamic geographical knowledge. Chin's (2013) history of the Silk Road concept cautions against treating a modern organizing term as the traveler's own geographical framework.

2. Materials and method

2.1 Textual witnesses and English presentations

The Chinese comparison centers on the *Xiyou lu* excerpt in Sheng Ruzi's □□□ (1805) Shuzhai laoxue congtan □□□□□□, in the Zhibuzuzhai congshu □□□□□□ edition; the complete manuscript material reproduced in de Rachewiltz (1962); and Yelü Chucai's text as edited and annotated by Xiang Da □□ (1981). They serve different functions. The excerpt establishes wording available within the textual tradition used by Bretschneider. The manuscript facsimile helps check complete-text readings discussed by de Rachewiltz. Xiang's edition is both a modern comparison text and Strassberg's explicitly identified Chinese source. Its date prevents its treatment as Bretschneider's working text.[1]

Three terms keep these relationships distinct. A working source is a text demonstrably used for a translation, as established by a translator's declaration or identifiable textual correspondence. A consulted witness is a text used to discuss variants or support an interpretation. A comparison edition is a text employed in the present analysis without implying that an earlier translator used it. An edition may occupy different positions in different comparisons. Similar wording alone does not establish direct dependence between translators.

Pym's (1998) historical method motivates asking who produced, transmitted, and used each version. Buzelin's (2005) attention to translation as a production process likewise discourages assigning every textual feature to an isolated translator. This study reconstructs only relations documented in editions and publications; it does not infer an institutional network from resemblance alone.[2]

Bretschneider's (1888) extract appears in the first volume of Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources. His geographical explanations draw the travel account into comparisons across Chinese and European scholarship. The analysis uses the 1888 version, distinguishing it from later republications. De Rachewiltz's (1962) study brings introduction, translation, textual discussion, notes, bibliography, and manuscript reproduction into one publication. His introduction identifies the principal manuscript and explains how other witnesses and printed versions are represented (p. 10). Strassberg's (1994) selection places the geographical section within an anthology of Chinese travel writing; its concluding note identifies Xiang's edition, pages 1–11, as the translation source (p. 484, n. 42).

Yang's (2025) Journeys to the West: Kitan and Jurchen Travelers in Thirteenth-Century Central Asia is a digital presentation that combines annotated translations with maps and images. Its introductory notice distinguishes the original 2018 Classic StoryMaps version from the new 2025 version. The present article identifies the latter as its digital reference edition. Its translations of Yelü Chucai and the account recorded by Liu Qi are distinct textual objects; the passages examined here concern Yelü's *Xiyou lu*.

Version identification does not establish that every sentence remains unchanged across the two presentations. The quotations and numerical readings discussed below require checking against a preserved copy of the 2025 version before submission.

2.2 Comparative procedure and limits

This is a qualitative study of selected passages, not a frequency analysis of all translation differences. The cases concern textual variants, product classification, agricultural causation, political dependence, direction, and measurement. They were selected because the Chinese wording and English interpretations allow a specific distinction to be tested. The aim is analytical coverage of different mechanisms, not statistical representativeness. The comparison proceeds in publication order for the three dated print translations, with the digital presentation discussed as a separate intervention.

For each case, the analysis first establishes what the relevant Chinese witnesses contain, including omissions and editorial emendations. It then reconstructs the English proposition: its subject, predicate, spatial reference, quantity, and qualification. It next asks which supporting materials occur in local notes, general editorial statements, or cross-references. Finally, where evidence permits, it follows the particular statement into a subsequent document. Chinese punctuation supplied for comparison does not constitute evidence for original punctuation. Brief English glosses of Chinese phrases are explanatory renderings in this article, not additional historical translations.

The method distinguishes three evidential relations. A textual relation concerns what wording a witness preserves. An interpretive relation connects that wording with an identification, causal explanation, or conversion. A reception relation requires a subsequent document that quotes, discusses, republishes, or uses a particular statement. These are analytical distinctions developed for this study, not a pre-existing model attributed to the cited literature. Their purpose is to prevent one kind of evidence from being made to answer another kind of question. In particular, consulting an earlier translation is not by itself evidence that the later text was translated indirectly through it. The distinctions among source relationships discussed by Ivaska et al. (2023) are relevant to this restraint.

Knowledge history clarifies this restriction. Livingstone (2003) examines the situated production of knowledge, while Raj (2007) treats circulation as a site of construction. These approaches warrant following transformations, not presuming that movement guarantees unchanged content. Darnton’s (1982) history of books similarly directs attention to differentiated acts of publication and reading. Their value here is methodological, not evidence that these particular translations had identical social functions.

