LIFE





Left: *The Amateur* stars actor Rami Malek as Charlie Heller, a Central Intelligence Agency cryptographer, and actress Rachel Brosnahan as the character's wife, Sarah. **Center:** The protagonist embarks on a vengeful journey. **Right:** A scene features Malek's role confronting a man involved in his wife's murder. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Oscar winner takes on covert operation

Hollywood actor's latest film gives an unconventional look into the world of CIA spies, **Xu Fan** reports.

When the topic of spy films comes up, what most often springs to mind are images of suave, highly skilled agents — such as James Bond with his famous Walther PPK pistol, or Ethan Hunt and the high-tech gadgets he uses to scale skyscrapers.

The Amateur, a new Hollywood spy thriller, presents a very different kind of Central Intelligence Agency agent — one who is sometimes clumsy, not even daring enough to pull the trigger.

The film, released on the Chinese mainland on April 11, is adapted from the 1981 novel of the same name by Robert Littell, an American writer who specializes in tales of espionage.

Featuring Oscar-winning actor Rami Malek as Charlie Heller, a talented CIA decoder and analyst with an intelligence quotient of over 170, the film begins with the tragic death of his wife Sarah, who is played by Rachel Brosnahan, in a London terrorist attack. After using his skills to swiftly uncover the perpetrators, Heller is frustrated to find that his superiors are refusing to act, forcing him to embark on a dangerous global manhunt to avenge her death.

Malek, who is most familiar to Chinese audiences for his role as singer Freddie Mercury in the 2018 biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*, tells China Daily during an online interview on April 9 that he was in Irish capital Dublin when he received a call inquiring about his future acting plans.

Recalling his portrayal of a cybersecurity engineer and hacker in the American television drama series *Mr. Robot*, Malek says he hoped to flex his muscles again in this genre.

"I thought I'd like to see an action film featuring someone with both a very high IQ and high emotional intelligence as well. That's what drew me to the story and the role. You don't often see those two qualities balanced in films, or even in real life," he explains.



A scene from the Hollywood spy film *The Amateur* features actor Rami Malek as the unconventional hero Charlie Heller. Malek is familiar to Chinese audiences for his Oscar-winning role as singer Freddie Mercury in the 2018 biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*.



A poster for the film *The Amateur*.

In the film, it is intelligence, rather than physical prowess, that becomes Heller's main weapon. In one gripping scene, he confronts a man involved in his wife's murder. Instead of resorting to direct violence, Heller cleverly uses a remote device to shatter the glass of a suspended swimming pool — positioned 35 meters above the ground as a bridge between two buildings — sending the villain, who is taking a night swim, plummeting to his death.

For director James Hawes, it was a challenge to make changes to the original novel, which is set more than 40 years ago.

"The nature of espionage has changed dramatically. The whole political landscape has shifted. One example is that in the novel, most of the action takes place in Prague in today's Czech Republic, which was known as 'a city of spies' before the Iron Curtain came down. But that isn't the case anymore," Hawes tells China Daily.

Istanbul — a vibrant, historic city that straddles Europe and Asia — thus becomes the alternative setting for some of the most pivotal scenes.

"We wanted a city that feels more like it is on the edge of Europe … Istanbul is not often seen on screen. It's on the border between the East and West. It's just that bit more edgy, exotic and exciting," he says.

As an action-packed tentpole with a globe-trotting storyline, the film was also shot in London — the city's St. Pancras International train station features in the scene of Sarah's death — as well as in Paris and Marseille.

With scenes purportedly shot at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia — a location that has been featured numerous times in films and TV series — Hawes was careful with the details and employed security advisers throughout the production.

After learning that London has one of the highest densities of surveillance cameras per person in Europe — exemplified by data showing that the average person is photographed up to 300 times each day — Hawes says this fact makes one scene more credible. In it, the protagonist takes advantage of the extensive surveillance system by tampering with real-time footage, copying his face onto multiple individuals to create the illusion that he is in several locations at once.

When asked what he believes will be the film's most appealing element for Chinese cinemagoers, Hawes replies: "It's all about the power of the underdog. I think Rami did so well to show him (Heller) sometimes failing but always fighting back. I think audiences love an unexpected hero."

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Facing the end on their own terms

To Yu Bo, a 41-year-old filmmaker from Beijing, death once felt like a distant concept — something dramatic, even cinematic.

He had spent years documenting life-or-death moments in ICUs, always from behind the camera. But everything shifted when Yu experienced three severe episodes of acute pancreatitis in a single year.

"It was all self-inflicted — alcohol, social events," Yu says. "But it made me realize that death is the one destination we all share. I wanted to understand it, to choose how I face it."

Last month, he signed a living will via an online platform, joining a growing number of people who are formally documenting their end-of-life wishes. He chose to forgo cardiopulmonary resuscitation, mechanical ventilation, and tube feeding should his condition be deemed irreversible.

