

# Research on the Construction of Working Class Image and Spatial Narrative in "So Long, My Son"

Xiusong Ji

Cheongju University, 360764, Republic of Korea

## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the film "So Long, My Son" directed by Wang Xiaoshuai, examining the portrayal of the working class and its intrinsic connection to spatial narrative. By integrating spatial narratology and class criticism, the film is analyzed for how it presents the historical changes and identity transformations of the working class in China after the reform and opening up through specific spatial configurations and narrative strategies. The article highlights that "So Long, My Son" constructs a process of transformation in the image of workers from collectivism to individualism and from state narratives to family narratives through a three-tier spatial narrative structure of "factory-family-migration." It reveals the groundbreaking significance of "So Long, My Son" as a new worker film, offering a fresh perspective on class studies in contemporary Chinese cinema.

## KEYWORDS

"So Long, My Son"; Workers; Spatial narrative

## 1 Introduction

Directed by Wang Xiaoshuai, a leading figure of China's Sixth Generation directors, the film "So Long, My Son" was released in 2019. Spanning nearly three hours, the film encapsulates and highlights the significant changes in Chinese society over nearly three decades. Since his rise to fame, Wang Xiaoshuai has consistently focused on individual life experiences and social realities. His early works, such as "Days of Winter and Spring" and "The Bicycle of Seventeen," deeply reflect his humanistic concern for individuals and the underprivileged. His "Three Lines Trilogy" in Guizhou, among other works, explores the fate of individuals and the conflicts with history through unique regional settings and narrative structures. "So Long, My Son" continues this style, reflecting the grand era through the eyes of ordinary people: three families of ordinary workers are entangled by their children's accidents and social changes, with themes of losing a child, unemployment, betrayal, and forgiveness running throughout. Unlike traditional worker-themed films that reduce the working class to symbols in grand political narratives, "So Long, My Son" weaves the identity of workers into daily life, family emotions, and historical processes through their encounters, separations, and reunions across different times and spaces. The article will analyze the film's innovative narrative structure and spatial expression from three dimensions: social space, family space, and individual space, and explore the production of space and collectivity. The internal relationship between sociological propositions such as memory and class mobility. By creatively combining spatial narrative theory and social identity theory, it not only sorts out Wang Xiaoshuai's consistent image humanistic concern, but also provides a new interpretation perspective and theoretical framework for the new era worker-themed films.

## 2 Construction of the image of workers in "So Long, My Son"

### 2.1 From collective to individual: the transformation and reconstruction of worker identity

The film "So Long, My Son" spans nearly three decades, capturing the identity transformation of China's working class from a highly collectivized to an individualized state. In the film, factories are not only spaces for social identity confirmation but also symbols of power and collective norms. By depicting factory spaces such as dormitory buildings, workshops, and auditoriums, the film recreates the collective memory of state-owned enterprise workers in the 1970s and 1980s. Workers' identities are "normalized" and "shaped" through mechanisms like uniform work attire, broadcasts, and collective commendations and punishments, with obedience to superiors becoming a core aspect of identity. The corridors of dormitory buildings connect individual rooms, embodying a shared living atmosphere, while the private spaces behind closed doors quietly nurture personal emotions and secrets. As times change, workers have gradually shifted from being subjects of the national collective to ordinary individuals in society and families, with their former

sense of belonging and honor replaced by layoffs, reforms, and wandering. The film illustrates the familialization of the working class identity through changes in space and interpersonal relationships—from unit people dependent on the state and collective to social members centered on family and personal survival. When the old factory auditoriums and dormitory buildings decline, transform, or disappear, the former glory of their identity fades away, leaving workers to navigate in a fragmented world. Struggling to survive in the torrent of society, the pain and tenacity of individual fate are increasingly highlighted<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 2.2 Workers trauma narratives and political memory