A later correction can establish that an earlier sentence misrepresents its source without establishing how widely that sentence influenced historians. Similarly, a translation and its Chinese original are two access routes to one historical account, not two independent eyewitness reports. These limits follow the documentary emphasis of translation microhistory (Munday, 2014) and the need to examine knowledge

through specific acts of communication rather than assume that circulation preserves an unchanged object (Secord, 2004).

3. Results of the textual comparison

3.1 Editorial variants and the objects described

The account of large watermelons at Bapu □□ illustrates why a newer Chinese edition cannot be assumed to eliminate earlier textual decisions. The disputed phrase is either □□□□□□ or □□□□□□. The first reading permits a long-eared animal to carry only two fruits; the second permits the long fruits to be carried only two at a time. Bretschneider (1888, p. 20) renders □□ as ‘A long-eared (i.e., a donkey)’. The animal has a textual basis in the excerpt tradition. Whether the translation explains that reading reasonably and whether that reading should be preferred are nevertheless different questions.

De Rachewiltz (1962, p. 21) adopts □□ and translates ‘the long ones can be carried only two at a time’. The passive construction leaves the carrier unspecified. His note 86 records the alternative reading and supplies comparisons with other descriptions of large watermelons. Those comparisons support the plausibility of exceptional size; they do not independently prove that the fruit was elongated or that one character is textually original. The evidence for magnitude and the evidence for choosing between □ and □ must remain distinct.

Xiang’s edition complicates any account of linear correction. Its main text reads □□, while note 24 records that the underlying reading was □□ and that the change follows Wang Guowei’s emendation; it also identifies the long-eared animal as a donkey (Yelü Chucai, 1981, n. 24). A modern edition of the complete work thus reinstates the animal reading by explicit editorial judgment. The opposition is not simply an inaccurate excerpt followed by an accurate complete text. Translators encounter both transmitted wording and editorial decisions about what should occupy the reading text.

Strassberg (1994, p. 230) gives ‘a mule can carry only two at a time’. His declared use of Xiang explains the animal-bearing construction, but not the choice of mule rather than donkey. The explanation must stop where the evidence stops: textual affiliation accounts for the presence of an animal; it does not account for every detail of its English identification. Yang’s digital presentation instead follows the elongated-fruit interpretation and explicitly favors □□. Its agreement with de Rachewiltz is an agreement in interpretation; direct dependence requires additional evidence.

This case identifies two successive decisions that a general label such as domestication would obscure. An editor chooses which Chinese character to print, and a translator identifies the referent of that printed expression. If a later reader uses the English passage to discuss transport animals, the relevant evidence is partly editorial and translational. The inference cannot be attributed without qualification to Yelü Chucai’s observation.

The neighbouring melon description makes a complementary distinction. The excerpt describes Samarkand's □ as large as a horse's head, while the complete text adds □□□□□, indicating a length sufficient to contain a fox. Bretschneider's shorter English description can therefore be explained by the excerpt's shorter wording. His use of 'water-melons' is a separate issue: both Chinese versions use □ here, whereas the Bapu passage explicitly names □□. Missing descriptive information and a more specific product category do not have the same cause.

De Rachewiltz (1962, p. 21, n. 98) retains 'melons' in the translation but argues for sweet melons in the annotation. He compares the travel account with Yelü's poems, particularly □□□□□, □□□□□, which connects sweet melons with both the horse-head and fox descriptions. Another poem separately names □□. This is stronger evidence for interpreting Yelü's usage than shape alone. It does not, however, establish a modern cultivar or a botanical distribution history. The note answers a question about the passage's likely referent.

Strassberg and Yang also retain a general melon designation and the extended description. Their main-text similarity should not erase differences in the supporting apparatus. De Rachewiltz makes the classification argument accessible through a local note; the literary selection foregrounds the memorable description; the digital presentation situates it among other information about Samarkand. A broad equivalent can thus be accompanied by a precise interpretation, while identical equivalents can carry different amounts of recoverable evidence. Translation comparison must examine both the proposition and its grounds.[3]

3.2 Agricultural limits and the attribution of causes

The mulberry passage shows how establishing variants leaves a further syntactic question unresolved. The excerpt reads □□□□□, approximately, there are mulberry trees but sericulture is not possible. The complete wording in Xiang is □□□, □□□□, □□□□□, □□□□: mulberries are plentiful, few can support or practise sericulture, and a consequence concerning scarce silk textiles and cotton clothing follows (Yelü Chucai, 1981, p. 3). The difference between □□ and □□ changes the degree of restriction. The fuller sentence also states a consequence absent from the abbreviated wording. Neither change by itself identifies the subject of □□.

