

REVIEW

Dead to Rights 南京照相馆 Review: Shen Ao’s Bleak and Moving Nanjing Massacre-Set Anti-War Drama

📅 August 28, 2025 👤 Casey



Shen Ao's much-anticipated follow-up to **No More Bets** sees the co-writer and director going back in time in **Dead to Rights**. More specifically, the bleak period of the Nanjing Massacre during the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. But instead of recounting the true events through the eyes of a soldier, Shen Ao sets his sights on how the Chinese civilians play their significant parts in turning things around.

Among them is A Chang (**Liu Haoran**), a postal worker who finds himself caught in the middle of the war as the Imperial Japanese army invades Nanjing. His life is spared from execution after he decides to pretend to be a photo technician. The reason? One of the high-ranking Japanese officers, Hideo Ito (Daichi Harashima), happens to be the photographer responsible for taking selective pictures for propaganda purposes. And coincidentally, he lacks the practical knowledge of developing films, making A Chang an important person to help him do so.

The latter, who claims to be an employee working at the Jixiang Photo Studio, has to improvise on his part to avoid suspicion. Thankfully, he's a quick learner, thanks to the guidance of the photo studio owner Jin Chengzong (Wang Xiao), who's been hiding underneath with his family. Upon developing the photos in the dark room, they uncover images of horrifying details, including rape and war violence caused by the cruelty of the Japanese army. But such photos of atrocities cannot be released at all costs, and despite the strict orders coming from Ito's superiors, they manage to find ways to secretly copy these images to be used as photographic evidence someday.

Shen Ao relies heavily on the power of suggestion associated with the Nanjing Massacre. Rapes are implied, while the violence against the Chinese soldiers and civilians is mostly depicted in a restrained manner. Viewers still get to witness the graphic horrors of a mass execution, and at one point, an uncomfortable scene revolving around an infant child. Here, Ao's matter-of-fact, yet clinical direction portrays these moments of monstrosity with none of the gratuitous or exploitative visual style.

A war movie like this tends to get jingoistic to appease the Chinese censors, and while **Dead to Rights** can't escape from such an obligatory inclusion, kudos to Ao for not overwhelming it to the point of ad nauseam. The movie is consistently engaging with all the emotional and dramatic resonance intact, as ordinary citizens like A Chang's selfless sacrifice in helping others in need, while maintaining his composure when it comes to dealing with Ito.

While Haoran deserves credit for his earnest portrayal as A Chang, it was Daichi Harashima who excels the most as Hideo Ito. Beneath his seemingly lesser-evil portrayal of a Japanese officer and photographer, who claims he and A Chang are friends, lies a cloak of malevolence hidden deep within his facade. His gradual descent to unveiling his true colours is unnerving, but he does so without falling prey to chewing the scenery.

The movie also benefits from strong supporting roles, notably Wang Chuan-Jun as Wang Guanghai, whose vital translation skills give him the leverage of making a deal with the Japanese. But beyond his opportunistic trait, which seems to care for his own survival and his loved ones, he still sided with his fellow citizens on some occasions.

Technically speaking, **Dead to Rights** excels in its atmospheric cinematography along with the evocative sound design and Ao's astute sense of buildup tension. The latter is especially true with the elaborate sequence revolving around the all-important passes to cross over the border safely. Ao is equally adept at blending stark metaphors, like how a camera can be as important as a rifle during the latter part of the movie. Whereas the rifle is mainly used as a threat and an execution for killing a person, the camera represents the contrasting weaponisation of a tool to capture and expose one's hideous act to the world.



- August 2025 (18)
- July 2025 (17)
- June 2025 (25)
- April 2025 (26)
- March 2025 (25)
- February 2025 (12)
- January 2025 (18)
- December 2024 (26)
- November 2024 (25)
- October 2024 (30)
- September 2024 (22)
- August 2024 (23)
- July 2024 (26)
- June 2024 (19)
- May 2024 (18)
- April 2024 (11)
- March 2024 (6)
- January 2024 (6)
- December 2023 (15)
- November 2023 (9)
- October 2023 (15)
- September 2023 (10)
- August 2023 (7)
- July 2023 (9)
- June 2023 (6)
- May 2023 (8)
- April 2023 (13)
- March 2023 (7)
- February 2023 (7)
- January 2023 (4)
- December 2022 (13)
- November 2022 (13)
- October 2022 (16)
- September 2022 (11)
- August 2022 (10)
- July 2022 (5)
- June 2022 (9)
- May 2022 (4)
- April 2022 (4)
- March 2022 (7)
- February 2022 (5)
- January 2022 (5)
- December 2021 (6)
- November 2021 (7)
- October 2021 (9)
- September 2021 (4)
- August 2021 (2)
- July 2021 (10)
- June 2021 (13)
- May 2021 (11)
- April 2021 (14)
- March 2021 (10)
- February 2021 (7)
- January 2021 (5)
- December 2020 (10)
- November 2020 (8)
- October 2020 (4)
- September 2020 (6)
- August 2020 (4)
- July 2020 (6)
- June 2020 (5)
- May 2020 (4)
- April 2020 (4)
- March 2020 (6)
- February 2020 (9)
- January 2020 (5)
- December 2019 (14)
- November 2019 (9)
- October 2019 (10)
- September 2019 (9)
- August 2019 (8)
- July 2019 (6)
- June 2019 (7)
- May 2019 (8)
- April 2019 (9)
- March 2019 (5)
- February 2019 (6)
- January 2019 (7)
- December 2018 (14)
- November 2018 (10)
- October 2018 (10)
- September 2018 (8)
- August 2018 (9)
- July 2018 (7)
- June 2018 (5)
- May 2018 (6)
- April 2018 (6)
- March 2018 (8)
- February 2018 (11)
- January 2018 (5)
- December 2017 (11)
- November 2017 (11)
- October 2017 (9)
- September 2017 (2)
- August 2017 (3)
- July 2017 (2)
- June 2017 (1)
- May 2017 (3)
- April 2017 (2)
- March 2017 (2)
- February 2017 (1)
- January 2017 (4)
- November 2016 (1)
- October 2016 (2)
- September 2016 (2)
- August 2016 (2)
- July 2016 (1)
- June 2016 (1)
- May 2016 (1)
- January 2016 (2)
- August 2015 (1)
- July 2015 (1)
- October 2014 (1)
- September 2014 (1)
- May 2014 (2)
- April 2014 (1)
- February 2014 (1)
- December 2013 (1)
- July 2013 (1)
- June 2011 (1)
- May 2011 (1)

Discover more

🔗 [Online movie streaming services](#)

🔗 [No More Bets](#)

🔗 [Nanjing](#)

🔗 [南京照相馆](#)

🔗 [Dead to Rights](#)

🔗 [Queer](#)

🔗 [Sicario](#)

🔗 [Evil Dead Rise \(2023\)](#)

🔗 [Valley of the Shadow of Death](#)