

## So Long My Son [12A] 2019 | China | 185 mins

UK release date	<b>6 December 2019</b>
Director	<b>Xiaoshuai Wang</b>
Screenplay	<b>Mei Ah, Xiaoshuai Wang</b>
Cinematography	<b>Hyun Seok Kim</b>
Music	<b>Dong Yingda</b>
Cast	<b>Wang Jingchun</b> (Liu Yaojun); <b>Yong Mei</b> (Wang Liyun); <b>Qi Xi</b> (Shen Moli); <b>Wang Yuan</b> (Liu Xing aged 15); <b>Du Jiang</b> (Shen Hao, 'Haohao'); <b>Ai Liya</b> (Li Haiyan)

Wang Xiaoshuai navigates an ocean of sadness in this film. It can finally be watched only through a blur of tears and with a terrible, futile need to reach into the screen and hug the two ageing lead characters. So Long, My Son is an epic generational drama of two families in China, from the 1980s to the present day; directed and shot with clarity and calm, audaciously structured in terms of flashback and flashforward – and acted superbly.

This is a film that doesn't signpost its relevant facts very emphatically and you have to stay alert for shifts in the timeline, and for important details that are only revealed later. But, once you have mentally readjusted away from traditional linear expectations, this movie opens up like a flower.

It is about the terrible burden of grief, rage and guilt, and the greater burden of forgiveness; it is also about an emotional wound that only gets worse with the years. That wound has been inflicted on two levels: by the ordinary, arbitrary heartbreak of life and by the malign agencies of the Chinese state, with its draconian one-child policy to control population and boost economic growth, begun in the late 70s and not completely abandoned until 2015.

Liyun (Yong Mei) and Yaojun (Wang Jingchun) are an obedient, hardworking married couple in the big city with an eight-year-old boy Xingxing. Their best friends are fellow factory hands Haiyan (Liya Ai) and her husband, who have an eight-year-old son of their own, Haohao; their kids are best friends. But, when Liyun gets pregnant with an (illicit) second child, she discovers just how much of an apparatchik party-zealot her friend and neighbour Haiyan actually is. And then

Haohao boisterously chivvies and bullies Xingxing into going swimming at a dangerous reservoir, despite Xingxing's timid complaints that he can't swim. The catastrophic result (all the more painful for never being explicitly shown) inflicts a crippling psychic blow to all four adults and to Haohao, who is to grow up with a need to go into the medical profession and save lives.

As the new millennium dawns, fate provides a new twist to the suppressed guilt suffered by Haiyan and her family by making them wealthy in the new Chinese world of adventure. Meanwhile, wretched, lonely Liyun and Yaojun move away, to a remote coastal town where they adopt a boy, Xing (Roy Wang).

At the centre of the film are the wonderfully compassionate and tender performances from Yong Mei and Wang Jingchun as the ageing, lonely pair whose unexpressed agony, by the end of this film, feels unbearably intimate.

Apart from everything else, this film reveals a terrible, simple truth: those who have endured the terrible agony of losing a child are not a separate tribe. Their fate is arbitrary and they are just like us; our current happiness used to be theirs. So Long, My Son is a piercingly, profoundly moving picture that peels and exposes the senses.

After: **Peter Bradshaw**, *The Guardian*, 4 December 2019

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