Bretschneider (1888, p. 21) makes the trees unsuitable for breeding silkworms. His note 31 identifies them as black mulberries, Morus nigra, and uses botanical explanation to account for the restriction. The translation and note jointly construct a proposition about environmental resources. The identification is an explanatory addition: the Chinese sentence does not name the species. Recognising the contribution of botanical scholarship does not require treating that scholarship as the traveler's own observation.

De Rachewiltz (1962, p. 22) translates 'There are plenty of mulberry trees, but few are fit for the breeding of silkworms'. The quantity changes from general inability to limited suitability, corresponding to the fuller Chinese wording. Yet the causal interpretation remains botanical. Note 106 explicitly engages Bretschneider's explanation and adds comparative material. A fuller source has altered the scope of the

statement without necessarily replacing its explanatory tradition. This is a documented instance of later scholarship working with an earlier translator's interpretation rather than simply superseding it.

Strassberg (1994, p. 231), using Xiang's complete-text edition, writes 'few people know how to raise silkworms'. People, rather than trees, become the subject, and ability is specified as knowledge of a practice. The restriction consequently concerns available expertise. This is not equivalent to a general judgment of technological backwardness, which the sentence does not establish. It nevertheless supplies a different explanation for the scarcity of silk. The shift cannot be reduced to the excerpt-versus-complete-text distinction because de Rachewiltz also works with the fuller wording.

Yang's Samarkand passage makes the reference to trees explicit and accompanies it with a distinction between mulberry species. This again shows why a digital presentation should not automatically be credited with a new explanation: the botanical approach is already present in the earlier notes. What can be established is the recurrence of an interpretation and, where explicit references occur, the stated use of previous scholarship. A complete genealogy of borrowing requires more than agreement.

There is no need to resolve the entire history of Central Asian sericulture to identify what translation does here. The English sentences distribute causal responsibility differently between vegetation and human expertise. Botanical evidence may support the suitability interpretation, but does not alone determine the grammar of the Chinese. A possible human referent for □ supports the alternative reading, but does not by itself establish the historical state of local knowledge. The contribution of translation analysis is to locate these distinct inferential steps and prevent their compression into a single agricultural fact.

3.3 Syntactic reference and political dependence

The Samarkand-Bukhara passage provides a case in which source variation does not explain a consequential difference. After describing Bukhara, the excerpt expressly returns to Samarkand: □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□. It then lists Bukhara, Khujand, and Otrar and states □□□. The complete witness and Xiang's edition preserve the same essential sequence, including Samarkand's renewed naming and Bukhara's position in the subsequent list. Differences in particles do not remove the topic change.

Bretschneider's (1888, p. 22) translation continues from Bukhara with a statement about the ruler's residence. It then declares that Khujand, Otrar, and other cities depend on Bukhara. Bukhara becomes the centre of dependence rather than one of the cities in the dependent list. The problem is relational, not a failure to recognise the city's name. The source excerpt already provides the elements needed to avoid it: the repeated name of Samarkand and Bukhara's inclusion in the list.

De Rachewiltz (1962, p. 22) supplies a bracketed adversative, 'However,', before restoring Samarkand as the ruler's capital and Bukhara as one of the cities subject to it. In note 114 he explicitly identifies Bretschneider's misunderstanding and discusses Samarkand's practical political role alongside the status of the formal capital. This historical discussion helps interpret □□, but the immediate evidence for

the changed reference remains the Chinese sentence. Historical corroboration and syntactic diagnosis strengthen one another without becoming interchangeable.

The distinction also limits what is being corrected. Establishing the sentence's referential structure does not establish an administrative hierarchy identical to that of modern municipalities. The traveler's political vocabulary must still be interpreted in its historical setting. De Rachewiltz's distinction between practical residence and formal capital is therefore material, rather than an optional accumulation of facts around an otherwise settled equivalent.

Strassberg and Yang preserve the return to Samarkand and list Bukhara among the dependent cities. Their convergence with de Rachewiltz does not prove that they simply borrowed his correction: the Chinese wording independently supports the same construction. This example requires an asymmetrical judgment. The evidence supports identifying a source-relative error in Bretschneider; it does not support explaining every later agreement as a direct response to him.

The case is significant for historical translation because the English remains coherent. Recognisable proper names and a plausible political narrative do not guarantee preservation of the source proposition. A concordance of city-name equivalents would miss the reversal. The smallest adequate unit of comparison is the relation asserted among named entities, including the transition between sentences. Before invoking competing translator ideologies or historical source texts, the analyst must establish who is made dependent on whom.

3.4 Directional correction and unresolved identification

The account of Ban □, identified with Balkh, raises a different problem: distinguishing geographical disagreement from evidence of textual corruption. Both excerpt and complete-text witnesses retain □, west, in □□□□□□□□. Xiang preserves this character in the reading text while explaining it as an error for □, south. There is thus no demonstrated west-versus-south variant in these witnesses. The proposed southern direction is a conjectural correction informed by geographical identification.

