Original Article

Facts, Modes, and Narrative:
The Cross-Cultural Circulation of Dead to Rights

Rong Zhenghao

School of Foreign Languages, Nanjing Medical University, Nanjing, China.

Corresponding Author : Veblen@njmu.edu.cn

Abstract - The film Dead to Rights, which dramatizes the factual history of the Nanjing Massacre and highlights civilian efforts to preserve evidence of atrocities, has garnered significant international dissemination and critical acclaim. Adopting a cross-cultural communication perspective, this article investigates the internal mechanisms underpinning the film's successful global reception. The analysis is structured across three interconnected dimensions: the historical, the modal, and the narrative. Firstly, the historical dimension examines how narrative credibility is constructed through the multi-source archival cross-verification of historical facts. Secondly, the modal dimension analyzes the film's multimodal construction, focusing on the synergistic coupling of visual, auditory, and textual elements. Finally, the narrative dimension explores how narrative structure, perspective, and dissemination strategies facilitate the transformation from individual to public memory. These dimensions operate synergistically, not only enhancing the evidentiary force of the film's historical materials but also expanding the cognitive and affective pathways through which international audiences engage with the film. This integrated approach enables Dead to Rights to transcend cultural barriers and effectively promote global communication of a pivotal historical event, thereby offering valuable insights into China's narrative practices for international dissemination.

Keywords - Dead to Rights, Historical Facts, Narrative Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Cross-cultural Communication.

1. Introduction

The film *Dead to Rights*, released in 2025, is a cinematic adaptation of the Nanjing Massacre, a historical event of profound significance. The film specifically draws upon the true account of Luo Jin and Wu Xuan's courageous efforts to safeguard the photographic negative known as "Jing No. 1," focusing on the perilous endeavors of civilians in a 1937 photo studio to preserve irrefutable evidence of Japanese army atrocities. The film's rigorous adherence to original footage and archival materials, coupled with its refined narrative structure, sophisticated audiovisual language, and serious engagement with historical ethics, has earned it widespread critical acclaim and extensive dissemination both domestically and internationally. The success of *Dead to Rights* is not fortuitous; it emerges within a contemporary global context characterized by an increasing imperative for historical memory reconstruction and cross-cultural dialogue.

Despite the historical gravity of the Nanjing Massacre, international awareness and understanding of this event remain uneven, often complicated by areas of dispute and ambiguity. In this challenging landscape, the creative team behind *Dead to Rights* faced a dual imperative: to uphold historical veracity and preserve the integrity of national

memory, while simultaneously crafting an artistic language capable of transcending cultural barriers and fostering broad empathy. This creative process itself constitutes a highly demanding exercise in cross-cultural communication. The film's successful reception underscores a critical insight: for historical audiovisual works to achieve effective global dissemination, they must meticulously balance historical authenticity with artistic expression. This necessitates not only ensuring factual accuracy but also strategically employing narrative techniques and cultivating emotional resonance. Such a balance is pivotal, influencing not only the artistic merit of the work but also its potential for international impact and cultural influence.

Existing scholarship has extensively explored the Nanjing Massacre from historical, sociological, and political perspectives (Sun, 1990; Chang, 1997). Furthermore, studies on cinematic representations of historical trauma have analyzed various narrative strategies and their reception (Rosenstone, 1995; White, 1987). However, a discernible gap persists in the comprehensive analysis of how a film, particularly one addressing a sensitive historical event like the Nanjing Massacre, leverages multimodal discourse and narrative strategies to achieve successful cross-cultural

communication. While post-classical narratology emphasizes the multimediality of narrative and the open generation of meaning, focusing on how diverse semiotic resources in non-verbal media collaboratively construct narrative (Ryan, 2015), there is a paucity of research that systematically applies these theoretical frameworks to a specific case study like *Dead to Rights* to dissect its cross-cultural communicative efficacy. Specifically, the interplay between factual verification, multimodal representation, and narrative transformation in facilitating the global reception of traumatic historical memory remains underexplored.

This article addresses this research lacuna by examining *Dead to Rights* as a compelling exemplar of cross-media narrative theory. Its dissemination success is posited to stem from the organic integration of three critical dimensions: the historical dimension, which establishes a credible narrative foundation through archival evidence; the modal dimension, which employs multimodal coupling to convey both emotion and evidence; and the narrative dimension, which, through perspective, structure, and strategy, facilitates the cross-cultural transformation of traumatic individual memory into collective public memory. This study aims to achieve several objectives: (1) to delineate the concrete strategies and underlying logic employed by *Dead to Rights* within each of these three dimensions; (2) to analyze how these elements are fused into an effective cross-cultural communication paradigm; and (3) to provide theoretical reflections and practical paradigms for Chinese historical films aspiring to achieve international recognition. Beyond its specific case study, this research also offers a novel perspective for the advancement of cross-cultural communication theory by identifying generalizable patterns that can inform the creation and dissemination of other similar subjects. The subsequent sections of this article will systematically explore these dimensions, culminating in a comprehensive understanding of the film's profound impact.

