

“Children of the Silk Road”

This film purports to be an account of George Hogg’s brief time in China. Although the film has considerable merit in showing war-time China, the true story of George Hogg’s eight year sojourn (1937-45) is somewhat different from the film’s fictionalised version.

After graduating from Oxford University, the young Hogg went to China on a round-the-world tour with his pacifist aunt Muriel Lester, but was so impressed with the struggle in China that he decided to stay and become a war correspondent. Having visited Yan’an (the war-time communist HQ), he went on to Wuhan, where he met Rewi Alley. He expressed an interest in working for the Gung Ho Co-operative Movement, and Rewi encouraged him.

At that time, the Gung Ho Co-operative movement was supported by an international committee in Hong Kong whose secretary was Professor Chen Hanseng (Jack Chen in the film, who rescues Hogg from certain death in Nanjing). Chen may well have visited Baoji but was not involved with George Hogg then or later.

Hogg went back to Japanese-occupied Shanghai, thence to Beiping (now Beijing). On a journey to join the Eighth Route Army in the Taihang Mountains, he caught typhus and would have died had he not by chance met Kathleen Hall and been nursed for six weeks in her village clinic at Songjiazhuang. Then he continued his journey.

From Yan’an, Hogg went on to Baoji, the northwestern HQ of Gung Ho, where he accepted an unpaid position writing press releases about the movement. Rewi then invited him to become headmaster of the Bailie School he (not an American nurse!) had established in the nearby village of Shuangshipu (not Huangshi, as in the film, and not an orphanage but a school to train co-op leaders). While there, Hogg accepted responsibility for the four Nie brothers, whose father was at Yan’an when their mother died of cancer in Baoji. He took them from an orphanage in Baoji to the Bailie School in Shuangshipu.

In 1944, the school was under such pressure from the corrupt Kuomintang government that Rewi (not Hogg) decided to move to the remote town of Shandan on the Gobi Desert. Hogg led sixty boys and all the equipment on a 500-mile trek to Lanzhou, thence by truck to Shandan, where Rewi had already set up the school in an abandoned Buddhist temple. Several months later, Hogg stubbed his toe in a basketball game and died of tetanus, the anti-tetanus serum arriving from Lanzhou the following day. Rewi Alley accepted responsibility for the four Nie Brothers until they were re-united with their father after the war.

While the film is full of historical inaccuracies about Hogg’s life, its portrayal of wartime China and Hogg’s courageous actions are quite accurate. Accounts of his time in China are available in Rewi Alley’s biography of Hogg *Fruition, The Story of George Alwin Hogg* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1967) and in Hogg’s own book, *I See a New China* (London: Little Brown, 1945), as well as in the two biographies and autobiography of Alley and the two books by Alley about the Shandan Bailie School (*You Banfa* and *Shandan*).