The film delves into the multifaceted traumas endured by the working class during industrialization, weaving together collective and personal memories through a non-linear narrative of space and time. Over three decades of dramatic social changes, individuals face misfortunes such as losing their only child, being laid off, being expelled from the collective, and wandering alone, all intertwined with the grand historical narratives of the nation and factories. The Liu Yaohui and Wang Liyun family endures the pain of their sons drowning and family discord, where trauma is not just a fleeting emotional outburst but a persistent presence in their living spaces, intergenerational relationships, and camera movements. The shifting between past and present, along with images like factory announcements, old songs from dance halls, and large-scale meetings, serve as physical and psychological carriers of collective and individual memories. Director Wang Xiaoshuai uses a starkly cold lens language to layer *So Long, My Son* and *Silent Sorrow*, creating a simultaneous atmosphere of historical memory. This narrative of trauma is not just an individual story but a collective reality of Chinese workers who, despite being battered and bruised, persist tenaciously in the tide of history. The loss and numbness of individuals, and the silence and endurance of the group, intertwine and converge in the shifting spaces, collectively forming a profound sense of historical vicissitudes and life care.

## 2.3 Intergenerational differences in the image of workers

The film contrasts the images of the older and younger generations of workers to vividly depict the collective psychology and identity reconstruction after the disillusionment of idealism. The older generation, such as Liu Yaohua and his wife, grew up under the planned economy and state-owned enterprise system, enjoying a stable life and clear identity. Collectivism and the ideals of struggle once brought them great honor and comfort. However, when faced with factory reforms, layoffs, and family setbacks, their ideals and sense of security gradually erode, leaving them to endure tragedy with forbearance and kindness. In contrast, the younger generation, or the new generation, often find themselves in a state of ambiguous identity. Zhou Yongfu and others from this generation face the loss of family affection, doubts about self-worth, and social instability. Caught between a turbulent social environment and strained family relationships, they struggle to maintain the collective identity of their predecessors and find their roots in personal space. The generational gap, estrangement, reflection, and reconstruction highlight the transformation of the working class from collective people to rootless individuals and then to individual seekers since the reform and opening up. This also provides a deeper and more comprehensive portrayal of the fate of ordinary people in the context of China's structural social transformation<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 3 The inter-constructive relationship between spatial narrative and working group image

### 3.1 Factory space: from production center to memory place

In *"So Long, My Son,"* the factory space has transformed from a production hub into a place of memory. The film opens with a bustling scene from the early 1980s, where machines roar and workers are busy, symbolizing the nation's industrialization and the core of workers' identity. Over time, this space has become symbolic and a relic. When Liu Yaohui and Shen Yingming return to the factory years later, the once-thriving workshop is now an abandoned shell, with only weathered walls and discarded machinery remaining. The director captures the factory's desolation and decay through long shots and aerial views, transforming it into a symbol of collective memory. This transformation also marks a shift in emotional significance, as the factory is no longer just a production site but a vessel for the collective emotions and historical memories of the working class. Liu Yaohui searches for traces of the past in the abandoned factory, touching machine parts, which illustrates how the factory space has evolved from a physical entity into a repository of emotional memory, serving as a spiritual anchor for workers' identity.

### 3.2 Family space: class imprints in the private sphere

In "So Long, My Son," the family space serves as a microcosm of class identity, reflecting the lifestyle and values of the working class. The film's depiction of the dormitory buildings and the interiors of working-class homes, with their walls adorned with certificates, simple furniture, and uniform living spaces, serves as a material representation of the working class identity. These details highlight the collective and homogeneous nature of working-class families, reflecting the living conditions of the working class during a specific historical period. As the story unfolds, the family space also becomes a site where power and emotional relationships intersect. In Liu Yaohong's home, the traditional patriarchal structure mirrors the state power structure, with the father acting as the family decision-maker, embodying the authoritative role within the working-class household. However, the unexpected death of his son disrupts this order, transforming the family space into a place of grief and estrangement. Notably, the film illustrates the changing fate of the working class through the transformation of the family space, from collective dormitories to rental houses in coastal small towns, and finally to Liu Yaohong's return to his old home in the north, where the spatial changes reflect the evolution of the working class identity and the flow of emotions<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 3.3 Migration space: identity change in urban and rural mobility

The film *So Long, My Son* constructs a narrative framework of the transformation of workers' identities through spatial migration. The film's narrative is dual, encompassing geographical and social mobility. Liu Yaohong's journey from a northern industrial city to a southern coastal city represents not only a change in location but also a shift from being a state worker to an individual market participant. This narrative unfolds through scenes of travel by train, car, and ship, creating an aesthetic of being on the road. In particular, the train, which connects the north and south, serves as both a geographical link and a symbol of time's passage, becoming a significant image that embodies the fluidity of workers. The journey space in the film acts as a metaphor for identity transition, with the characters' conversations, silences, and gazes during their travels hinting at their transitional state of identity. Notably, the reunion between Liu Yaohong and Shen Yingming at the end of the film is a spiritual and spatial return home. Through this migration process, the two old workers reconcile with their past both physically and psychologically. Thus, the space of migration is not just a backdrop for the narrative but also a symbolic domain where the workers' identities are redefined in the context of social change.