Bretschneider (1888) retains west but inserts a correction to south; his annotations connect Ban with other historical transcriptions of Balkh. De Rachewiltz (1962, n. 120) also retains west in the translation and argues in the note that the character must be wrong because Balkh lies south of the Amu Darya. Strassberg (1994, p. 483, n. 31) presents the textual error as probable. Yang, while retaining the westward wording, considers an error in Yelü's geographical knowledge more likely than mistranscription.

These explanations concern different possible histories of the same surviving wording. A textual correction assumes that an erroneous character has entered transmission; a cognitive explanation allows the transmitted character to preserve an erroneous authorial conception. Neither is proved by establishing the city's modern position. Moreover, a city's position relative to a river does not automatically establish the direction in which the narrative moves from the preceding place. The directional reference and the river relationship require separate attention.

Barthold (1928) supplies a regional historical-geographical comparison, but a historical synthesis is not a textual witness supporting an emendation.

The translational intervention includes how strongly the explanation is stated and where it appears. Main text can preserve □ while a note makes the reader interpret it otherwise. A rendering along the river may also specify a spatial relationship more strongly than the Chinese expression of proximity warrants. The continued presence of west in the English is therefore insufficient evidence that the translator has left the geography uninterpreted. Equally, the use of south in a note should not be reported as a reading found in another manuscript.

De Rachewiltz's discussion of Tuan □ provides a useful check against a simple contrast between authoritative old scholarship and cautious digital scholarship. His note 121 investigates earlier identification with Tuanbala and the proposed association with a fortress called Kerduan. It distinguishes the underlying historical sources, considers another identification, and explicitly leaves the problem unresolved (de Rachewiltz, 1962, p. 61). Strassberg compresses the proposal into a tentative association with Tuanbala. Yang foregrounds the lack of a conclusive identification.

An important geographical distinction must nevertheless survive this compression. De Rachewiltz differentiates the Tālqān he discusses between Balkh and Marwarrūd from the similarly named place near Qunduz. An objection based on the position of modern Taloqan cannot automatically refute a proposal concerning the other location. Uncertainty is therefore more than a matter of inserting 'may' or 'probably'. It also requires identifying the object of uncertainty and the intermediate links between Chinese transcription, another historical name, and a modern location. A longer annotation may preserve those links more effectively than a conspicuously cautious short notice.

3.5 Quantities and the identification of what is measured

The weight of the Bapu watermelons and the yield of Samarkand's fields separate numerical conversion from a prior semantic task. The watermelon passage gives □□□. Bretschneider (1888, p. 20) retains fifty but writes pounds; the passage does not specify a conversion. De Rachewiltz (1962, p. 21, n. 85) retains chin and supplies an equivalent of 0.5968 kilograms or 1.3129 pounds per chin. Strassberg (1994, p. 230) gives sixty-five pounds, while Yang retains jin and supplies an approximate seventy-pound equivalent.

These values cannot be ranked by apparent precision alone. De Rachewiltz exposes a coefficient, making the calculation recoverable, but the note does not fully document its metrological basis. Strassberg's editorial notes explain his use of approximate Western equivalents and acknowledge historical variability; the guidance must be read with the local translation (1994, pp. xxii-xxiii). Yang's approximation is visibly approximate but does not in that passage establish a historical coefficient. Nor does replacing jin with pounds without changing fifty demonstrate that a conversion was undertaken. A transparent calculation, an appropriate historical standard, and the precision of the original observation are three different matters.

The crop-yield passage poses a more fundamental issue. Xiang's text reads □□□□, □□□□□□□□□□□: there is no rain at the height of summer, river water is diverted for irrigation, and generally two mu yield approximately one zhong (Yelü Chucai, 1981, p. 3). The verb □ establishes a harvest relation. □ and □ mark generalization and approximation. The excerpt lacks the irrigation and yield clauses, explaining why Bretschneider supplies neither. Their absence from his translation is not evidence that he chose to suppress agricultural information.

De Rachewiltz (1962, p. 22) gives a yield of approximately one chung per two mou. Notes 103 and 104 perform different tasks. The former supplies comparative material on irrigation; the latter gives unit equivalents while explicitly questioning whether they fit this particular text. Evidence that canals supported agriculture does not validate the numerical yield, and a stated unit equivalent remains conditional when its textual applicability is uncertain. The note prevents a precise conversion from masquerading as an independently verified agricultural measurement.

Strassberg's sentence instead measures irrigation water. The verb of harvesting has disappeared, and land area is linked to a volume applied to it (1994, p. 231). His general conversion table helps explain the numerical vocabulary but cannot repair the change of referent. Even a perfectly defensible conversion of mu and zhong would not make irrigation input equivalent to harvested output. The use of a familiar unit can lend a statement practical intelligibility while obscuring a more consequential semantic substitution.

