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Mortal Heroes from the Perspective of New Popular Literature and Art: The Construction of the Character Ensemble and its Limitations in the Animated Film *The Eight Immortals!*

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Abstract: The animated film *The Eight Immortals!* presents the pre-immortal history of the Eight Immortals in the form of an adventure tale that focuses on cooperation among ordinary individuals. By adopting an anti-heroic group structure, it redefines the standards for heroism, changing the criterion for judging heroic behavior from identity to action. Using close textual analysis as its main approach and relying on theories of character engagement, this article looks at how non-conventional motives, complementary modes of action, and decisions regarding responsibility contribute to the formation of this anti-heroic group. At the same time, the comic dislocation and the spectacle of the immortal world establish a structure in which aesthetic familiarity exists alongside the attraction of the divine realm. However, the fact that heroic qualifications are opened up to ordinary people does not mean that the general population achieves full subjectivity. Limitations to the film's representational potential arise because of the uneven distribution of narrative importance within the group, the lack of continuous action by ordinary people, and the ethical simplification of institutional criticism. From the point of view of New Popular Literature and Art, the study of mythological animation should be able to distinguish between the masses as objects of representation, as subjects of action, and as participants in the production process.

Keywords: New Popular Literature and Art; *The Eight Immortals*; Animated film; Anti-hero; Ensemble narrative

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1. Introduction

In recent years, mythological animation has brought the identity, motives, and responsibilities of heroes back into critical discussion. *The Eight Immortals!* centers on the Eight Immortals before they attain immortality, bringing their pursuits of wealth, livelihood, and salvation into one adventurous storyline. To simply call the film "turning immortals into ordinary people" might fail to take into account the long-standing folk character of the Eight Immortals legend; on the other hand, labeling it "New Popular Literature and Art"

risks confusing the popularization of the subject matter with actual changes in the ways literary and artistic production is carried out. The issue, therefore, is how characters who can no longer depend on immortal identities for recognition gain heroic status through mutual reliance and ethical decisions, and to what point does this expansion of heroic qualification go?

He argued that "New Popular Literature and Art" encompasses both the description of reality and the construction of ideals [1]. Fan further linked its "newness" to the masses' deeper participation in creation, production, and dissemination [2]. On this basis, three levels can be distinguished: the masses as objects of representation; as subjects capable of judgment; and as participants in the actual production of works and the generation of meaning. This article takes character motivation, collaborative relationships, and the ending as its principal units of analysis, drawing on interviews with the creative team and publicly released promotional images to examine the first two levels. Participation in production and effects of dissemination, by contrast, are not inferred from the text alone.

2. Conceptual boundaries of the mortal-hero ensemble and the narrative starting point

The Eight Immortals are not a uniform divine group. Director Mu conceived of them as a group of ordinary people and regards their pre-immortality experiences as a space for creative exploration [3]. The film's innovation lies not in humanizing immortals, but in repositioning ordinary human experience within the narrative. Livelihood, desire, and frustration no longer need to be overcome; they now shape relationships and drive action. The focus of analysis, then, should not be on the question of the removal of divinity, but on which experiences of everyday life are given narrative meaning, and how they influence the actions and choices of characters.

The notion of the mortal hero is also in need of qualification. Abrams and Harpham used the term to refer to a departure of a protagonist from traditional heroic models [4]. The mortal hero can also be explained according to the concepts of the anti-hero, in terms of character traits, modes of action, and value orientations, and cannot be deduced directly from poverty, disability, or non-elite origins. For example, Tieguai Li is an anti-hero because greed corrupts his judgment, not his lameness. Cao Guojiu has an official position and social resources, but his actions and values determine his anti-heroic nature.

The film is structured around the pursuit of money, and the characters no longer receive prior recognition by virtue of heroic identities. We judge their accountability after seeing their predicament and desires and after they act and choose. The experience of Zhongli Quan is particularly indicative of this antiheroic mode of introduction. By bringing rain to a drought-stricken region to save its people, he was punished. He disrupted the moral logic of "doing good—being rewarded" in the traditional sense. He then earns his living by stealing. This allows for the audience to simultaneously sympathize with his circumstances and criticize his conduct. While a character's frustration or disillusionment may be justified by past good deeds, it does not automatically excuse actions.

The term "anti-hero" refers to a type of characterization which differs from the traditional idea of a hero, while "mortal hero" describes how heroism can arise in ordinary, non-divine individuals as a result of their actions and decisions. In the case of a character who is just disheveled in appearance but who acts heroically without any hesitation, anti-heroism amounts to no more than a superficial characteristic. Therefore, heroism has to be shown rather than taken for granted.

