

# Narrative Empathy and Patriotism—An Analysis of the Chinese “Main-Melody” Film *My People, My Country*

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Narrative empathy is a relatively new theory and it can guide researchers in the studies of main-melody films so as to promote the communication of the core values of the society. The rhetorical mechanism of narrative empathy can be illustrated from five rhetorical elements, including rhetor, rhetorical goal, rhetorical situation, rhetorical strategy and audience. The theory of narrative empathy can be applied to the case study of the film *My People, My Country*. In the production of this film, the directors are the rhetors. The rhetors uphold the tenet of closeness, choose the right rhetorical situation as the 70th birthday of the People’s Republic of China, and use appropriate rhetorical strategies in order to realize the rhetorical goals of evoking empathy and inspiring patriotic feelings in the audience’s minds. An exploration and application of narrative empathy can be conducive to the empathic communication of Chinese main-melody films in order to achieve better communication effect.

*Keywords:* narrative empathy, main-melody films, *My People, My Country*

## Introduction

The concept of Chinese “main-melody” film is defined as a film that implements the mainstream ideology of contemporary China and is mainly oriented towards the portrayal of heroic characters (or positive characters) (Zhang, 2005). The past years have witnessed the rapid growth of the Chinese “main-melody” films, such as *Jianjun daye (The Founding of An Army, 2017)*, *Meigonghe xingdong Operation (Mekong, 2016)*, *Wohe wode zuguo (My People, My Country, 2019)*, *Changjinhua (The Battle at Lake Changjin, 2021)*, etc. Released on 30th September 2019 and dedicated to the 70th birthday of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter, PRC), *My People, My Country* (hereafter, *MPMC*) reached RMB 2.9 million on its first day at the box office (*My People, My Country*, n.d.) and won the 2019 National Day box office. It is also the winner of many film awards. On a relatively authoritative film-reviewing website in China called Douban, the film’s rating score is 7.6, evaluated by more than one million viewers, a relatively high score. The type of the film is very novel. It is an omnibus film directed by eight directors with one in charge and composed of seven episodes, united respectively in contiguity to form a whole. Two sequels of the same pattern that followed *MPMC* also earned good reputation, *Wohe wode jiaxiang (My People, My Homeland, 2020)* and *Wohe wode fubei (My Country, My Parents, 2021)*.

The directors of *MPMC* draw on countless historic and meaningful moments that China has experienced since the founding of PRC and tell moving stories of the inextricably-linked attachments between ordinary

people and the country. Focusing on the seemingly distant but actually close connection between ordinary people and the country in the midst of the great events in the history of China, the film evokes the common memories of Chinese people around the world, which is in alignment with the core values of Chinese socialism and the distinctive theme of patriotism in contemporary China. The need to vigorously promote the great spirit of patriotism has been repeatedly stressed. Especially against the special background of the 70th birthday of the PRC, the movie has great aroused the empathetic patriotism in the viewers and put them in empathy with every single person that has made contributions to the development of China.

The film is divided into seven parts, *The Eve*, *Passing By*, *Champion*, *Going Home*, *Hello Beijing*, *Guiding Star* and *One for All*. All of the seven stories feature ordinary people contributing to meaningful moments related to special events of the country. The hero of the movie is not the country but ordinary people. The word “country” is actually an abstract concept. It is the individuals that make the country meaningful. It is the dedication of millions of individuals that has led to the prosperity of the country. In this sense, the country is the people. Through personal stories closely related to the country, the film broke down grand themes into small incidents in people’s daily life. Each story is just twenty minutes or so, short in length but rich in content. However, it conveys patriotic ideas, thus inspiring empathy of patriotism in the audience. Having watched the film, people’s spiritual life is enriched and people’s feelings towards the country are deepened.

Quite successful among Chinese main-melody film, the rhetorical mechanism of narrative empathy in this film is worth studying. The significance of this study lies in its introduction of a relatively new theory of narrative empathy into the interpretation of the rhetorical mechanism of a Chinese well-received “main-melody” film. The detailed analysis of the episodes reveals the rhetorical strategies of some of the most talented directors in contemporary China. The study also can offer sights for the future “main-melody” films.