Yang's digital passage restores grain yield as the object but expresses approximately two zhong per mu. Against the wording □□□□□□, this reverses the placement of the quantities. If the units are held constant solely for comparison, two zhong per mu is four times one zhong per two mu. This is a relation between translated ratios, not a new estimate of medieval productivity. Without a demonstrably different Chinese reading or an explicit explanation, source multiplicity cannot be invoked to account for the discrepancy.

The order of checking matters: whether the clause exists, what it measures, how the quantities relate, and only then how the units are converted. Calling all these differences strategies of cultural adaptation would flatten distinct evidential questions. So would using the present example to assert that an entire translation is unreliable. The defensible finding is local: different English sentences make different agricultural propositions, and the distinction can be established before resolving every problem in historical metrology.

Porter's (1995) study of quantification helps explain why numerical explicitness can invite trust. The present case adds a prior linguistic test: an exact coefficient cannot correct a misidentified measured object.[4]

4. Reception and the survival of explanatory evidence

The comparisons establish what a translation makes available, not what all readers learn from it. Reception must be documented through specific acts of use. The *Xiyou lu* materials show several such acts: correction within a later translation, republication of an earlier translation, critical review of an

anthology, and citation in historical scholarship. They differ in what they demonstrate. A quoted description establishes attention to that description; a bibliographical reference alone does not establish acceptance of every interpretation in the cited work.

The Samarkand-Bukhara error makes this distinction particularly clear. De Rachewiltz publicly corrected Bretschneider in 1962. The University of Washington's Silk Road Seattle republication nevertheless preserves Bretschneider's city relationship in its reproduction of the 1888 translation (Bretschneider, n.d.). This demonstrates the continued availability of a specific reading through an identifiable textual channel. It does not establish that the hosting institution endorses that reading, nor that historians who encounter the page necessarily adopt it. Republication can preserve an old interpretation without transporting the later correction alongside it.

Other reception follows an alternative route. Duturaeva's (2022, p. 159, nn. 186–187) discussion distinguishes sources concerning Li Zhichang from those concerning Yelü Chucai and cites both the Chinese *Xiyou lu* and de Rachewiltz in connection with the city account. The translation enters a new historical argument, but the Chinese reference retains an independent evidential role. The historical conclusion should not be assigned exclusively to the translator merely because his work is cited nearby.

A parallel distinction matters in botanical reception: Lao's (1969, p. 414, nn. 23–24) neighboring notes concern Li Zhichang and Yelü Chucai separately. A criticism attached to the former must not be reassigned to the latter. Jackson's (2017) use of Yelü alongside other accounts of merchants likewise calls for separating the travel record from the historian's reconciliation of sources.[5]

Reviews of Strassberg's anthology show that its literary framing did not prescribe a single kind of reading. Watson (1996) selects the memorable melon description, demonstrating attention to the imagery without thereby endorsing a botanical classification. Rudolph (1996) instead examines the Han-hai passage against the annotation, map, and Chinese edition, questioning the geographical designation. One reader extracts an image; another tests the apparatus. The anthology makes both operations possible, even though neither operation reproduces the full specialist discussion found in de Rachewiltz.

The point is not that literary readers ignore evidence while historians preserve it. A review can subject a geographical note to scrutiny, and a historical citation can detach a sentence from a qualification. The relevant distinction lies in the particular material used and the claim for which it is used. This is why broad statements about the influence of a translation are less secure than a reconstruction of quotation, disagreement, and reuse at passage level.

The digital presentation offers another arrangement of access. Place headings, maps, and annotations can bring contextual information close to a translated sentence. They can also encourage readers to treat an identified map location as equivalent to a resolved historical name. The unresolved Tuan example shows why that equivalence should be resisted. Mapping, naming, and identifying are related but distinct operations. Without user studies, page design demonstrates available reading routes rather than actual patterns of reader understanding.

Harley (1989) makes the interpretive work of maps a critical concern, and Tuan (1977) distinguishes spatial experience from abstract location. Neither supplies evidence of this presentation's actual reception. Cronin's (2013) digital perspective and Littau's (2016) account of material communication instead support examining the medium's conditions. Qi's (2023) study of digitally changing paratexts makes version identification especially pertinent here, without implying that its censorship context applies to the *Xiyou lu*.[6]

Taken together, these examples show that interpretations and their supporting evidence do not necessarily travel together. A correction can exist in specialist scholarship while an older sentence remains easily accessible elsewhere. A general word in the main text can circulate after the local argument specifying its referent has disappeared. Such outcomes are best described as selective reuse of statements and apparatus. They are not evidence for an inevitable progression toward accuracy, nor for the general failure of translation to transmit knowledge.