2. The Historical Dimension: Factual Construction and Narrative Credibility

In the realm of cross-cultural communication, particularly when engaging with historical events as politically charged and narratively contested as the Nanjing Massacre, the establishment of authenticity and credibility forms the bedrock for audience acceptance and serves as a potent instrument against entrenched biases. The transformation of disparate, and occasionally conflicting, archival materials into coherent "textual events" marked by clear narrative trajectories and temporal anchors is thus paramount for facilitating public, especially international public, comprehension and engagement with history. The Nanjing Massacre, a profoundly tragic chapter of World War II, resulted in an estimated 300,000 fatalities, an atrocity that reverberated globally (Sun, 1990). However, the international landscape of awareness and depth of understanding regarding

this historical catastrophe remains disparate. Consequently, a primary challenge confronting the creators of *Dead to Rights* was to imbue its narrative with unquestionable historical authority. The film adeptly navigates this challenge by meticulously constructing a multi-sourced, mutually corroborative, and traceable evidentiary network. This network encompasses not only the diaries of key international figures such as John Rabe, chairman of the Nanking Safety Zone International Committee, and Minnie Vautrin, principal of Ginling Women's College, alongside visual documentation by individuals like Reverend John Magee, but also, through sophisticated narrative design, transmutes these static "historical sources" into dynamic "narrative resources." These resources fulfill multifaceted functions within the film, including driving plot progression, shaping character development, and generating profound meaning. This strategic conversion of historical archives into narrative assets not only augments the film's perceived authenticity but also significantly enhances its persuasive and affective power in cross-cultural dissemination.

2.1. John Rabe's Diary: A Third-Party Credibility Anchor

John Rabe's diary occupies a pivotal position within the film's evidentiary framework, possessing singular narrational value. Its indisputable evidentiary weight stems not only from Rabe's unique status as the head of the Nanking Safety Zone but also from the immediacy and granular detail of its entries, spanning from December 13, 1937, to February 1938 (Rabe, 2024). The diary functions as a real-time, firsthand lens, meticulously documenting the Japanese army's organized and systematic sweeps, massacres, and acts of sexual violence. Archival research corroborates that Japanese forces established positions across Nanjing city and its environs, perpetrating atrocities that led to a complete societal collapse (Chang, 1997). Rabe's records transcend a mere enumeration of data; they are replete with concrete descriptions of specific times, locations, individuals, and events—such as the experiences of particular refugees and detailed accounts of various modes of Japanese atrocities. These granular details provide a rich tapestry of source material for the film's screenwriters.

Within *Dead to Rights*, excerpts from Rabe's diary are frequently integrated into the narrative, either through direct quotation by characters or by visually reenacting the events it chronicles. This narrative technique transforms a historical document from a distant text into an intrinsic element that propels plot development and elucidates character motivations. Crucially, Rabe, as a German national and citizen of an Axis power allied with Japan at the time, inherently possesses a unique "third-party" credibility in cross-cultural discourse. His meticulously recorded observations serve to neutralize presumptive doubts regarding a "Chinese one-sided narrative," thereby enhancing the propensity of international audiences to accept the historical portrayal presented by the film. The international perspective and ostensibly objective

stance embedded within Rabe's diary are instrumental in fostering greater trust and understanding in cross-cultural dissemination, a significant factor contributing to the film's extensive international influence.

Furthermore, the stringent internal "press censorship" mechanisms enforced by the Japanese army, which often labeled photographs and texts depicting atrocities as "not permitted," render the images and written evidence that fortuitously emerged or were preserved exceptionally precious (Chang, 1997). This historical context itself contributes to the film's narrative tension. The photographic negatives that the protagonists risk their lives to preserve in *Dead to Rights* represent a tangible act of resistance against this "erasure of memory." Rabe's practice of juxtaposing text and images to preserve his observations inherently underscores the necessity of multi-source corroboration. Analyzing Rabe's diary as a "textual event" necessitates not only focusing on its recorded content but also tracing its transmission, translation, and reinterpretation across various media—text, photographs, and film. By reenacting Rabe's acts of documentation and their content, the film ingeniously immerses viewers in the historical milieu, fostering a sense of witnessing the generation and preservation of evidence, thereby significantly augmenting narrative credibility. This integration of historical evidence into the narrative process not only elevates the film's artistic value but also reinforces its function as a historical witness, facilitating deeper emotional resonance and identification among audiences.

2.2. Minnie Vautrin's Diary: Micro-Narratives of Humanitarian Resilience

Complementing Rabe's macroscopic observations, Minnie Vautrin's diary offers a distinctive female perspective, detailing concrete rescue efforts and thereby enriching the micro-level and emotional dimensions of the historical event. Vautrin, as the principal of Ginling Women's College, provided sanctuary to a substantial number of women and children. Her diary meticulously chronicles the daily lives of these refugees, their psychological states, the pervasive dangers they confronted, and the concerted relief efforts undertaken by international humanitarian organizations (Minnie, 2024). These records are imbued with a profound concern for individual fates, vividly illustrating the enduring resilience of human dignity amidst extreme violence. Integrating Vautrin's writings into the "textual event" analytical framework facilitates a deeper understanding of how *Dead to Rights* portrays networks of rescue and mutual aid among individuals during wartime.

