Xiyou ji (西遊記)
and the Netherworld

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Abstract

The full-length epical novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*) is, admittedly, a trip to paradise: haven’t the Tang monk and his monstrous disciples been assigned as a mission to get to Buddha’s pure land to fetch the Buddhist scriptures? But, for this talk, we’ll be looking at the *Journey* from the depth of Hell. The 1592 novel includes no fewer than three trips to the Netherworld: Sun Wukong’s short and tumultuous descent to Hell, then the long and dangerous stay of Emperor Tang Taizong, and, eventually, the trip of Liu Quan to bring a gift of melons to the Kings of Hadès. We’ll try to understand the reason why those Hell’s trips appear in the narrative, and, going a step further, will ask a provocative question: cannot the whole *Xiyou* pilgrimage outside of the boundaries of the normal world, across haunted landscapes inhabited by monsters and demons, be seen as a trip to Hell? To answer this question, we won’t restrict our analysis to the late Ming novel, but also question the role of the *Xiyou* story in late-imperial religious narratives and rituals.

Speaker