5. Discussion

The first research question concerns the explanatory reach of source variation. The *Xiyou lu* cases support that explanation where a descriptive clause is genuinely absent or a recorded character differs. They also reveal its limit. The excerpt's missing fox description explains a shorter melon sentence; it does not explain the choice of watermelon. Its omission of irrigation and yield explains Bretschneider's silence; it does not explain how a later translator turns harvest into water. The explicit return to Samarkand excludes a missing-topic explanation for the reassigned political dependence. Source identification is therefore both an explanation and a constraint on explanation.

The second question concerns the formation of geographical propositions. Translation does more than select equivalents for unfamiliar names. It supplies grammatical subjects, chooses referents, resolves or preserves categories, identifies measured objects, and sets degrees of certainty. These interventions are not intrinsically errors: many are necessary to produce an intelligible translation. Their historical significance depends on whether the resulting proposition can be distinguished from its Chinese wording and its supporting inference. The same modern geographical fact may justify an identification without proving a conjectural emendation; the same plant comparison may support a causal hypothesis without settling syntax.

The third question concerns what survives reuse. The evidence supports local trajectories rather than a global reception narrative. An earlier reading persists in republication; a later study cites Chinese and English sources together; reviewers extract or challenge different components of an anthology. These findings qualify any inference from the publication of a corrected translation to the successful correction of shared knowledge. Availability, critical engagement, and adoption must be demonstrated separately.

The article consequently extends the source-text problem from identifying versions to assigning responsibility for claims. Ivaska and Huuhtanen's (2020) distinction between work and text prevents translations of different versions from being compared as though their verbal inputs were identical. The

present cases add the need to distinguish transmitted wording, editorial establishment, translational assertion, and later evidential use. Batchelor's (2018) paratextual perspective then helps explain how those distinctions become visible or disappear at the point of reading. An apparatus is valuable not simply because it is extensive, but because it enables the grounds and limits of a judgment to be reconstructed.

Baker's (2006) account of narrative framing offers a further question about how selected statements acquire a larger interpretive setting. In this corpus, however, establishing a reversed dependency relation is a textual finding; explaining it as an ideological narrative would require additional evidence of selection, purpose, and context.

This approach also avoids dividing the corpus into an outdated scholarly translation, a merely literary selection, and an inherently transparent digital version. Bretschneider exposes some interventions and leaves others unexplained. De Rachewiltz corrects errors while explicitly preserving unresolved questions. Strassberg identifies his source and offers general editorial guidance, even where a local interpretation remains problematic. Yang reopens earlier questions while remaining subject to the same demands of source attribution and quantitative checking. Genre and medium change the organization of evidence; neither guarantees its adequacy.

The study has limits. Selected cases cannot measure the overall accuracy of four presentations. Published texts and notes do not reveal every source consulted during translation. The digital material requires version-sensitive citation, and the reception examples do not constitute a survey of all users or languages. The analysis also does not independently resolve botanical distributions, historical unit standards, or every disputed place identification. Its contribution is methodological and documentary: it identifies where each of those further claims would require evidence, while establishing the differences that the textual record already supports.

6. Conclusion

English presentations of the *Xiyou lu* construct historical geographical knowledge through connected but distinguishable acts. Transmitted witnesses determine available wording; editors establish readings; translators organize descriptions into propositions; annotations expose or qualify inferences; subsequent readers select material for new purposes. A difference can belong to more than one of these processes, but each attribution requires its own evidence.

The comparisons show why isolated equivalents are an inadequate unit for this history. Names can remain stable while dependence reverses, figures can remain legible while their object changes, and general vocabulary can conceal a specific classification supplied in a note. Establishing the relevant source text must therefore be followed by a comparison of relations and evidential grounds. Following later reuse then establishes which parts of that knowledge actually traveled. This makes it possible to assess correction and persistence without assuming either that later translations improve automatically or that textual circulation proves intellectual acceptance.

Declarations

Data availability statement

The study analyzes published texts and a digital presentation identified in the references. Passage locations, page numbers, and note numbers are provided in the article. No participant data were collected.

Notes

1 Sheng (1805), upper juan, preserves excerpts, not the complete *Xiyou lu*. The complete manuscript was rediscovered in Japan in 1926. The 1228 preface date does not date the surviving copy (de Rachewiltz, 1962).

2 Bretschneider's (1875) earlier collection belongs to the publication history, but the 1888 extract is the version compared here. Earlier publication does not establish identical wording.