For instance, the film judiciously draws upon specific details from Vautrin's diary—such as strategies for protecting women from assault, methods for procuring essential supplies, and negotiations with Japanese forces—to sculpt compelling female characters or construct episodes of heightened narrative tension. This fact-based micro-narrative approach transforms the grand historical tragedy into perceptible, relatable life stories, thereby more readily eliciting cross-cultural audience empathy.

Vautrin's perspective not only enriches the multifaceted layers of historical narration but also underscores the universal value of the international humanitarian spirit in the face of catastrophe, a theme inherently capable of resonating across diverse cultural contexts. Through the lens of Vautrin's diary, *Dead to Rights* effectively illuminates the glimmer of humanity that persists even in the darkest hours of war. This balanced narrative strategy allows audiences to confront the historical tragedy while simultaneously perceiving hope and strength, significantly enhancing the film's cross-cultural acceptability.

2.3. Visual Documentation: Evidentiary Force and Critical Engagement

The visual materials captured by figures such as George Fitch and John Magee, often at great personal risk, provided *Dead to Rights* with some of its most direct and profoundly impactful visual evidence (Liu, 2016). These dynamic and static images serve as potent instruments for revealing historical truth. However, the inherent nature of images also carries risks of misinterpretation or contestation, stemming from issues such as uncertain provenance, ambiguous contextualization, or potential manipulation. Consequently, in its utilization of these critical visual documents, *Dead to Rights* meticulously situates them within an intricate inter-evidentiary network, comprising textual archives, oral histories, and other corroborating evidence. The film effectively emulates the methodologies of historical source verification by depicting characters discovering, developing, and authenticating these images, thereby actively engaging audiences in the process of "verifying" the visual content.

This narrative strategy, which integrates images into a comprehensive "textual event–evidence chain," underscores the principle of mutual reference and complementarity between text and image, as well as among images from diverse sources. For instance, the film might present a historical photograph and subsequently unveil the specific narrative context behind it through character dialogue or unfolding plot developments.

Alternatively, it might juxtapose such authentic imagery against official Japanese army propaganda photos, often designed to project a benevolent image, thereby exposing their inherent falsity (See Fig. 1). This practice not only significantly enhances the credibility of historical memory but also cultivates within audiences a heightened awareness and critical capacity for examining historical media (See Fig. 2). Through such rigorous mutual corroboration of multi-source evidence, *Dead to Rights* constructs a more complete and unimpeachable historical narrative, thereby establishing a robust foundation for its cross-cultural dissemination.

Fig. 1 Not Permitted shot (Shot from Dead to Rights showing the "not permitted" (forbidden) label on a photographic negative, illustrating wartime censorship.)

Fig. 2 Not Permitted photograph (Photograph from the Sanzao Lin Weimin Memorial collection, used as an external historical corroboration in the film.)

2.4. The Dynamic Construction of Historical Memory

These diverse multimodal archives—comprising textual diaries, on-site photographs, and moving images—collectively forge an internally consistent and externally verifiable network of evidence through precise cross-verification across temporal, personal, and thematic axes. The very process of remembering the Nanjing Massacre constitutes a dynamic construction: evolving from the contemporaneous testimonies of wartime survivors and international observers, through the post-war collection of evidence and judicial proceedings, to the surge of international attention following Iris Chang's seminal 1990s work, *The Rape of Nanking*, and culminating in China's establishment of a national memorial day and the successful inscription of related archives on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. This trajectory unequivocally demonstrates that archives are not merely static repositories of facts but rather the foundational impetus for the dynamic construction of collective memory.

Dead to Rights, positioned at the contemporary nexus of this ongoing memory construction, has, through the pervasive medium of film, creatively reactivated and disseminated these archives anew. The film's profound success lies not solely in its restoration of historical truth but, more significantly, in its artistic revitalization of these historical evidences, thereby catalyzing widespread international attention and critical discourse. In essence, the historical dimension serves as the indispensable cornerstone enabling *Dead to Rights* to achieve effective cross-cultural dissemination. By rigorously grounding its narrative in multi-source archives and meticulously constructing a robust chain of mutual corroboration, the film transmutes ostensibly inert historical evidence into vibrant narrative resources. This process establishes an unassailable foundation of authenticity for the entire cinematic narrative. Such profound respect for and innovative utilization of historical facts empowers international audiences to comprehend this complex history on the basis of solid and credible evidence, thereby paving the way for emotional acceptance and identification. Built upon this robust evidentiary framework, *Dead to Rights* further reinterprets the historical event for the modern era through sophisticated multimodal narrative and profound aesthetic strategies, allowing these dust-bound archives to acquire renewed public meaning and ethical resonance within the contemporary visual landscape. This transformative practice, converting archives into compelling narrative events, not only safeguards the film's historical gravity but also furnishes the most critical prerequisite for transcending cultural barriers and achieving impactful international dissemination. Through the meticulous construction of its historical dimension, the film successfully establishes authority and credibility among international audiences, laying an immutable foundation for its cross-cultural reach.