### **Narrative, Empathy and Narrative Empathy**

Film narrative studies is an important branch of contemporary narrative studies. Main-melody film actually is a name specifically known by Chinese and it has received some attention from Chinese scholars. They mainly focus on the analysis of the narrative strategies or effects or other factors of one or two or a set of particular films. For example, Jin Ai (2022) analyzed the film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* from narrative point of view and visual narrative. It is found that the combination of Individual point of view and collective point of view reinforced the idea of patriotism conveyed by the film. Zong Xiaojun and Hu Fangang (2018) studied the patriotic narrative of *Hong Kong Rescue* and proposed that the work presented in profound detail the upheavals of the troubled times and it also borrowed the narrative logic of a commercial film, ending up with a panoramic pattern focusing on the past of the nation. The audience received memorable patriotic education and the film met both its commercial and emotional aims, which was a big inspiration for the future main-melody films.

Empathy is defined as a both affective and cognitive process (Cuff et al., 2016). In a broader sense, sympathy is included in empathy. There seems to have been more studies of empathy abroad than in China. Foreign studies on empathy thrive in work areas, teaching areas and other psychological areas (Wieck et al., 2022). Studies on the empathic aspects of film are also touched upon. Brinckmann’s book joins a wealth of publications in two growing fields: color studies and affect studies of the films (2014). Studies on empathy do not yet appear to have been explored in depth in China before, but recent years in China have witnessed the rapid

development of studies of empathy. Researchers also applied the theory of empathy into the study of the main-melody films. Liu and Su (2021) analyzed the sports film *Leap* and its empathic effect. It has a very special symbolic significance in today's era. As a sports film, it conveys the essence of sports culture and promotes the spirit of sports. As a main-melody film, it also reflects the contemporary socialist core values and advocate and promote the Chinese Dream. Based on real events, it also has the function of awakening empathy and collective memory. L. L. Li (2022) analyzed the empathic communication of the main-melody film *My Country, My Parents*. It promotes the communication of empathy through the construction of space and time, stimulates the audience's empathy through the linear flow of space and time and continuously enhance the audience's empathy and promotes the audience's consensus with the mainstream values. It provides a lot of experience for the empathy communication of the main-melody films in the future. Although there are case studies focusing on the empathic effect and communication of the films, a unified theory has not yet been reached.

Main-melody films in China have been analyzed from both narrative and empathic points of view separately. However, main-melody film studies combining narration and empathy have not caught researchers' attention. Keen (2006) put forward for the first time the concept of narrative empathy, paving the way for an important study of empathy in narrative. Narrative and empathy are inextricably linked, and people's ability to understand and empathize with the stories of others is largely dependent on the grand interpretive context created by the narrative. At the same time, much of the research on empathic narratives has also viewed narrative as a pathway to empathy. In *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Keen presents a comprehensive account of the relationships among novel reading, empathy, and altruism, introducing the theory to literary studies. Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* is perhaps the most important and thorough contribution to the scholarly discussion of narrative empathy. Most of the previous studies with reference to narrative empathy by Keen are linked with literature (Anderst, 2015; Ishai, 2020; Monaco, 2019, 2020). Monaco (2019, 2020) applied the theoretical framework of narrative empathy to the case studies of James Bradley's *Clade* and a corpus of William Trevor's fiction, focusing on character identification and multiple focalization, metafictional devices and multifocal perspectives respectively. The articles are in line with Keen's argument that fictionality is a key feature prompting empathetic response in readers. Literary theorists who study empathic responses to narrative generally focus on characters or narrative techniques of fictional texts that trigger or impede empathy. However, Anderst (2015) Selected two autobiographical narratives Doris Lessing's *Under My Skin* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* for close reading and showed that nonfiction narrative, and autobiographical narrative specifically, has just as much potential for creating empathetic responses and for arousing strong emotions in readers as do novels and short stories. As response and explanation, Keen (2016) proposed that life writing should be considered as a special category of nonfiction that shares with fictional narratives the capacity to invite feeling responses and to evoke readers' empathy. Literary studies on narrative empathy have flourished in its field for many years. In fact, narrative theory has a rhetorical foundation, the early Greeks initiated metadiscussions of narrative (Clair et al., 2014). K. Li (2022) explored the rhetorical foundation of narrative empathy, developed the theory of narrative empathy and brought it back to the rhetorical field. He proposed that narrative empathy can be illustrated from five rhetorical elements, including rhetor, rhetorical goal, rhetorical situation, rhetorical strategy and audience.

