Historical sources tell us that the Syr Darya has had different names. Ancient Greek and Latin authors called it Yaksartes. The Pahlavi Yakhšārt is without doubt connected to this expression. The river is also referred to as Yenčü ügüz in ancient Turkish inscriptions. The river was called Sayhun or Sīhun in Arabic sources; later, in Arabic and Persian sources, it was more often called something like Khojend River, after the name of a city on its bank.

It is interesting that Chinese sources of different periods include almost all of these different forms. Yaosha shui 藥殺水 / Yaksartes appears in the description of Tashkent in Du You’s Tongdian and such dynastic histories as Beishi (History of Northern Dynasties), Suishu (History of the Sui Dynasty), and Xin Tangshu (New History of the Tang Dynasty). Xin Tangshu also uses the name Zhenzhu he 眞珠河 (Pearl River) and Zhi he 贍河 (mod.Ch. zhi < anc.Ch. *tśir) for the upper streams of the Syr Darya. The former, which could be a translation from the Turkish Yenčü ügüz, probably corresponds to the Narin River, and the latter to the Syr Darya. This information in the Xin Tangshu owes much to Du Huan 杜環 who, having been captured at the battle of Talas (751), wandered about for twelve years in Central and West Asia until he returned to China by sea. He wrote of his travels in the Jingxingji 經行記, which was lost and is preserved in fragments in the Tongdian. The form Sayhun / Sīhun does not...
seem to appear in Chinese historical sources. Lastly, we can find the name Huozhan 火站 being used for the Khojend River in the Mingshi, the description of which apparently followed Chen Cheng’s Xiyu Fanguo zhi 西域番國志. A Mongolian form of the name of the Khojend River, Huochan monian 霍闡 没輦 (Khojend-muren), appeared in the Xiyouji 西遊記 of the famous Taoist monk Qiu Chuji 邱處機 (Changchun zhenren 長春真人), who was invited by Chinggis Khan to travel to his camp near the Hindu Kush. Chinggis Khan received him in an audience there in 1221.

Incidentally, Xuanzang’s Account of Western Regions (Datang xiyuji 大唐西域記, 646 AD) presents a very peculiar variant of Syr Darya, Ye he 葉河. This is the oldest name for the Syr Darya attested in Chinese historical sources, but it is written as Yeye he 葉葉河 in the Biography of Xuanzang (Datang Da Ci’ensi sanzang fashi zhuan 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳), a difference that deserves careful attention. We need to discover whether Ye he or Yeye he is the correct form of the original expression for Xuanzang before proceeding to a more detailed examination of the name. The river is named twice in Xuanzang’s Account, first in the passage for Tashkent (Zheshiguo 赭時國) and then in the passage of SuTRSNa (Sudulisenaguo 窜堵利瑟那國); both occurrences appear as Yehe in the later editions of the Tripitaka. We present the relevant passages below (punctuation marks omitted intentionally):

Contrariwise, the Biography offers the following:

---

7 Chen Cheng 陈誠, who was dispatched in 1412 by the Yongle emperor to the court of Timur, cites in his itinerary Xiyu xingcheng ji 西域行程記 a certain river called Yihun he (or a muddy river) 一渾河. The context suggests that it corresponds to the Syr Darya; it is therefore tempting to find in it a transcription for Sayhun / Sīhun, but one cannot be certain. See Chen Cheng, 1991: 44.

8 Mingshi, juan 332: 8603.

9 Juan 2. The first five juan of the Biography were compiled by Huili 慧立 in 664, immediately after the death of Xuanzang.

10 Here, we use the text of the Kyoto University edition, which adopts the Korean Tripitaka as the original. Daitō seiiki ki, kan (juan) 1,1911: 20–21.

11 Taisho, vol.50: 227c.