3. The Modal Dimension: Intertextuality of Visual, Auditory, and Textual Elements and Affective Mobilization

As a composite medium, film's communicative efficacy is profoundly contingent upon the coordinated semiosis of its multimodal signs. Within multimodal discourse analysis, "modality" refers to the distinct narrative patterns engendered by various video channels and media. Multimodal discourse analysis, therefore, critically examines the discourse generated through the integration of multiple modes—visual, auditory, and other communicative means—recognizing that narrative discourse features exhibit significant variation across different media (Nurudeen *et al.*, 2021). This perspective holds particular salience when analyzing non-textual media such as film. *Dead to Rights* masterfully establishes a delicate equilibrium between the rigorous presentation of evidence and the strategic mobilization of emotion through the organic coupling of visual, auditory, and textual modalities. This synergistic interplay facilitates a sensorial conveyance of historical truth. The film's success in

multimodal construction is not merely a testament to its skillful technical application but, more significantly, to the manner in which coordinated multimodal signs effectively trigger audience emotional resonance and cognitive understanding, thereby achieving the potent transmission of historical memory and fostering profound cross-cultural resonance.

3.1. Visual Evidence and the Deconstruction of Propaganda

The film's central narrative pivots on the historical event involving the operators of Jixiang Photo Studio—specifically, Su Liuchang and print apprentice Jin Chengchang (whose characters are inspired by the historical figures Luo Jin and Wu Xuan)—who risked their lives to preserve the photographic negative designated "Jing No. 1," which documented Japanese army atrocities. The creative team ingeniously constructs two interwoven narrative strands.

The first is a tightly structured event sequence driven by the concrete act of "developing photographs," encompassing Su Liuchang's acquisition of developing techniques, the collective efforts to safeguard the negatives, and the fraught process of negotiation and confrontation with Japanese forces. The second strand explores the profound moral dilemmas and human choices precipitated by the prospect of a city-exit pass, thereby illuminating the complexities of individual fate and the ethical ambiguities inherent in extreme circumstances.

Through the strategic juxtaposition of authentic footage depicting Japanese atrocities with deliberately staged "benevolent" publicity photographs, the film incisively exposes the systematic occlusion and distortion of historical facts by the wartime press censorship and propaganda apparatus. The developed negatives, functioning as incontrovertible visual evidence, metaphorically tear away the façade of "benevolence," unequivocally highlighting the hypocrisy of official propaganda. Throughout this process, the director and screenwriter confront a critical ethical and aesthetic imperative: how to avoid the sensationalization of violence and the voyeuristic consumption of trauma, while simultaneously preserving the solemnity and persuasive power of historical evidence. Their artistic resolution lies in meticulously linking the emergence of these images with the characters' internal awakening of conscience.

The film conveys the profound shock and indignation not through direct, graphic depictions of gruesome scenes, but rather through the visceral responses of the characters to the evidence. This judiciously restrained approach not only safeguards the dignity of the victims but also ensures the potent force of the primary evidence itself. Through this multimodally coordinated semiosis, *Dead to Rights* successfully navigates the delicate balance between historical veracity and artistic expression, thereby maintaining its historical gravitas while exerting significant artistic and affective power in cross-cultural dissemination.

3.2. Multimodal Semiosis and Affective Engagement

The film's sophisticated multimodal semiosis extends beyond the mere presentation of visual evidence to encompass a rich interplay of auditory and textual elements, all meticulously orchestrated to enhance affective engagement and cognitive processing. The soundscape of *Dead to Rights*, for instance, is not merely incidental; it is a carefully constructed layer of meaning. The absence of sound, or conversely, the deliberate amplification of specific auditory cues—such as the distant rumble of artillery, the hushed whispers of refugees, or the stark silence following a moment of terror—serves to immerse the audience in the historical reality. This strategic use of sound design functions as a powerful emotional amplifier, circumventing the need for explicit visual gore while still conveying the profound horror and psychological impact of the atrocities. Furthermore, the film's score often employs traditional Chinese musical motifs, which, when juxtaposed with scenes of devastation, evoke a deep sense of cultural loss and resilience, fostering empathy particularly among East Asian audiences, while simultaneously providing a unique cultural entry point for Western viewers.

Textual elements, though seemingly secondary in a visual medium, play a crucial role in *Dead to Rights*. Intertitles, character dialogues, and even the visual representation of written documents (like Rabe's diary entries or official Japanese proclamations) contribute significantly to the multimodal narrative. For example, the film displayed a historical document on screen, allowing the audience to read its contents, thereby directly engaging with primary source material. This direct textual engagement, combined with visual and auditory cues, creates a layered understanding of the historical context and the characters' motivations. The strategic inclusion of multilingual dialogues, particularly between Chinese, Japanese, and Western characters, not only enhances the film's authenticity but also subtly underscores the cross-cultural nature of the historical event and its documentation. This intricate weaving of visual, auditory, and textual modalities ensures that the film communicates its historical message with both intellectual rigor and profound emotional resonance, effectively bridging cultural divides and fostering a shared understanding of a traumatic past (Curean, 2021; Latupeirissa *et al*., 2025).