Narrative empathy is a relatively new theory and it can guide researchers in the studies of main-melody films so as to promote the development of the main-melody films and the communication of the core values of the society. This paper applies the theory of narrative empathy to the analysis of the main-melody film *MPMC* with the aim to introduce the theory into the analysis of the main-melody films and to shed light on the future researches and the development of the main-melody films.

### **Rhetors, Assiduous Directors of *MPMC***

Rhetor plays a significant role in the process of creating narrative empathy. The rhetor is the initiator of the narrative behavior. In film production it seems that there no rhetor or narrator. The identification of the narrator in a film narrative is further complicated by the intervention and participation of the camera. The fact that there appears to be no rhetor or narrator in a film and that events seem to tell themselves does not mean that the narrative of film is totally an objective statement, rather it is a subjective story told in what appears to be the most objective way possible. In fact, the rhetor is the director. The film’s content is all about what the writers and producers and directors want to present to the audience. Their positive subjectivity and potential of creativity should be tapped appropriately. Therefore, the director needs to adopt appropriate narrative strategies to influence the audience.

The audience is put at the central position where all other factors are modified in order to arouse the audience’s empathy. When narrative strategies are applied to the film, the directors need to speculate the audience’s cognitive and emotional response, finding the best way to present the cognitive ideas and emotional feelings that they want to convey. The director’s choice of narrative point of view, the presentation of images, the choice of background music, etc. all have an impact on the empathic effect of the film. The first-person point of view can better express the inner feelings of the character, but the first person also limits the scope of the narrative. In contrast, the third-person point of view narration can present information and activity scenes. Of course, the third-person narration of the film is limited in conveying the character’s inner thoughts and feelings. By considering the audience and adopting appropriate narrative strategies, the desired narrative effect will be achieved, leading to the gradual realization of narrative empathy.

Yin et al. (2019) interviewed with Huang Jianxing, the producer in charge of *MPMC*. He said they set up seven film groups to proceed the filming individually and let the directors seize their imagination and produce what they wanted to convey. “I think the directors’ freedom of creativity must be guaranteed, and this is my experience and bottom line from being a producer for so many years” (Yin et al., 2019, p. 72).

Another important tenet during the film production is closeness. Originally the film was named “*My Country*” (*Wode zuguo*), which was a very big title and could create a sense of alienation. After a long discussion at the meeting, the producer and the directors finally decided to put the words “My people” at the beginning to form “*My people, My country*” (*Wohe wode zuguo*). This is because the word “I” (*wo*) involves the audience in the title and create a sense of closeness in the audience’s minds.

The tenet of closeness is also manifested in the portrayal of the characters. The main characters are ordinary people who are closely related to the audience. The film characters are meant to be touchable and visible, not out of reach and distant. Most of the them in the seven short films are vivid and have distinctive personalities, which is the prerequisite for the audience to develop empathy. Only when the characters are real and vivid can they

evoke empathy in the audience. The closeness brings the audience back to the historical moments and evokes the audience’s memories, feelings and imaginations of that time. The mass memory and the emotional collision of the historical moments lie at the core of the production of *MPMC*, thus evoking narrative empathy.

The producer and directors are devoted whole-heartedly to the film. From the aspect of time, the film covers a time span from 1949 to the beginning of the 21st century presenting the historical development of the PRC. There are ordinary people’s stories and military stories, and the genres of the short film cover light comedy, tragedy, poetic film, as well as symbolic film, which seem to be a carefully configured series of work. After many revisions and modifications, they watched the final version in the studio first and were moved to tears. The film was approved and finally set.

### **Rhetorical Goals, Tribute Nature Combined with Commercial film**

Rhetorical goals are narrative goals in narrative empathy. During the process of narration, the narrative goals guide and even determine the entire narrative process. Before the film production, the director should know for clear the narrative goals, whether they are to elicit the audience’s empathy with the characters in the film. If the director intends to stimulate the audience’s empathy, he or she will apply certain strategies in the narrative process and guide the audience along the set path to achieve empathy. The director could reveal more of the characters’ inner thoughts and feelings to bring it closer to the audience and arouse a strong empathetic response among them. Also, narrative goals in narrative empathy depend closely on narrative situations.

