

THE CHILDREN OF HUANG SHI

A Sony Pictures Classics Release

Directed by Roger Spottiswoode

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A film review by Franco P. Visser

George Aylwin Hogg (played by Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), a young adventurer and independent reporter for Associated Press arrived in Shanghai China in January 1938 after travelling to Japan with his aunt, Muriel Lester, a well-known pacifist and personal friend of Mohandas Gandhi. This was the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and Hogg assisted an Australian Red Cross aid worker, Lee Pearson (played by Radha Mitchell), in smuggling food and medicine to the Chinese people. It was in Nanjing that Hogg witnessed and photographed the atrocities committed by the Japanese against the Chinese people, and for this he was captured and nearly beheaded. Hogg is rescued by a Chinese revolutionary, General Nie Rongzhen (played by Chow Yun-Fat) and he then travels to Shaanxi where he involves himself in a forgotten and dilapidated orphanage.

Hogg transformed the orphanage and the lives of the 60 boys who called the facility home. The lice-infested facility became a safe and nurturing environment for the children and Hogg even attended to their health needs. He also stepped in as teacher and mentor to the boys, doing everything possible in his power to obtain the necessary food, medicine and books in order for the boys to grow and develop out of their impoverished and isolating circumstances.

The advancing Imperial Japanese Army and the subsequent interest of the Chinese Nationalists in recruiting the boys of the orphanage into the war effort against the Japanese caused Hogg to attempt a major and epic relocation of the boys in 1944 to Shandan in the far north Gansu Province. Shandan sits on the edge of the vast Gobi desert, miles away from any threat and possible interference in the lives of Hogg and the boys. The journey was started in the dead of night so as to avoid possible detection by the Chinese authorities, and Hogg, Pearson, along with General Rongzhen and the children completed the 1,100 kilometre journey mainly on foot in a total of 5 months. Friendly individuals in Lanzhou, about 380 kilometres from Shandan, rented six trucks to Hogg to complete their voyage. In Shandan a friend of Hogg rented an abandoned Buddhist temple which was turned into living quarters, a classroom and workshops with Hogg being appointed as Headmaster of the new facility.



The Children of Huang Shi, also known as The Bitter Sea and The Children of the Silk Road, was released in 2008 and so in that sense it is not a current movie. However, the issues raised by the film are significant. Notwithstanding technological and scientific advancement, discrimination, war and flagrant abuse by one nation of another remain. The film has a rather tragic and sorrowful end which I leave up to the viewer to discover. Hogg remains a national hero in the Chinese culture for saving the lives of those 60 boys.

The Second Sino-Japanese War is famous for the 'rape of Nanjing / Nanking' in which mass murder, rape and plundering of the city took place by the advancing Imperial Japanese Army. To this day the 'rape of Nanjing / Nanking' remains a contentious political

issue between China and Japan, and many Chinese citizens hold Japan's former Emperor Hirohito to blame for the atrocities committed. The complex Japanese political system on the other hand remains firm in their view that this specific event was greatly exaggerated. This has had dire consequences not only for Chinese-Japanese relations, but also for Japanese relations with South Korea and the Philippines. Many millions of people lost their lives in the Sino-Japanese War, although Japan would not confirm the estimate given by the Chinese authorities during the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal and other post-war investigations. The culmination of Japan's conflict with the world followed the infamous Pearl Harbour attack in 1941 – during World War II – and the two atom bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, after which Japan surrendered.

The film leaves the viewer inspired to be and to do more in life, to explore and investigate the past- not as stumbling blocks for the future, but as valuable learning opportunities to prevent history from repeating itself. We can do more, and we can be more, especially towards those individuals in need, and to those who are less fortunate than we, as Hogg and his friends proved in this epic story. After the film ends, short testimonial vignettes from some of the actual orphans saved by Hogg at the time are given, and from these the actual impact of Hogg's actions becomes clear. The film is brilliantly made, and the cinematography is outstanding. It is worth every minute of viewing.