3.3. Synthesis of Modalities for Cross-Cultural Resonance

The communicative power of *Dead to Rights* in cross-cultural contexts is thus deeply rooted in its sophisticated synthesis of visual, auditory, and textual modalities. This multimodal orchestration transcends mere technical proficiency, evolving into a deliberate strategy for historical representation and affective engagement. The film meticulously crafts a sensory experience that allows international audiences to not only intellectually grasp the historical facts but also to emotionally connect with the human tragedy and resilience depicted. By carefully balancing the

presentation of verifiable evidence with evocative sensory details, the film avoids didacticism while maximizing its persuasive impact. This approach is particularly effective in navigating the complexities of cross-cultural historical memory, where direct, uncontextualized depictions of trauma might be met with resistance or misinterpretation. Instead, *Dead to Rights* employs a nuanced multimodal language that invites empathy and critical reflection, fostering a shared understanding of the Nanjing Massacre's profound human cost. The strategic interplay of these modalities ensures that the film's message resonates across diverse cultural backgrounds, transforming a specific historical event into a universal narrative of human suffering, endurance, and the imperative of memory.

4. The Narrative Dimension: From Individual to Public Memory Transformation

Film narrative, fundamentally, encompasses both the act of storytelling and the intricate process of generating cinematic discourse, thereby constituting the foundational impetus for a narrative's existence (Bateman & Schmidt, 2012; Abd El-Hameed, 2024). In the context of historical trauma, the transformation of individual, often fragmented, memories into a cohesive and widely accepted public memory is a critical undertaking, particularly for cross-cultural dissemination. *Dead to Rights* employs sophisticated narrative strategies—encompassing structure, viewpoint, and dissemination approaches—to facilitate this crucial transition. The film does not merely recount events; it actively constructs a framework through which audiences, irrespective of their cultural background, can engage with and internalize the historical significance of the Nanjing Massacre. This section will delve into the specific narrative mechanisms utilized by the film to bridge the gap between personal recollection and collective historical consciousness, thereby fostering a shared understanding and memory across diverse audiences.

4.1. Narrative Structure: Non-linear Chronology and Archival Narrativization

As posited by Hall (1973), the creators of *Dead to Rights* function as "encoders," meticulously screening, authenticating, and recombining voluminous historical archives. They then employ cinematic language to visualize and dramatize these materials, thereby encoding historical information into a meaningful cultural product. Audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds, acting as "decoders," are not passive recipients; rather, based on their lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and ideological frameworks, they actively—and potentially diversely—interpret the film's conveyed meanings, leading to dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. The non-linear narrative structure adopted by *Dead to Rights* precisely accommodates such open interpretation. By eschewing strict linear chronology, non-linear narration facilitates more complex and tension-laden narrative architectures, enabling temporal and spatial interleaving and juxtaposition. This approach generates a

more pluralistic and open interpretive field, actively encouraging audiences to participate in the deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning (Barthes &Duisit, 1975). This structural choice not only amplifies the film's artistic expressive power but also enhances its adaptability to the interpretive habits and cognitive patterns of audiences across different cultural contexts.

Dead to Rights does not adhere to a straightforward chronological chronicle. Instead, it organizes its plot through rhythms of rupture, retrospection, contrast, and collage. The film establishes a fundamental narrative unit: "discovery of photograph/negative – character reaction/oral account – reenactment of historical scene." For instance, within the darkroom, as a negative gradually emerges under the red safelight (see Fig.3), the narration does not immediately rush to a definitive verdict. Rather, it cuts back to the present, showcasing characters' shock, fear, debate, or silence when confronted with the image. Subsequently, the camera transitioned to a reenactment of the historical scene captured in the photograph, or to fragmented memories of related characters. This narrative "rupture" is not a deficiency but a deliberate strategy, reflecting the fragmented and non-continuous nature of traumatic memory in individual minds. Through ellipses, flashbacks, and other temporal manipulation techniques, the film simulates this mnemonic quality, compelling audiences to actively forge connections among seemingly disparate fragments, thereby completing a "puzzle" of historical truth. This audience-driven process of "stitching" constitutes a profound act of historical understanding and personalized memory reconstruction. Through such innovative narrative structuring, the film successfully guides active audience participation and emotional investment, significantly enhancing its cross-cultural communicative efficacy.

Fig. 3 Darkroom shot (A scene in the darkroom of Jixiang Photo Studio, showing the ritualized process of developing the "Jing No. 1" negatives under red safelight.)

Furthermore, archival images attain a "second life" and profound narrative function within the film. They are no longer merely displayed statically as illustrations or background evidence; instead, they become pivotal elements that trigger key character actions, provoke ethical choices, and drive plot development. A single photograph can unveil a hidden story; a piece of footage can irrevocably alter a character's fate. This narrative strategy serves as a vivid embodiment of remediation theory (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Concurrently, from the perspective of simulacra theory (Baudrillard, 1983), these historical images are re-contextualized and imbued with new meaning within the film, to some extent detaching from their original referential relations and entering a new system of symbolic exchange.