*MPMC* is a main-melody film dedicated to the 70th birthday of the PRC with the aim of developing people’s empathy and inspiring their patriotic feelings. People have been building up their patriotic feelings for the last 70 years. The film is like a catalyst and provides an access for them to let their feelings out. On this special occasion, the audience have the mental need to echo with the patriotism that has been laid stress on. The mass memory is the collective presentation of a group of people’s psychological state, and the film is to meet the psychological need of the audience and call up people’s inner patriotic feelings to echo with the mass memory. The seven short stories are true stories in history collected by the directors. Therefore, the stories of the seven short films are all familiar to the audience and rooted in people’s memories. If the psychological demand of the audience is satisfied, the film’s first goal of developing people’s empathy and inspiring their patriotic feelings is clearly and fully realized.

The film is also a commercial film, so the box office is also the directors’ primary concern. The film has to be a fun film to win people’s heart. People nowadays are living a fast-paced life and are often stressed. So, if they go to the cinema, they must want to be relieved from the stressful life. The film should provide a mental shelter for the audience to relax. The fun parts can come from the characters’ lines, the actions of the characters, the contradiction of the characters or something of aesthetic methods from the scenes. The fun parts also need to reveal people’s real feeling. To create fun for fun’s sake is not recommended. If the film is a fun film but its content is nonsense, then the film cannot go to people’s minds and become a big hit. From this perspective, the film has to be both fun and meaningful and *MPMC* is a case in point.

### **Rhetorical Situations, Perfect Timing and Stressed Patriotism**

Rhetorical situations in narrative empathy are composed of exigence, audience, and timing. “Exigence generally refers to a deficiency or obstacle and there may be multiple absences in the same rhetorical situation.” For the director, it is necessary to identify the main exigence in the rhetorical situation of the movie. By adopting appropriate rhetorical strategies, the director will achieve better rhetorical effects. Thus, the identification of deficits is crucial for establishing the narrative goals and provides a solid foundation for the realization of narrative empathy. Specified rhetorical situations are more likely to mobilize the audience’s emotions, thus facilitating the process of creating empathy. The exigence may be a kind of emotion that is neglected or taken for granted in people’s fast-paced life. The film is directed to reveal the phenomenon and to provoke the audience’s neglected feelings and finally realize narrative empathy. The audience is included in both the rhetorical situations and the rhetorical mechanism of narrative empathy. It is a crucial element that will be discussed later.

Timing is also an important element in rhetorical situations. Timing generally refers to the choice of the time made by the rhetor to make the rhetorical act so as to achieve the desired rhetorical effect. In the film production process, it refers to the released time chosen by the director. If the timing coincides with certain special meaningful event, it can more easily achieve the desired effect. Appropriate timing can achieve twice the rhetorical effect with half the effort. As far as narrative empathy is concerned, a specific timing can make the film more outstanding than expected. Moreover, during the film, the moment the director chooses to provoke empathy also matters a lot. Which rhetorical act takes place at what time need to be considered seriously, because it will immediately touch the audience’s emotions and thus produces a certain kind of empathy.

From the perspective of the rhetorical situation of the whole film, the analysis is as follows. Since the founding of the PRC, people have witnessed the glorious achievements of the development of the PRC in the era of peace, and their patriotic fervor is constantly on the rise. The timing of the film is very meaningful. The film was released on September the 30th in 2019 right before the national holiday 70 years after the founding of the PCR. The directors of the film accurately capture the historical moment of 70th birthday of the PRC and the audience’s personal experience during the development of the PRC to empathize with the emotions of the characters devoted to the country in the film.

Patriotism in life is often thought to be a very grand theme and far away from people’s daily life. Although patriotism is at the core of socialist values, in daily life, people don’t emphasize patriotic feelings on purpose. The patriotic feelings are often neglected in normal people’s ordinary life unless some special events happen or some importance announce is made. To a certain extent, this creates a certain “exigence” in the current life situation. So, people need an occasion and a trigger for them to evoke and express their patriotic feelings. The directors focus on this absence, and through aesthetic representation seven patriotic stories of ordinary people doing something extraordinary are presented to the audience, which has resulted in a deep empathy in the audience.

Due to the limited length of the paper, this paper chose to analyze the specific rhetorical situations of four short films, *Champion*, *Guiding Star*, *Going Home* and *Hello, Beijing*. First, the author compared the number of the reviews on the online websites that have *MPMC*. It was found that the Youku website has the most reviews (All statistics are as of June 8th, 2023). Then the author analyzed the bullet comments on the Youku website. Bullet comments refer to commentary subtitles that pop up when watching a video on the internet. Usually when

the audience have the most intense feelings, they send the most bullet comments. The film parts that have the most bullet comments usually have the best rhetorical effects or empathetic effects. When the film parts have the most bullets comments are selected, then the rhetorical situation and the rhetorical strategies will be analyzed. The Youku website in total has 42,612 bullet comments. As the film plays, the number of the bullet comments was kept every five minutes. The outcome is displayed in the following figure.