3. The ensemble mechanism: A transition from individual desire to collective responsibility

In the beginning, the team is made up of people who know each other, meet by chance, and share benefits. Zhongli Quan recruits Tieguai Li, and approaches Han Xiangzi and Zhang Guolao by offering them a share of the proceeds. This gives their cooperation an intelligible practical basis. Here, the eight figures do not appear as a pre-harmonious whole, but as a temporary association of people with different needs and unequal resources. The pursuit of money does not in itself constitute public responsibility. Its narrative purpose is to bring strangers together over a common interest, and through shared action to gradually bring them face to face with each other's situation and with the results of their own decisions.

When Sanxing offers payment, Lü Dongbin still tries to steal the glazed lamp, while the other seven just want to take the money and leave. The resulting disagreement illustrates the instability of an alliance based on interest. If these conflicts were only humorous devices, they would not inform later relationships or choices. Rather, the film associates interpersonal friction with subsequent acts of mutual rescue and cooperation so that a transitory collaboration for commercial gain can be progressively transformed into a shared responsibility. Thus, team relations go beyond an exchange of interests and gradually become based on mutual dependence and shared responsibility.

The other condition for the ensemble construction to take shape is the distribution of abilities. Different skills are distributed among the characters, so that it is impossible for the plan to be carried out by a single protagonist. The narrative value of Han Xiangzi's devices and Zhang Guolao's mount comes from their incorporation in a collective task, and everyday skills are turned into resources for action. But "everyone has a use" doesn't mean "everyone has subjectivity." An instrumental character can also help to complete a task. When trying to assess the completeness of the ensemble, one must ask whether each member can affect collective aims, voice dissent, and take part in altering common decisions.

Smith described levels of audience engagement with characters including recognition, alignment and allegiance [5]. Viewed this way, the film presents the characters' situations in a manner that the audience can understand their actions without necessarily condoning their behavior. The backgrounds of Zhongli Quan and the predicament of Tieguai Li offer comprehensible motives, but understanding them does not mean automatically morally siding with the characters. The film gives the audience reasons to see the characters as heroes only when they start to take risks beyond their own benefit and show responsibility to others through actions. The move from sympathy for the frustrated to recognition of the agent still requires concrete acts and choices; a tragic background alone cannot accomplish this move.

The transformation of the ensemble should therefore be reflected in a change in the characters' reasons for acting. **Table 1** distinguishes cooperation, responsibility, and autonomy through key plot points, avoiding the assumption that alliance, mutual assistance, and salvation necessarily constitute successive stages of a single developmental process.

Table 1. Plot evidence and analytical boundaries of the anti-heroic ensemble

Plot point	Group relationship	Narrative function	Boundary of inference
Profit-driven grouping and profit-sharing	A temporary alliance based on expected returns	Brings together members with different needs	An alliance does not yet constitute public responsibility

Plot point	Group relationship	Narrative function	Boundary of inference
Cooperation through devices and mounts	Complementary distribution of abilities	Transforms everyday skills into resources for action	Functional usefulness does not entail equality in decision-making
The team undertakes rescue	A shift toward public responsibility	Choices of responsibility establish heroic qualification	A few people assuming responsibility does not amount to universal participation by the masses
Sun Wukong helps resolve the crisis	Rescue depends on external assistance	Distinguishes autonomous choice from the conditions of completion	Autonomous choice does not entail independent salvation

Source: Compiled from the film's plot. The correspondence presented in the table constitutes textual analysis rather than statistical measurement.

4. The coexistence of comic dislocation and divine spectacle

The anti-heroic ensemble also needs to be rendered through concrete animated situations. Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization emphasizes disrupting habitual perception so that perception can be renewed [6]. The film moves service counters, Daoist temple rentals, and proceduralized service discourse to the realm of the immortal. This creates a disjunction between familiar representations of immortals and contemporary organizational experience. The first function of the comic Celestial Administration Bureau is to make of the immortals not remote authorities, but figures that can be seen, questioned, and even mocked. The effect is not simply the use of modern colloquial language to create defamiliarization, but rather the juxtaposition of situation and identity.

Yet this dislocation works both ways. The intervention of everyday experience makes mythology depart from traditional imaginings on the one side, and familiar administrative logic makes the immortals more approachable on the other. The two effects are not mutually exclusive. The first one allows for re-evaluation; the second one lowers the threshold of comprehension. However, if administrative procedures serve only as a means of inducing contrast and humor, defamiliarization could remain at the level of amusement, rather than lead to critical reflection on the rules and power relations that the characters face. The intellectual richness of the comedy thus depends on whether these comic devices are further related to the characters' situation, actions and consequences.