## 4 Spatial narrative strategies in time dimensions

### 4.1 Space-time compression: the spatial presentation of social changes in the past 30 years

"So Long, My Son" spans over three decades, skillfully weaving personal destinies with the sweeping changes of the era. By compressing time and space, it makes the abstract shifts in the times tangible and perceptible. The opening factory scene, typical of China's industrialization wave in the 1980s, features roaring machines and collective labor, symbolizing the pride and unity of the working class under the planned economy. As the story progresses, the spatial settings rapidly transform: from the dormitory buildings, schools, and old factories, to the shabby rental houses, noisy markets, and modern streets of southern coastal cities. This transformation not only highlights the identity changes of families and the protagonist but also links the significant transformations in Chinese society, economy, and class structure over nearly three decades through vivid imagery. The director achieves a juxtaposition of temporal and spatial changes by placing different historical spaces within the same narrative sequence, thereby spatially expressing the historical process. This allows the audience to truly experience the shifting fates of individuals and groups amidst the surging tide of the times<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 4.2 Circulation and linearity: innovation of narrative structure in time and space

In terms of its narrative structure, *So Long, My Son* innovatively combines cyclical and linear elements —. The film employs a non-linear narrative rhythm, weaving together past and present, using the concept of returning to space to create a cycle of memory and reconciliation. For instance, Liu Yaohong and Shen Yingming repeatedly revisit abandoned factories and old residences at various points in time and space, from specific rooms to entire urban areas, experiencing a journey that seems to loop back to the starting point. This cyclical structure not only highlights the workers' fated and repetitive lives but also underscores the fundamental role of space in shaping personal identity and emotions. However, this superficial cycle does not alter the unidirectional nature of history and destiny. Just as the factory's prosperity fades

and family dreams are lost, each spatial return is accompanied by an irreversible sense of sorrow and loss. The director uses the tension between spatial return and linear progression to metaphorically convey the workers classs irreversible fate, thereby deepening the storys historical depth and aesthetic impact. The integration of cyclical and linear elements turns space into a multidimensional domain that embodies the sense of destiny and historical scars, achieving structural innovation and enriching the narrative of workers life experiences.

## 5 Conclusion

As an epic realist film, "So Long, My Son" uses space as a central axis to vividly depict the identity changes and emotional transformations of Chinas working class amidst significant social changes. By exploring the transformations in spaces such as factories, homes, and migration, the film transforms grand historical processes into the everyday experiences of ordinary people. It not only reflects the evolution of social structures and the spirit of the times but also illustrates how individuals find their place and identity through spatial mobility. The director skillfully employs techniques like time-space compression, spatial memory, and narrative loops, using space as a medium to tightly link collective memories, personal destinies, and historical narratives. With a gentle yet profound touch, "So Long, My Son" offers a collective lamentation of the fate of the working class, the changes of the era, and the dignity of human nature. It also prompts the audience to reconsider the complex and profound relationships between individuals and society, and between memory and reality, through the interplay of different levels of time and space.

## References

- [1] Wang Shiyi, Analysis of the Lens Language of the Film "So Long, My Son": The Narrative of Character Growth under the Shadow of Chinas Times [J], Times Report (Bengluo).2022,(10),41-43.
- [2] Qu Pengcheng, Yang Li. Narrative Strategy Analysis of the Movie "So Long, My Son " [J]. Comedy World (Lower Half Month). 2023,(3),133-135.
- [3] Li Jinzhe, On the Ecological Implications of Wang Xiaobos Early Novels —— Taking "Eternal Love" as an Example [J], Popular Literature and Art.2024,(4),24-26.
- [4] Ying Qun,Group, Field, Situation and Dilemma —— Spatial Narrative Analysis of the Film "So Long, My Son" [J], Beauty and Times (Part II).2024, (4),138-144.