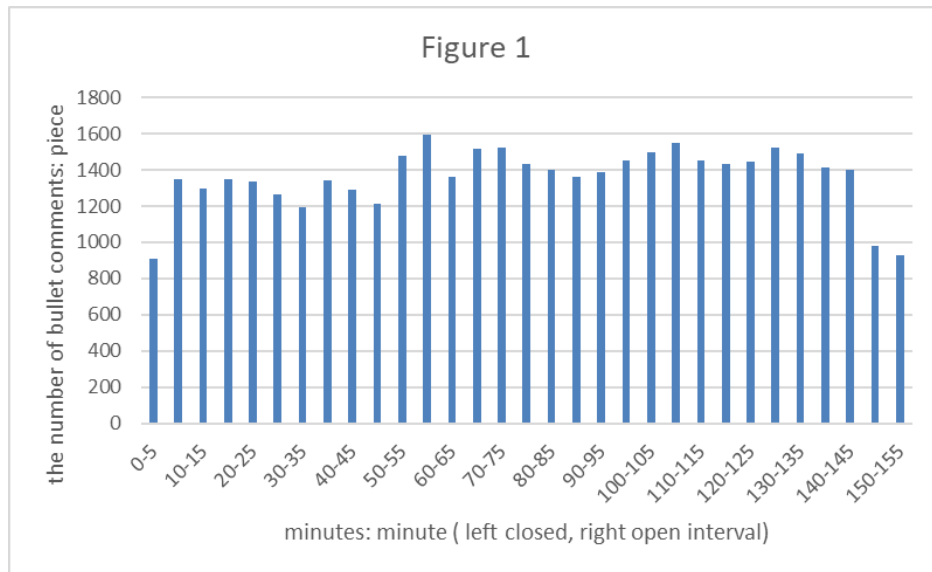


Figure 1. Number of bullet comments per five minutes.

The number of the Interval that have more than 1500 bullet comments is 5. They are minutes 65-70, minutes 125-135, minutes 70-75, minutes 105-110 and minutes 55-60. And they are parts of the four short films *Champion*, *Guiding Star*, *Going Home* and *Hello, Beijing*. The minutes 55-60 have the most bullet comments, being 1594, included in the short film *Champion*. The minutes 105-110 have the second largest bullet comments, being 1548, included in the short film *Hello, Beijing*. The minutes 70-75 have the third largest bullet comments, being 1525, included in the short film *Going Home*. The minutes 125-130 have the fourth largest bullet comments, being 1522, included in the short film *Guiding Star*. The minutes 65-70 have the fifth largest bullet comments, being 1516, included in the short film *Champion*.

The rhetorical situation of the *Champion* is set in 1984, when the Chinese women’s volleyball team competed in the Los Angeles Olympics and was defeated by the U.S. team in the group competition stage. However, the girls were not discouraged, but got stronger and stronger, and eventually won the Olympic gold medal in the final. The victory of the women’s volleyball team was very significant for the people of China who had been suppressed for a long time. The Chinese people gained confidence and nothing at that time could make the Chinese feel prouder than the golden medal won by the Chinese women’s volleyball team. Meanwhile, in one of Shanghai’s alleys, a primary school student named Dongdong set up a black and white television in the middle of the alley. And the neighbors were gathered around to watch the exciting game. However, something wrong happened to the antennae on the roof. It required someone to manually search for the signal from time to time, so

Dongdong carries on this mission. In the alley, the cheers seemed to pierce the sky every time the Chinese team scored.

The rhetorical situation of *Hello, Beijing* is set in 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Zhang Beijing, a taxi driver, accidentally obtained a ticket to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, and the ticket was hard to buy with money. During his work time, he showed off to a boy travelling from Sichuan. The boy, unaware of the condition, quietly paid 800 yuan for Zhang’s ticket to the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games without telling Zhang of his actions. After finding out what had happened, he went to find the boy to ask his ticket back. However, when he learnt that the boy was an orphan of the Wenchuan earthquake, he decided to give his ticket to the boy. It fully embodies the Chinese spirit of sharing blessings and shouldering difficulties together.