They may evolve from a first-order simulacrum, originally intended to "reflect reality," into second- or even third-order simulacra with more complex relations to reality through creative cinematic use. Through continuous reproduction, dissemination, and reinterpretation, they construct a historical narrative that produces a "hyperreal" effect for contemporary audiences. However, this does not negate their authenticity; rather, it underscores the film medium's potent capacity to reshape historical cognition. Through this narrativization and re-creation of archival imagery, the film successfully achieves a modern transformation of historical memory, rendering it more contemporary and resonant in cross-cultural dissemination.

The film demonstrates considerable prudence and wisdom in navigating the inherent uncertainty of historical evidence and memory. Even when a photograph unequivocally presents atrocities, the film's narration often refrains from immediately issuing an absolute verdict via an omniscient voice-over. Instead, it presents divergent interpretations of the same evidence by different characters (e.g., some believe, some doubt, some fear), introduces additional archival clues for corroboration, or gradually consolidates the evidentiary chain through subsequent testimony.

This mode of presentation respects the inherent complexity of historical research, particularly the imperative for corroboration, and simultaneously mitigates potential overinterpretation or controversy arising from a singular image. This reflects an ethical stance responsible to both history and its audiences. In sum, the non-linear narration in *Dead to Rights* functions both as an effective affective mobilization device—enhancing audience immersion by simulating the fragmented nature of traumatic memory—and as a strategic guide for critical reflection, prompting viewers to adopt a more active viewing state imbued with evidentiary awareness. Through this meticulous design of narrative structure, the film successfully facilitates the transmission of historical memory and fosters cross-cultural resonance, thereby making a profound impact on the international stage.

4.2. Narrative Viewpoint Selection and Ethical Considerations in Character Construction

Framing Theory offers robust theoretical underpinnings for analyzing the film's narrative viewpoint and its inherent ethical choices. This theory posits that media selectively emphasize, exclude, and interpret events, thereby providing audiences with particular "frames" for understanding (Entman, 1993). By establishing narrative frames such as "preserving dignity rather than displaying gore" and "implying rather than stating directly," *Dead to Rights* effectively guides audiences toward a more reflective, rather than purely sensational, comprehension of historical violence. The film adopts an ensemble narrative perspective, directing its focus toward characters from diverse social strata—including a studio owner, a print apprentice, a translator, an opera actor, and a deserter soldier. This approach subtly delineates their survival conditions, moral struggles, and moments of profound humanity amidst extreme circumstances. This narrative choice departs from the traditional single-hero protagonist model, enabling audiences to identify with the unfolding events from multiple angles and identities, thereby experiencing the multiplicity and complexity of individual fates within the inexorable currents of history. Through this multi-perspectival narrative strategy, the film successfully illuminates the complexity of history and the diversity of human experience, fostering greater audience resonance and understanding in cross-cultural dissemination.

However, the very selection of an ensemble narrative inherently involves framing decisions: which social groups are afforded a voice, how their stories are articulated, and which groups' experiences might be relatively marginalized or silenced. These choices collectively reflect particular narrative stances and considerations concerning the politics of memory. *Dead to Rights* strategically centers its narrative on ordinary civilians and international friends (such as Rabe and Vautrin) and their concerted rescue efforts. This choice of perspective broadens the basis for emotional identification, allowing a wider spectrum of viewers to find resonance. Furthermore, it foregrounds the courage of ordinary individuals, the spirit of mutual aid, and the international humanitarian ethos in the face of disaster—a thematic constellation that transcends national borders and generates broad appeal. This approach serves as a poignant reminder to acknowledge the "little people" often overlooked in grand historical narratives and to recognize their pivotal roles. Through this deliberate selection of narrative viewpoint, the film successfully achieves a pluralistic presentation of historical memory, rendering it more inclusive and resonant in cross-cultural contexts.

In its depiction of atrocities, the film rigorously adheres to an ethics-centered framework prioritizing "dignity." Many violent scenes are not explicitly shown to the audience but are instead implied and invoked through imagination. This is achieved through the strategic use of sounds (e.g., crying, gunfire), shifts in lighting and shadow, close-ups of facial

expressions (e.g., fear, anger, sorrow), and aftermath scenes (e.g., ruins, bloodstains). For instance, the persistent crying of an infant subtly implies the tragedy unfolding beyond the frame, while dim, oppressive lighting creates an atmosphere of impending violence. This restrained handling serves, first and foremost, as the highest respect for the dignity of historical victims, preventing the secondary consumption of trauma. Secondly, it aligns more effectively with artistic practice, where "negative space" often stimulates aesthetic participation and emotional investment more powerfully than explicit depiction. Finally, this approach mitigates potential psychological discomfort or resistance among audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing the film's overall acceptability. This is not an avoidance of historical cruelty but rather a presentation of it in a more elevated, humanistically compassionate manner. Through this ethical narrative framework, the film successfully balances historical truth and artistic expression, maintaining historical solemnity while possessing profound artistic and affective power in cross-cultural dissemination.

