



Shi-Kai (Guang Li) glowers at George Hogg (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) in *The Children of Huang Shi*

Another Incredible Journey

A fascinating story, but an ordinary film

THE CHILDREN OF HUANG SHI:

Directed by Roger Spottiswoode. Written by James McManus and Jane Hawksley. Cinematography, Zhao Xiaoding. Music, David Hirschfelder. Starring Jonathan Rhys Meyers, Radha Mitchell, Chow Yun-Fat and Michelle Yeoh. Sony Pictures Classics, 2008. R. 125 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

If you were to read a movie summary about a young Englishman who led 60-odd Chinese children to safety in war-torn China in the late 1930s, what sort of movie would you imagine? A sort of child-heavy *Painted Veil*, perhaps? A movie rich with landscapes and lighting, with connections being made through language barriers and cultural differences as one Westerner's eyes are opened?

The Children of Huang Shi is just the movie I expected it to be. It's beautifully filmed (by *House of Flying Daggers* cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding), capably acted and slightly tedious, in a good-hearted, well-meant sort of way. At its center is the adapted-from-real-life story of George Hogg (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), an English journalist who, in 1938, leaves Shanghai for Nanjing, where he expects he'll find the real stories of China's conflict with the Japanese. Naturally, he finds much more — and more than the Japanese wanted anyone to see. A timely appearance by Jack Chen (Chow Yun-Fat) saves Hogg from an unpleasant fate, but when Hogg is wounded, Chen and a pretty blonde nurse, Lee (Radha Mitchell, her accent fluctuating), pack him off to a place called Huang Shi to recuperate (and work on his Chinese). There, he finds not a tidy English school but an empty building occupied by dirty, ragged, orphaned boys with no respect for this still faintly arrogant arrival.

Hogg's naïveté is by this point a bit inexplicable, but it serves to make his inevitable transformation a bit more dramatic, and this movie does enjoy the dramatic. Likable and confident, Chen likes to blow things up; Lee comes and goes from Huang Shi as she pleases, alternating between a terse, slightly fatalistic attitude

and a few quieter moments in which she gradually becomes closer to Hogg. Their attraction is believable, if convenient; equally convenient but less believable is Hogg's boundless knowledge of, well, everything needed to turn Huang Shi into a decent place to live, and to help the boys grow from rebellious hellions to willing students and farmers. He fixes the building's electricity, teaches the kids English and basketball and barbers with Madame Wang (a regal Michelle Yeoh) for seeds by proving to her that he knows what's what in a dish of grains (he does accept guidance from two of the kids regarding his planting methods). And as the Japanese creep closer, Hogg devises a plan to lead the children to safety — 700 miles away.

Despite the title, *The Children of Huang Shi*'s point is one we've seen time and again in other narratives: George Hogg's shift from mildly opportunistic journalist to idealist, from one who watches to one who acts for the good of others. The children, though they inspire such a change, are types rather than characters. There's Shi-Kai (Guang Li), who's been through so much he may be unreachable; Ching (Naihan Yang), who first inspires Hogg to teach; and the quartet of brothers whom Hogg rescues after a bombing. (Over the credits, surviving men from Huang Shi speak about George Hogg, and it's frustrating not to know which children, in the film, represented which of these survivors.) And while Hogg is an interesting and admirable figure, his story here simply feels streamlined for ease of telling. As always, there's more to it than this. But what there is onscreen, as Ella Taylor so aptly put it in *L.A. Weekly*, is "a tale as ploddingly familiar as it is good-looking and worth telling." It won't inspire any life-changing feelings in your gut — other than perhaps a desire to visit some of the locations — but it won't leave a bad taste in your mouth, either. **CW**

The Children of Huang Shi opens Friday, Aug. 8, at the Bijou.



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