The rhetorical situation of *Going Home* is set in 1997, before the handover ceremony for the return of Hong Kong. The Chinese and British government had a “two-second dispute” on the handover ceremony. An Wenbin, commander-in-chief of the handover ceremony, recalled that the British government had only said that the sovereignty of Hong Kong returned to China on 1st July 1997, and did not provide the exact time. So, they said that they would lower the flag at 0:00 on 1st July. On the other hand, An Wenbin insisted that the British flag be lowered at 23:59:58 on 30 June. The Chinese government conducted 16 rounds of negotiation with the British government. Finally, the British government agreed that the British flag would be lowered at 23:59:58 on 30 June.

The rhetorical situation of *Guiding Star* is set in 2016 marking the successful landing of the Shenzhou-11 return capsule. It tells the story between the two brothers and the Shenzhou-11. The lives of the vagabond brothers were changed quietly when they met the retired Poverty Alleviation Office director Lao Li. Under Lao Li’s kind guidance, they witnessed the successful landing of the Shenzhou 11 spacecraft, which was a major historical moment for them. They saw the “daytime shooting star”, which they thought to be a good sign of escaping poverty. For the two brothers, the return capsule of the Shenzhou-11 spacecraft confirmed the “myth of impossibility” and represented infinite hope.

### **Rhetorical Strategies, Effective in Arousing Empathy**

Rhetorical strategies are at the core of the rhetorical mechanism of narrative empathy. Rhetorical strategy is a broader concept that involves a multiplicity of strategies. Keen (2006) put forward bounded strategic empathy, ambassadorial strategic empathy and broadcast strategic empathy. “First, bounded strategic empathy occurs within an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others” (Keen, 2006, p. 224). Usually, members of the empathic circle share familiarity with each other and they may possess homogeneous experiences with their culture enjoying a steady history. Outsiders that do not belong to the group may encounter empathic inaccuracy due to lack of familiarity. Films applied the bounded strategic empathy may advocate emotions such as patriotism and feminism. “Second, ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end” (Keen, 2006, p. 224). This narrative empathy strategy targets outsiders who are different in some way from in-group members with the aim to develop their empathy for in-group members. Films applied the ambassadorial strategic empathy may focus on themes such as justice. Since outsiders and in-group members are different, the narrative empathy is realized by contrast. “Third, broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group,



by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes” (Keen, 2006, p. 224). In a film, the director may tend to show vulnerabilities of group members which may in turn prompts the audience to evoke their compassion and empathy to empathize with the group members leading to the audience’s emotional identification with the members of the group involved in the narrative, which is called also sympathetic identification.

Rhetorical strategies are not limited to the above three. Specifically, there are also other audio or visual empathic strategies in the film production. For example, the use of a background music, the arrangement of different colors, the division of the space on the scene, the change of different camera point of view or the portrayal of a heroic character in a film can also cause the audience to develop empathy.

The rhetorical strategies of *MPMC* are worth analyzing. The *Champion* was thought to be the most vivid short film of them all. Minutes 55-60 received the most bullet comments. If the number of the bullet comments is kept every one minute, the resultant figure is as follows in Figure 2. It is found that minute 64 received the most bullet comments, being 442. This part elicited the most intense feelings of the audience. It is included in the *Champion* and is about Dongdong’s struggling between maintaining the TV signal and meeting his best friend for the last time before she moved abroad. At the start of minute 64, he gave up maintaining the TV signal to meet his best friend, so the TV signal was lost and people couldn’t see the competition scenes on TV. The portrayal of a group of people’s anxious faces and the background music also made the audience empathize with them, eager to see what happened next. The addition of background music better presented the vivid atmosphere. The portrayal of a group of people can make the audience develop empathy more easily than that of a single individual. Because the audience may involve themselves into the group and have their feelings as well. Both the audio and visual strategies are very effective in evoking the audience’s empathy with the characters. Even the group of people could not see the TV scenes, they were cheering the Chinese women’s volleyball team up together. At this time the shooting camera are shooting from a lower angle, so the characters seemed bigger and greater to some extent, highlighting their morale and patriotic feelings. The shooting point of view are changing from Dongdong, his best friend Xiaomei and the group of people, making the audience more curious about what happened next. Dongdong was moved by their actions, and empathized with their patriotic feelings. So, he changed his mind and run back to maintain the TV signal for the people watching TV. The audience also developed empathy with the characters and their patriotic feelings were evoked.

