

Interview: Director Roger Spottiswoode Captures Spirit of China’s Past in ‘The Children of Huang Shi’

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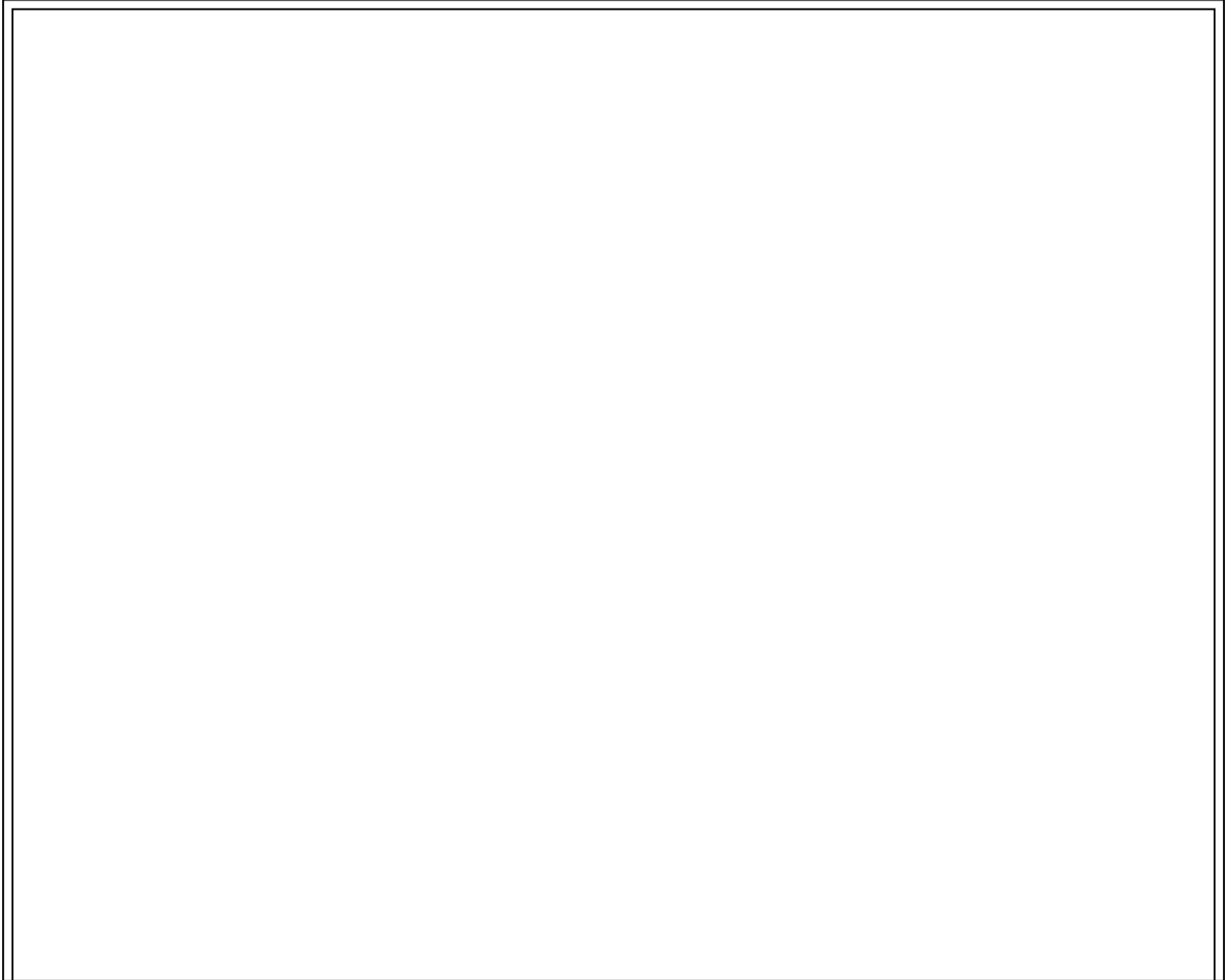
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- [George Hogg](#) [3]
- [Hero](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [House of Flying Daggers](#) [6]
- [Interview](#) [7]
- [Jonathan Rhys Meyers](#) [8]
- [Melinda and Melinda](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [Radha Mitchell](#) [11]
- [Roger Spottiswoode](#) [12]
- [The Children of Huang Shi](#) [13]
- [Xin Min Huang](#) [14]