However, defamiliarization does not mean that the immortal picture is completely gone. Director Mu said in his creative statement that "a glazed gradient palette runs through the immortals' costumes and the Penglai environment, translating the colors of blue-green landscape painting and the tactile qualities of folk craftsmanship into a three-dimensional animation aesthetic" [3]. The film thus continues to construct a consciously mythological visual world. **Figure 1** emphasizes the extraordinary scale of the immortal realm through floating mountains, layered clouds, and golden architecture, indicating that the promotional visual appeal still incorporates divine spectacle. This fits with the talk of materiality from the creators, but does not automatically produce audience identification.



Figure 1. The spectacle of the Immortal Realm as it appears in the IMAX poster for *The Eight Immortals!* Source: the IMAX-format poster release page of Chengdu Hi-Tech Client, 8 July 2026 (accessed 16 September 2026).

Within this visual system, the mortals' predicaments are juxtaposed with the splendor of the immortal realm. Characters may lack a dignified appearance yet make choices worthy of affirmation; conversely, an environment and identity may be visually dazzling without guaranteeing the legitimacy of action. The film therefore does not construct the anti-hero by eliminating divinity altogether. Rather, while retaining the visual appeal of myth, it shifts the basis of heroism from identity and outward appearance toward concrete action and choice. Material, color, bodily form, and capacity for action all participate in constructing character images and in shaping the audience's recognition of character identities. The film's contemporary translation thus loosens the previously close association between sacred appearance and moral legitimacy.

5. The narrative limits of mass subjectivity

First, opening heroic qualifications to ordinary people does not mean that ordinary people gain the power to act. The eight protagonists have names and histories and moments of decision; however, the disaster-stricken populace is there mainly to elicit sympathy and make rescue necessary. The agency in the story changes from established immortals to a group of mortals, but still keeps an organizational structure in which a small number of people rescue the majority. What changes is not the transformation of all represented ordinary people into subjects of action, but what subject occupies the position of the hero.

In the end, where Sun Wukong helps to resolve the crisis [7], it further suggests that mortal action is still embedded within established mythological authority. External help does not necessarily absolve the eight characters of their responsibility for their choices, but it is necessary to distinguish the autonomy involved in making a choice from the material conditions needed to complete the rescue. Thus, the film confirms the subjectivity of mortals in choosing how to act, but it does not fully liberate itself from dependence on supernatural power. So, a simple description of the film as "ordinary people save the world through their own strength" would not do justice to the role of Sun Wukong as external assistance at the end.

Second, the completion of a collective task does not mean that each member of the group undergoes a similarly large process of character development. The major lines of conflict in the film are developed through the experience of Zhongli Quan and the goal of Lü Dongbin. Their personal histories and choices

directly affect the development of the narrative. The other members, however, base their distinctiveness mainly on the abilities, characteristics, and division of labor among the team members. They participate in the common adventure and have important parts in crucial moments, but the links between their personal experiences and the final task are rather limited. Memorable characters can arise from distinctive designs, specialized abilities, and climactic moments, but not necessarily from fully developed circumstances, motives, and choices. The limitation of the ensemble construction is not in the existence of a common goal, but in the fact that some members do not participate enough in the formation of the goal.

Third, the setting of the Celestial Administration Bureau cannot be seen as a logical flaw merely because suffering still exists in the mortal world. That power is dependent upon recognition by the public does not mean that it has to respond to every demand. The functioning of institutions may also be constrained by resources, procedures, and competing interests. It's more important to ask how the immortals might be affected by public opinion, how much institutional neglect costs, and whether the weak have real ways to speak out and be held accountable. The film sets up satire in institutionalized settings but depends more on conflicts between individual characters to bring about resolution, with the consequence that institutional problems may be reduced to questions of individual morality.

The film presents ethical choices in moments of crisis with relative clarity but devotes limited attention to how ordinary people might sustain participation in collective life, articulate different demands, and negotiate among them. Heroic action can resolve a particular crisis, but the subjectivity of ordinary people is not expressed only through choices made in moments of crisis; it also involves sustained participation before and after the crisis. From the perspective of New Popular Literature and Art, therefore, emotional identification on the part of audiences cannot by itself serve as evidence that subjectivity has been realized. It is also necessary to examine whether ordinary people within the film actually afforded sustained space for action and participation.

6. Conclusion

The anti-heroic ensemble construction in *The Eight Immortals!* changes the criterion for judging heroic behavior from identity to action, turning this shift into a process of developing character relationships through conflicts of desire, complementary abilities, and assumed responsibility. Its novelty lies in reorganizing the interpretive authority granted to ordinary human experience within mythology, rather than claiming that traditional mythology has never contained a popular dimension. Meanwhile, representative heroes and ordinary people are still not well represented, and there are still gaps between those who can make decisions and those who can act on them, as well as between ethical rescue and institutional response. Bringing these gaps into the analysis allows "New Popular Literature and Art" to function as a framework for examining character agency and the distribution of narrative power, while leaving room for further research based on production materials and audience studies.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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