Minutes 55-60 and 65-70 are also included in the *Champion*. Minutes 55-60 are about the group of people preparing for watching the competition together. The shooting camera looks up at the characters, and they seem smaller and are real ordinary people getting together to watch the volleyball game. The background audio is people’s laughter and the sound of gongs and drums, which are very effective mobilize the emotions of the audience. The camera shoots at a very close distance and provides much details such as moving the tables and the TV, preparing the snacks and slicing the watermelon. When the TV signal is lost, the background music changed the style and the situation becomes interesting.

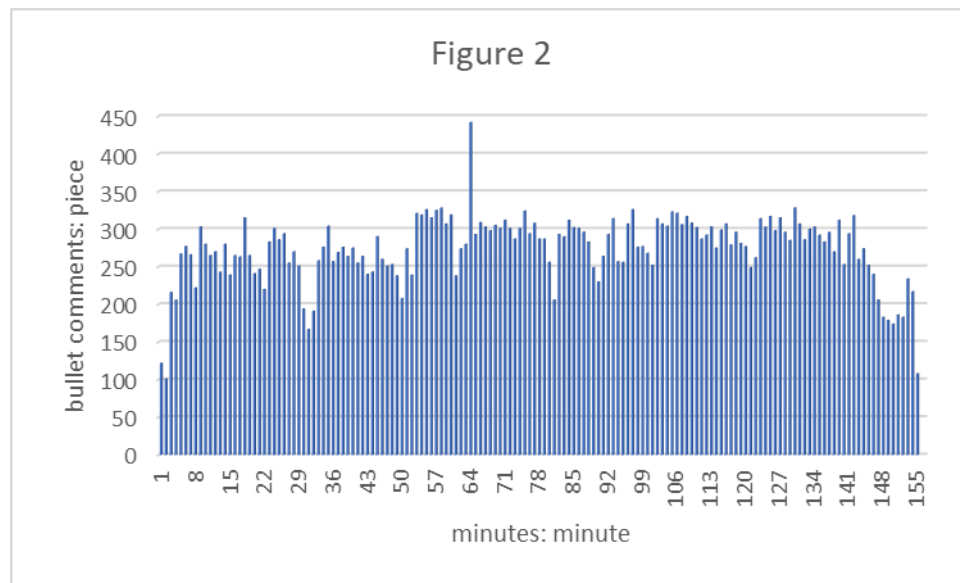


Figure 2. Number of bullet comments per minute.

When minute 65 begins, the view of Xiaomei and her mother’s backs contrast with the view of the group of people’s back, with a background music that makes the audience feel nervous. When the national flag comes into people’s view, the background music stops and Dongdong realized that something was more important than his friendship with Xiaomei, which is the country and people’s patriotic feelings towards the outcome of the competition result. When Xiaomei let go of her mother’s hand and ran back to meet Dongdong before moving abroad, the atmosphere of the film is lit. The strategy of slow-motion shooting is applied and this very moment is highlighted. The slow-motion shooting is also used to portray the looks and cheers of the group of people when they watch the final victory of the Chinese women’s volleyball team. The shooting strategies and audio strategies create much closeness for the audience and closeness can make them develop empathy more easily.

Minutes 105-110 is included in *Hello, Beijing*. When Zhang Beijing, the taxi driver learned that the boy’s father died in the Wenchuan earthquake and the boy’s father participated in the building of the rails of the audience seat. And because of this, the boy wanted to touch the rail his father touched. All of the misunderstanding are understood at the moment. The background music *Back to That Day* merges closely with the atmosphere in the film. If the boy could go back to the day before the earthquake, he would touch and hug his father. The camera keeps giving close-ups of this taxi driver, highlighting his characteristics. Then much of the lens are directed to the scenes at the Niaochao Stadium with the background music going on. Some real scenes when the Olympics took place were released in the film. The audience reviewed the spectacular scenes, which is an effective way to evoke empathy in the audience’s minds. People’s cheering, laughing and waving are contagious, the audience were as if involved on the spot. The narration of this short film is proceeding in a placid manner. Sometimes some funny sentences come up and the audience are amused. This taxi driver is one of the millions of Chinese people who share blessings and shoulder difficulties together.