3 Huang (2015) addresses the horse-head-shaped melon terminology; Paris (2015) distinguishes botanical and historical evidence about watermelon. Laufer (1919) and Spengler (2019) provide comparative plant-history contexts. None independently identifies this particular fruit. Li Zhichang (1931) is a separate account, not another witness of Yelü's text.

4 A modern metrological equivalent does not establish the historical standard intended in a medieval sentence. The fourfold difference discussed here compares ratios with units held constant; it is not a reconstruction of actual agricultural productivity.

5 Jackson (2017, p. 448, n. 143) refers to Allsen (1989, p. 91). This documents Jackson's attribution, rather than proving that every explanatory element originated with Allsen.

6 The introductory notice dates the original Classic StoryMaps presentation to 2018 and identifies a new 2025 version at https://arcg.is/mq8vW0, which redirects to the StoryMaps URL listed in the references. The notice establishes version history; it does not independently verify the quoted passages. Those passages remain subject to comparison with a preserved copy of the 2025 version.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

All primary source materials analysed in this study are publicly available published texts, including Chinese historical texts, printed monographs, journal articles, conference proceedings, and open-access digital translation resources. These source texts can be accessed via university libraries, open-access web platforms, and digital archive repositories. The digital StoryMaps resource (Yang, 2025) discussed in the manuscript has been archived using the Internet Archive Wayback Machine; both the original URL and permanent archived snapshot URL are provided within the reference list. No new raw data were generated for this research.

Author Contribution

Liu Hongxia conceived the study, designed the analytical framework, conducted source-text comparison, performed case analysis, wrote and revised the full manuscript, checked references and supplementary materials, and reviewed the final version of the manuscript.

References

1. Allsen TT (1989) Mongolian princes and their merchant partners. Asia Major 2(2):1200–1260
2. Allsen TT (2001) Culture and conquest in Mongol Eurasia. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497445
3. Appiah KA (1993) Thick translation. Callaloo 16(4):808–819. https://doi.org/10.2307/2932211
4. Baker M (2006) Translation and conflict: A narrative account. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203099919
5. Barthold W (1928) Turkestan down to the Mongol invasion (2nd ed.). Luzac
6. Batchelor K (2018) Translation and paratexts. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351110112
7. Berman A (1990) La retraduction comme espace de la traduction Retranslation as a space of translation. Palimpsestes 4:1–7. https://doi.org/10.4000/palimpsestes.596
8. Biran M (2005) The empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian history: Between China and the Islamic world. Cambridge University Press
9. Bretschneider E (n.d.). Account of a journey to the West (Si Yu Lu), 1219–1224. Silk Road Seattle, University of Washington. https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/si_yu_lu.html(Original translation published 1888)
10. Bretschneider E (1875) Notes on Chinese mediaeval travellers to the West. American Presbyterian Mission, Trübner
11. Bretschneider E (1888) Mediaeval researches from Eastern Asiatic sources: Fragments towards the knowledge of the geography and history of Central and Western Asia from the 13th to the 17th century (Vol. 1). Trübner
12. Buzelin H (2005) Unexpected allies: How Latour's network theory could complement Bourdieusian analyses in translation studies. Translator 11(2):193–218.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2005.10799198
13. Chin T (2013) The invention of the Silk Road, 1877. Critical Inquiry, 40(1), 194–219. https://doi.org/10.1086/673232
14. Cronin M (2013) Translation in the digital age. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203073599
15. Darnton R (1982) What is the history of books? Daedalus 111(3):65–83
16. Deane-Cox S (2014) Retranslation: Translation, literature and reinterpretation. Bloomsbury Academic
17. de Rachewiltz I (1962) The Hsi-yu lu by Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai. Monumenta Serica 21:1–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.1962.11731020
18. 18, Duturaeva D (2022) Qarakhanid roads to China: A history of Sino-Turkic relations. Brill
19. Emmerich K (2017) Literary translation and the making of originals. Bloomsbury Academic
20. Genette G (1997) Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation (J. E. Lewin, Trans). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1987)
21. Harley JB (1989) Deconstructing the map. Cartographica 26(2):1–20. https://doi.org/10.3138/E635-7827-1757-9T53
22. Hou S (2025) Translation, heritage, and traveling memory: Remembering Angkor in a thirteenth/fourteenth-century Chinese travel record and its three modern English renditions. Perspect Adv online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2025.2502923
23. Huang T, □□□ (2015) Xiyou lu yu Changchun zhenren xiyou ji suo zai 'mashouxing gua' mingcheng kao: Jian lun tiangua yu Hamigua mingcheng yuanliu The horse-head-shaped melon in the Xiyou lu and Changchun zhenren xiyou ji: On the names of sweet melon and Hami melon. Zhongguo nongshi □□□□, pp 128–136. 1
24. Ivaska L, Huuhtanen S (2020) Beware the source text: Five (re)translations of the same work, but from different source texts. Meta 65(2):312–331. https://doi.org/10.7202/1075838ar
25. Ivaska L, Pięta H, Gambier Y (2023) Past, present and future trends in (research on) indirect literary translation. Perspectives 31(5):775–786. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2023.2221388
26. Jackson P (2017) The Mongols and the Islamic world: From conquest to conversion. Yale University Press
27. 27 Koskinen K, Paloposki O (2010) Retranslation. In Y. Gambier & L. vanDoorslaer (Eds.), Handbook of translation studies (Vol. 1, pp. 294–298). John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/hts.1.ret1
28. Kovala U (1996) Translations, paratextual mediation, and ideological closure. Target 8(1):119–147. https://doi.org/10.1075/target.8.1.07kov
29. Lao Y-s (1969) Notes on non-Chinese terms in the Yüan imperial dietary compendium Yin-shan cheng-yao □□□□. Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 39, 399–416
30. Laufer B (1919) Sino-Iranica: Chinese contributions to the history of civilization in ancient Iran, with special reference to the history of cultivated plants and products. Field Museum of Natural History
31. Li Z (1931) The travels of an alchemist: The journey of the Taoist Ch'ang-ch'un from China to the Hindukush at the summons of Chingiz Khan (A. Waley, Trans). George Routledge & Sons