More profoundly, through its ensemble narration, the film addresses the core issue of the "politics of memory." The question of whose experiences are deemed worthy of being recorded, narrated, and transmitted directly correlates with the composition of collective memory and the power dynamics inherent in historical narration. By foregrounding survivors, ordinary civilians, and even conflicted "small persons" (such as the translator), the film subtly challenges the unifying and stereotypical tendencies often prevalent in grand narratives. This results in a historical memory that is richer, more three-dimensional, and imbued with greater humanitarian warmth. The construction of character subjectivity, therefore, pertains not only to narrative technique but also to the broader concerns of historical justice and the democratization of memory. Through this meticulous selection of narrative viewpoint, the film successfully realizes a pluralistic presentation of historical memory and democratized expression, rendering it more persuasive and influential in cross-cultural dissemination.

4.3. Narrative Dissemination Strategies and Cross-Cultural Reception Effectiveness

Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory provides a valuable cultural-psychological framework for understanding the film's cross-cultural dissemination strategy. This theory identifies key cultural differences across dimensions such as power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and long-term/short-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001). For a film like *Dead to Rights*,

which is deeply rooted in a specific national-historical trauma, achieving global recognition necessitates a delicate balance: maintaining historical veracity and cultural specificity while simultaneously identifying affective connection points that transcend particular cultural dimensions and resonate with universal human psychology. The film masterfully probes common human experiences and emotional themes under extreme conditions—fear and resilience in the face of immense suffering, moral choices at life-and-death junctures, the protection of kinship, the longing for justice, and the courage of ordinary people to resist oppressive power. These themes possess inherent cross-cultural universality and are highly effective in triggering empathy mechanisms across diverse audience backgrounds. By excavating and foregrounding such universal human themes, the film successfully achieves cross-cultural emotional resonance and exerts broad international influence.

Furthermore, "cultural translation" theory elucidates that film, as a cultural text, requires a process of meaning reconstruction and symbolic translation when entering heterogeneous cultural markets. This adaptation is crucial to align with different audiences' cognitive patterns, aesthetic habits, and value systems (Al-Kahtani, 2023). The cross-cultural dissemination success of *Dead to Rights* is, to a significant degree, attributable to its effective cultural translation strategies. This is manifested not only in the precision of subtitle translation but also in the judicious use of nonverbal signs, such as symbolic visual imagery, emotionally evocative music, and expressive facial and bodily language. These nonverbal elements often bypass linguistic barriers more directly, transmitting emotion and fostering cross-cultural affective engagement and resonance. Through the careful implementation of these cultural translation strategies, the film successfully adapts to diverse audiences' cognitive and aesthetic sensibilities, thereby significantly enhancing its cross-cultural communicative effect.

The actual responses of overseas audiences powerfully attest to the efficacy of these strategies. Reports from the Canadian premiere indicated that many Western viewers were deeply moved, often falling into prolonged silence and reflection, with some expressing remorse for their prior ignorance of this historical event[1]. Audiences from Korea, Europe, and America similarly reported that the film enabled them to "viscerally feel" the "shock and anger" provoked by Japanese atrocities[2]. Notably, a British actor commented that the film eschews a simplistic "hero vs. villain" binary, instead offering a profound portrayal of ordinary people's moral struggles and human complexity under extreme conditions[3].

[1] China Daily, "*Nanjing Photo Studio* Premieres in Canada, Moves Audience Deeply," China Daily, August 9, 2025, https://world. chinadaily. com. cn/a/202508/09/WS6896ddc5a310626720041d33. html.
[2] Global Times, "*Dead to Rights* a Powerful Reminder of History

Resonating with Foreign Audiences," Global Times, August 12, 2025,https://www. globaltimes. cn/page/202508/1340702. shtml.
[3] Global Times, "*Dead to Rights* a Powerful Reminder of History Resonating with Foreign Audiences," Global Times, August 12, 2025,https://www. globaltimes. cn/page/202508/1340702. shtml.

This unwavering focus on universal human themes is paramount to eliciting deep resonance among international audiences. By employing powerful audiovisual language and humanized narration, the film successfully enables viewers from different countries to connect their own national traumatic histories (such as World War II or the Holocaust) with the Nanjing Massacre, thereby fostering a cross-cultural identification and shared memory reference grounded in the concept of "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2012). The dissemination of cultural memory concerning the Nanjing Massacre, as facilitated by *Dead to Rights*, aims precisely to construct such a human collective memory.

In summary, the film's success within the narrative dimension is a testament to its theory-guided narrative practice. Structurally, through its non-linear organization and the narrativization of archival footage, it intensifies the traumatic historical experience and stimulates active audience interpretive participation. In terms of viewpoint, leveraging framing theory, it constructs an ethically attentive ensemble narrative that achieves a pluralistic presentation of historical memory. Regarding the dissemination strategy, it integrates insights from cultural dimensions theory and cultural translation theory to effectively achieve cross-cultural emotional resonance and the construction of a memory community. These three aspects are mutually complementary, jointly demonstrating the multifaceted functions and profound significance that film narrative can play in historical representation, ethical choice, and cultural dissemination. The film's meticulous design and successful implementation in the narrative dimension provide invaluable reference points and inspiration for the cross-cultural dissemination of other historical films.