Minutes 70-75 is included in *Going Home*. The short film presents a couple of ordinary people, a watch repair mechanic and a policewoman. The director used the two ordinary people to approach the audience,

because they are closer to ordinary people’s life. Depicting the handover ceremony from the two ordinary people’s point of view. After introducing the two ordinary people, the negotiation details are presented to the audience. The negotiation scenes take the eye-level shot, revealing the equal status of the two sides. Many people nowadays may have not experienced the handover ceremony nor may not know the preparation the Chinese government has made. Therefore, the narration of the details such as choosing the site, matching the watch time and setting the flag bearer also creates closeness for the audience. The patriotic feelings of the characters are also felt by the audience.

Minutes 125-130 is included in *Going Home*. The director takes long and wide shots to film the teenagers’ riding horses and the trunks in the desert. The drop point forecast has been sent. The re-entry capsule would land in the central area of Inner Mongolia Dorbod Banner landing site. The two teenagers were standing there waiting the guiding star to arrive. Poverty Alleviation Office director Lao Li told them to go after the star. The star refers to both the re-entry capsule and the director Lao Li. The whole scene is very artistic and meaningful. The background music adds grandeur to the whole scene. The young brother’s monologue is so touching. They felt full of pride for China Aerospace. They felt full of hope for China’s poverty alleviation. The vivid depiction makes empathy in the audience’s mind, feeling proud in the heart.

### **Audience, Patriotic Chinese**

The audience are held at a high position in narrative empathy. All of the rhetorical strategies are supposed to be modified according to the characteristics and expectations of the audience. In the film production process, if the rhetorical strategies the directors use are more familiar and accessible to the audience, they are more likely to evoke their emotions, thus achieving empathy. Since empathy can be stimulated both cognitively and emotionally, the directors need to tend to both the cognition and the emotion of the audience in order to achieve the empathic effects successfully. The audience’s empathy can be directed towards factors at the macro level such as the time and the nation or factors at the micro level such as the character and the action.

In all the rhetorical mechanism of narrative empathy can be summarized as “The narrator (rhetor), driven by the purpose of the narrative (rhetorical) goals, consciously puts himself or herself into a state of empathy with the audience and is able to clearly judge the type and source of the audience’s emotions, and takes advantage of the exigence and timing of the rhetorical situation to adopt appropriate narrative empathy strategies to achieve empathy between the audience and the narrator and the members of the group involved in the narrative” (K. Li, 2022, p. 18). The theory combines narrative and empathy and provides a new theory in analyzing and innovating rhetorical works.

The main audience of *MPMC* are Chinese people all over the world. As for the age groups, the 20-24 years old are the main viewing people. *MPMC* has broken through in mobilizing the under-19 and the middle-aged groups. Therefore, it has a more balanced age group of viewing audience. *MPMC* selects representative events since the founding of the PRC. The mass memory of the historical moments triggers the empathy of the whole nation. Viewers of all ages, all education levels and all geographical backgrounds can enjoy the film. Positive energy and real materials from life are the main factors that impress the young people. The right timing is more likely to inspire the patriotic feelings and the enthusiasm of the whole nation to watch the film. The “strong

empathy” creative approach and the incorporation of tragedy and comedy and other elements lay the foundation for a high box office.

### Conclusion

In the face of such a lofty and grandiose theme of patriotism, the film uses small things to reflect the big things, portraying a group of ordinary people contributing to historical moments. There are both real people based on historical facts, such as the designer of the automatic flag-raising device for the Founding Ceremony, the flag-raiser for the Hong Kong Handover Ceremony, the atomic bomb researchers, the grass-roots cadres who sacrificed their lives to help the poor, and the female pilots who prepared for and escorted the flights; and there are also boldly created artistic images, such as the little boy from Shanghai’s alley, the taxi driver from Beijing, and the two lost brothers, etc. Their dedication, sacrifice, hard work, defense and perseverance of the spirit of the times are everlasting. Their strong faith vividly expresses that history is written by the people. The film awakens the mass memory of the audience and stimulates empathy of patriotism of all the people. The mass memory and the emotional collision of the historical moment lie at the core of the production of *MPMC*.

This paper corroborates the practical feasibility of the rhetorical mechanism of narrative empathy and provides to some extent a theoretical supplement to narrative empathy. This paper also sheds some light on narrative empathy and empathic communication of Chinese main-melody films. The theory of narrative empathy can be further discussed and implemented.

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