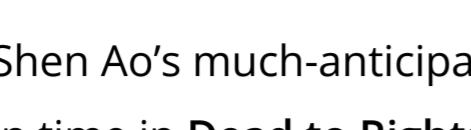


REVIEW

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

August 28, 2025 by 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.



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