As China develops, life expectancy has steadily risen — reaching an average of 79 years in 2024, among the highest in the developing world. Many older adults are now living longer, healthier lives, but the rise in chronic illness and end-of-life challenges is prompting deeper reflection on how to age — and die — with dignity.

In this shifting landscape, end-of-life planning is slowly entering public conversations. Once seen as taboo, living wills and advance directives are gaining ground, offering individuals greater control and families a clearer sense of their loved ones' final wishes.

Yu is part of a demographic driving this change: educated, urban, tech-savvy adults aged 30 to 59. This age group accounts for two-thirds of the more than 60,000 people who have signed living wills with the Beijing Living Will Promotion Association — formerly known as the Choice and Dignity platform — since 2010.

"At our age, the most obvious sign is that you get fewer wedding invitations and more funeral notices," he says. "I've seen too many people suffer needlessly in their final days, like my grandfather, who was bedridden for eight years. That wasn't life. That was prolonged pain."

Nearly 70 percent of those who have signed living wills with the association hold a university degree, and most live in first-tier cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen of Guangdong province, where exposure and access to new ideas shape their attitudes.

Growth was initially rapid, peaking at about 15,000 a year six years ago, but this has since slowed. According to Wang Bo, secretary-general of the association, this isn't due to waning interest, but rather the emergence of more means for writing wills, such as hospitals, civic groups and notary offices.

"Public awareness has grown," Wang says. "When we first started, no one responded to the information we shared on WeChat. But now, even high school students have joined our volunteer team."



A therapist assists an elderly man in rehabilitation training in Shaoxing, Zhejiang province, on Sept 5. XU YU / XINHUA

Still, progress clashes with tradition. In China, cultural norms surrounding death remain strong — discussing it is often avoided, as it's seen as inauspicious. Forgoing life-prolonging treatment, no matter how futile, can be seen as unfilial. Families often insist on aggressive intervention for emotional closure or fear of being judged.

Qin Yuan, a doctor at the palliative care center at Beijing Haidian Hospital, often sees this tension. "People believe that as long as their elderly relatives are alive, their family is whole," she explains. "They also worry about being judged for 'giving up' too early."

To navigate this, her team holds family meetings to align patient wishes with family expectations. "It's a daily negotiation," she says.

Now, policy is beginning to reflect shifting attitudes.

In 2023, Shenzhen became the first city in the country to legally recognize living wills, allowing residents to reject invasive treatment at the end of their lives.

The move sparked unexpected interest, with notary offices reporting rising numbers of people seeking to formalize their wishes.

"Young people and childless couples are increasingly seeking notarization," says Liu Suimei, a Shenzhen notary. "They care deeply about preserving dignity in their final moments."

As China's population ages — currently there are more than 310 million people aged 60 and above — the government has been expanding palliative care services as part of a broader strategy to meet the needs of its elderly citizens.

Hospice units in China grew from 510 in 2020 to 4,259 in 2022, with pilot facilities reaching 185 cities and counties. Yet access remains uneven, especially in less-developed western regions. By 2025, the government aims to establish at least one palliative care ward in every pilot area, ensuring coverage across both urban and rural communities.

Momentum is building. In 2024, a national political adviser proposed the expansion of education and policy support. Advocates want advance directives linked to health IDs, ensuring that people's wishes follow them to the hospital.

This shift mirrors a global trend. The United States is moving from static living wills to ongoing advance care planning. China is adapting similar models.

Wang envisions advance care planning, which will be a key focus for her association in the future, as a tool to translate personal preferences into actionable medical plans.

She says the association plans to use big data to inform policy and expand outreach via video-sharing and streaming platforms like Douyin and Bilibili.

Still, cultural resistance lingers.

"Some people just wave us off, as if talking about death will make it come sooner," says Xiang Qiaozhen, a palliative care nurse in Zhejiang province and a volunteer advocate. "But waiting until the very end often means missing the chance to have the conversation at all."

She has not signed a living will herself, but her daughter knows her wishes. "One day, she told me, 'If it ever comes to that, I'll make sure you go into palliative care,'" Xiang says. "That kind of quiet understanding is what we hope to build."

Yu, too, faced pushback. After sharing his decision to sign a living will on his WeChat account, friends flooded him with calls, assuming he was terminally ill. "They couldn't believe I'd made such a choice just to be prepared," he says.

"Our discomfort with death is almost in our cultural DNA," Yu reflects. "We fear it, avoid it, and rarely claim ownership of it. But choosing how we leave this world should be our right."

Despite this, he remains hopeful. "I believe more people will choose the same path," he says. "I want to tell their stories through film. Maybe then, we'll learn to talk about death — not to dwell on it, but to live more wisely because of it."

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