CHICAGO – The second Chinese/Japanese war, which was a [1937 prelude](#) [15] to the great conflict of World War II, is notable today mostly because modern China rose from its ashes. Largely forgotten except for the survivors, it is a backdrop for “The Children of Huang Shi,” which is a new film from veteran director Roger Spottiswoode.



HollywoodChicago.com recently interviewed Spottiswoode to speak about the challenges of Chinese location and period shooting along with his admiration for the real-life legacy of his main character: George Hogg.

“I thought George Hogg was a fascinating character. He was very young to come to China after having been through Japan,” Spottiswoode said. “He then becomes ingrained in China and bumps into these orphans. But he doesn’t necessarily want that life.”





"The Children of Huang Shi" director Roger Spottiswoode in Chicago on May 23, 2008.

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

Portrayed by Jonathan Rhys Meyers, Hogg was part of a famous pacifist family. When he was 22 years old and after traveling through the U.S. and Japan, he worked as a reporter in China in 1938. He was caught in Shanghai at the apex of the war, which led to an orphanage full of abandoned children.



Chow Yun-Fat (left) as Jack Chen and Jonathan Rhys Meyers (right) as George Hogg in "The Children of Huang Shi".

Photo credit: Zhu Jiale, Ming Productions for Sony Pictures Classics

"He could have gone back to England – back to the society he could fit into," Spottiswoode related, "but in being stuck with these children, he made their lives his life. He stayed with it and changed their lives. There is a lot to be said that we all can make a difference if we choose to do so."

Along with fellow westerner Lee Pearson (Radha Mitchell from "Melinda and Melinda") – who is a self-taught medical practitioner – Hogg establishes a British-style school system in the orphanage and protects the children from the outside forces in the war. The film also features Chow Yun-Fat.

When these events catch up to and threaten the orphans, he packs them up for a several thousand-mile journey over the old [Silk Road](#) [16]. "The Children of Huang Shi" is a period piece that's filmed on location with a mostly Chinese crew. Spottiswoode related how an insider

made a difference in finding the right look for 1930s China.



Guang Li (left) as Shi Kai and Jonathan Rhys Meyers (right) as George Hogg in "The Children of Huang Shi".
Photo credit: Zhu Jiale, Ming Productions for Sony Pictures Classics

"Our art director, Xin Min Huang, worked on 'Hero' and 'House of Flying Daggers'. He had been all over China," Spottiswoode said.

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He added: "Finding the past is difficult in China because it got destroyed in the war and during the Cultural Revolution. But he helped us find these places. They were hard to find and they were very, very remote. Finding the past is very hard in China."

Unfortunately, the film focuses on the love story between Pearson and Hogg, which diminishes the impact of the orphanage work and journey. There's a feeling of skimming the surface of a true story that would be better served by being grittier or more challenging.

As well, the narrative deserves more than an obvious and improbable love story between two good-looking movie stars. That awareness seemed apparent as the director summed up his experience with the film.

"These kids – now grown – are still alive and still honor George Hogg," Spottiswoode said. "He didn't pick up a gun and he didn't win a war, but he still did something extraordinarily good. I think it's useful to remember that there is a way to change the world piece by piece. If you find something you can do, just do it. It will make a difference."

"The Children of Huang Shi" opened on June 6, 2008. The film is playing at Landmark's Century Centre Cinema in Chicago, Landmark's Renaissance Place Cinema in Highland Park, Ill. and Cinemark's CinéArts in Evanston, Ill.



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