5. Conclusion

The remarkable success of *Dead to Rights* in cross-cultural dissemination fundamentally stems from its judicious and organic integration of three pivotal dimensions: the historical, the modal, and the narrative. This study has systematically demonstrated how the film meticulously constructs narrative credibility through multi-source archival cross-verification, thereby establishing an unassailable factual foundation. Furthermore, it has elucidated the sophisticated multimodal construction, wherein visual, auditory, and textual elements are synergistically coupled to convey both historical evidence and profound emotional resonance. Finally, the analysis has revealed the intricate narrative strategies—encompassing structure, viewpoint, and dissemination approaches—that facilitate the transformative journey from individual, often traumatic, memory to a shared, collective public memory across diverse cultural landscapes.

This comprehensive analysis contributes significantly to the existing scholarship in several ways. Theoretically, it offers a nuanced application of multimodal discourse analysis and narrative theory to a complex historical film, providing a robust framework for understanding how cinematic texts negotiate historical trauma in cross-cultural contexts. Practically, the findings furnish valuable insights and paradigms for Chinese historical films aspiring to achieve effective international recognition, particularly in navigating the delicate balance between historical authenticity and artistic expression. The film's strategic choices in leveraging verifiable facts, orchestrating multimodal elements, and employing universal narrative themes serve as a compelling model for global communication of sensitive historical narratives.

Despite these contributions, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The analysis primarily focuses on the film's internal textual mechanisms and its reported reception, without conducting extensive empirical audience studies across various cultural groups. Future research could address this by incorporating quantitative and qualitative audience reception studies to further validate the film's cross-cultural impact. Additionally, a comparative analysis with other historical films addressing similar traumatic events could provide deeper insights into the efficacy of different multimodal and narrative strategies. Further exploration into the long-term effects of such films on collective memory formation and historical reconciliation would also be a fruitful avenue for future inquiry.

In conclusion, *Dead to Rights* stands as a powerful testament to the potential of cinema to transcend cultural barriers and foster a shared understanding of history. By meticulously weaving together factual rigor, multimodal artistry, and universal narrative themes, the film not only revitalizes historical evidence but also cultivates a global collective memory, underscoring the enduring imperative of remembering and learning from the past.

Funding Statement

References

[1] Amel Omar Abd El-Hameed, "Doing Things with Emotions: A Multimodal Visual Narrative Affective Pragmatics Approach to the Anti-Bullying Digital Animated Short Film," *CDELT Occasional Papers in the Development of English Education*, vol. 85, no. 1, pp. 291-327, 2024. [CrossRef] [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[2] Adrian B. Latupeirissa, Akshata Murdeshwar, and Roberto Bresin, "Semiotic Analysis of Robot Sounds in Films: Implications for Sound Design in Social Robotics," *International Journal of Social Robotics*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 39-58, 2025. [CrossRef] [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[3]   Abeer Al-Kahtani, "Translating Cultural Features in Arabic Subtitles of English Literary Film Adaptations between Domestication and Foreignization," *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 1-23, 2023. [CrossRef] [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[4]   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Semiotext(e), 1983. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[5]   Dan Curean, "Audio-Visual and Interpersonal Communication," *Medea Egyesület*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 73-82, 2021. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[6]   Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 51-58, 1993. [CrossRef] [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[7]   Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. [Publisher Link]

[8]   Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001. [CrossRef] [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[9]   Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, New York: Basic Books, 1997. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[10]   J.D. Bolter, and R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. [Google Scholar]

[11]   J.A. Bateman, and K.H. Schmidt, *Multimodal Film Analysis: How Films Mean*, New York: Routledge, 2012. [Google Scholar]

[12]   John Rabe's Nanjing Diaries, Hypotheses, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://rabediaries.hypotheses.org/primary-sources

[13]   Minnie Vautrin, Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing Diaries and Correspondence, 1937-38, University of Illinois Press, pp. 1-312, 2024. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[14]   Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[15]   Monsurat Aramide Nurudeen, Ebenezer Oluseun Ogungbe, and Moshood Zakariyah, "A Socio-Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Discourse of Selected Nollywood Film Advertisement Posters," *Studies in Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 31-45, 2021. [CrossRef] [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[16]   Roland Barthes, and Lionel Duisit, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," *New Literary History*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 237-272, 1975. [CrossRef] [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[17]   Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Harvard University Press, pp. 1-271, 1995. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[18]   Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television* Discourse, XBirmingham, U.K.: University of Birmingham, 1973. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[19]   Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. [Google Scholar] [Publisher Link]

[20]   Liu Yanjun, George Fitch, Nanjing Publishing House, 2016. Not Found [Online]. Available: https://www.sanmin.com.tw/product/index/006278443

[21]   Sun Zhaiwei, "The Nanjing Massacre and the Population of Nanjing," *Nanjing Social Sciencess*, no. 3, 1990. [Publisher Link]