32. Littau K (2016) Translation and the materialities of communication. Translation Stud 9(1):82–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2015.1063449
33. Livingstone DN (2003) Putting science in its place: Geographies of scientific knowledge. University of Chicago Press
34. McKenzie DF (1999) Bibliography and the sociology of texts. Cambridge University Press
35. Munday J (2014) Using primary sources to produce a microhistory of translation and translators: Theoretical and methodological concerns. Translator 20(1):64–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2014.899094
36. Paris HS (2015) Origin and emergence of the sweet dessert watermelon, Citrullus lanatus. Ann Botany 116(2):133–148. https://doi.org/10.1093/aob/mcv077
37. Park H (2012) Mapping the Chinese and Islamic worlds: Cross-cultural exchange in pre-modern Asia. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139088329
38. Porter TM (1995) Trust in numbers: The pursuit of objectivity in science and public life. Princeton University Press
39. Pym A (1998) Method in translation history. St. Jerome
40. Qi L (2023) Source text readers as censors in the digital age: A paratextual examination of the English translation of Wuhan Diary. Perspectives 31(2):282–296. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2021.1939741
41. Raj K (2007) Relocating modern science: Circulation and the construction of knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900. Palgrave Macmillan https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230625310
42. Rudolph D (1996) Review of the book Inscribed landscapes: Travel writing from imperial China, by R. E. Strassberg. Journal of the American Oriental Society, 116(1), 121–124
43. Secord JA (2004) Knowledge in transit. Isis 95(4):654–672. https://doi.org/10.1086/430657
44. Sheng R, □□□ (1805) Shuzhai laoxue congtan □□□□□□ Collected conversations on learning in the studio (Upper juan). Bao Tingbo. (Zhibuzuzhai congshu woodblock edition)
45. Spengler RN (2019) Fruit from the sands: The Silk Road origins of the foods we eat. University of California Press
46. Strassberg RE (Trans.) (ed) (1994) Inscribed landscapes: Travel writing from imperial China. University of California Press
47. Tahir Gürçağlar Ş (2002) What texts don't tell: The uses of paratexts in translation research. In: Hermans T (ed) Crosscultural transgressions: Research models in translation studies II: Historical and ideological issues. St. Jerome, pp 44–60
48. Toury G (2012) Descriptive translation studies-and beyond (Rev. ed). https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.100. John Benjamins
49. Tuan Y-F (1977) Space and place: The perspective of experience. University of Minnesota Press
50. Venuti L (1995) The translator's invisibility: A history of translation. Routledge

51. Washbourne K (2025) Margin for interpretation: Translation marginalia as reading-writing traces. Perspectives 33(6):1277–1298. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2025.2533465
52. Watson W (1996) Review of the book Inscribed landscapes: Travel writing from imperial China, by R. E. Strassberg. Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 6(2), 288–289
53. Xu M (2012) On scholar translators in literary translation - a case study of Kinkley's translation of 'Biancheng'. Perspectives 20(2):151–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2011.554610
54. Yang S-y (2025) Journeys to the West: Kitan and Jurchen travelers in thirteenth-century Central Asia StoryMap; 2025 version. ArcGIS StoryMaps. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/d77eb70be65649bd897386f1ab12182e
55. Yelü Chucai (1981) Xiyou lu □□□ Record of a journey to the West (D. Xiang, Ed. & annot.). Zhonghua shuju