

# Foreword

Willy Wilkinson

*Life Beyond My Body* is a beautifully written account of heartbreak, survival, and liberation—a triumphant journey from cold, bitter hardship to the warm glow of optimism. I found Lei Ming’s tale thoroughly gripping, a precious gift I felt honored to receive from a talented, brave storyteller whose origins lie in the rural landscape of a country at the intersection of ancient ways and modern technology: China.

As a Chinese American, I resonated with Lei’s descriptions of his childhood as the youngest girl in a world with clearly drawn gender rules and expectations. Like the predictions surrounding my own birth at a time before ultrasounds were available, a fortune teller predicted that he would be a boy. Though my upbringing was not nearly as severe, I felt a profound kinship with the wise soul in these pages. His firsthand experience with the Chinese legacy of female subjugation and the steadfast adherence to strict gender norms are compellingly described both from the intimacy of his own victimization, and the self-awareness of a transgender man watching over his female body. As a young Chinese American trans boy growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area a generation before Lei, I often wondered if I would have survived had I been born in China. Lei Ming has given us a powerful, universal tale of survival against all odds and at tremendous risk.

Despite China’s one-child policy, which took effect in 1978, Lei’s family included a developmentally disabled brother, two sisters, and parents who labored long hours to support them. He describes his family as a “heap of loose sand [with] nothing to keep us together.” His parents did not outwardly express affection, demonstrate concern for his well-being, or establish a sense of order with him, instead leaving him alone all day from the time he was three or four years old. Born in 1986, Lei was “as uncared for as a weed in the wind,” and learned

to be self-reliant in the face of hunger, injuries, and bullying. Sadly, he experienced child sexual abuse at the hands of both his brother and a neighbor, an atrocity that sometimes befalls trans and gender nonconforming young people as vulnerable members of society.

The description of Lei's family life in rural Northern China is notable for its reference to a "kang," an earthen platform used in Northern Chinese houses for heating the home, cooking, working, entertaining, and sleeping. These traditional bed stoves, which first came into use over seven thousand years ago, made the frigid climates of the north habitable. The warmth of the *kang* in Lei Ming's house exists in juxtaposition to the icy sense of family, a relic of the ancient practices and belief systems that permeate daily modern life in China.

Particularly striking is Lei's description of China's "barns," multiple-stall outhouses that lack plumbing or stall doors. He describes with levity the "earth-friendly properties" of an open pit that uses no running water for flushing or electricity for light. Rather than dwell on the foul odor, lack of privacy, or how creepy the barns were in the obscure night, he extols the barns for the opportunities they presented for socializing, and the ghost stories the facilities inspired.

Yet, the barns, with their lack of privacy, presented challenges unlike any bathroom drama that transgender Americans face. In elementary and middle school, if Lei went to the girls' side of the barn, he would get stared at and/or scare the girls. If he went to the boys' side, he would be recognized as a known girl in the boys' bathroom. Both the girls' and boys' toilets were forbidden to him. He waited all day to use the toilet until after the fifteen-minute walk home from school. But in high school, home was two hours away. The barn was available only during ten-minute breaks, with long lines of fellow students and dozens of eyes upon him as he relieved himself, which felt disconcerting. He was forced to use the barn early in the morning or late at night, and to drink very little water. As an adult, when he used the men's side, Lei had to pretend to defecate, since he was unable to stand to urinate, but the lack of visible male genitals made him feel unsafe.

His description of the barns brings a welcome international perspective on restroom access for trans people, and showcases the hardships that trans people face in underdeveloped countries, just to take care of the most basic human function that others take for granted. While transgender Americans currently fight countless "bathroom harassment" bills that threaten our right to use re-

strooms, Lei portrays extraordinary circumstances that are well outside of the American expectation of privacy behind stall doors.

Since homes in his village did not have indoor showers or bathtubs, bathing was a public activity that was generally off limits to him. Rather than use the public baths, he washed from a basin at home in private, only taking a bath once a year in preparation for the Lunar New Year. It could take a couple of hours to scrub off the dust that had accumulated like layers of paint over his entire body. As a university student, he was forced to use open shower facilities, which was distressing to him. Bathing was off limits to him there as well, and he stayed dirty rather than endure this naked exposure. Lei's story highlights the barriers that trans people face worldwide in order to engage in basic grooming activities that take place in public sex-segregated facilities.

Another recurrent theme in *Life Beyond My Body* is the stress Lei Ming encountered with identification documents. Without an ID that matched his gender presentation, he was unable to participate fully in society because he had to present ID when seeking employment, renting a room, and even buying a train ticket. Time after time, he faced seemingly insurmountable barriers to legal gender change, which requires gender confirmation surgery, itself difficult to access because of arbitrary protocol defined by individual surgeons and cost-prohibitive care.

In 2009, the Chinese Ministry of Health published the first guidelines for gender confirmation surgery, which are highly restrictive. One must be over the age of twenty, ask the police department for permission and not have a criminal record, have parental consent, and undergo psychiatric treatment for one year. If married, the person must ask permission from their spouse. Despite a lack of systemic support in China to live authentically without surgery, one must live in their identified gender for at least three years prior to surgery. Even if Lei managed to meet the conditions for approval, he would need the equivalent of a few years' salary to cover the costs. When Lei sought certification from a mental health provider, she assumed he was male-to-female. When he explained that he was female-to-male, she proclaimed him "incurable" and sent him away. The invisibility of transmasculine individuals amplified his burden.

Because of these barriers to changing identity documents and accessing transition-related care, Lei Ming was briefly jailed for using false identification. He describes feeling like a thieving criminal living in a sketchy underground. At one point his financial circumstances forced him to rent a small, gloomy basement room in Beijing. The

*beipao*, poor drifters, lived in these mazes of dark basement residential compounds, while the modern buildings above ground housed the rich in bright, sunny apartments. He scrambled to make a living while marginally housed in Beijing's cold, damp underground—a fitting metaphor for his life as a trans person who was forced to circumvent China's strict laws, policies, and cultural expectations of gender.

Despite enduring a lifetime of ridicule, rejection, and isolation, Lei Ming encountered many people who appreciated him for who he was. He found spiritual connection and community among Christians who offered guidance, cherished him, and surrounded him with love. Yet he learned the hard way that some Christians could not accept him once they learned of his trans status. He questioned how to appear before the Creator. When he was genuine about who he was, he was told that he was displeasing to God and the result of sin that needed to be eradicated. He wondered if they expected him to pretend to be someone other than who he was. Suicide became alluring.

While some Christians judged him, there were others who loved him unconditionally and vowed not to disclose his trans experience. Ultimately he found happiness working as a teacher at a Christian school. This book is a true act of bravery that comes with monumental risk; most of the members of his Christian community do not know that he is trans.

There are moments of heart connection that imbue the book with optimism about the possibility of unconditional love. Lei describes beautifully the joy of falling in love with Shao Han, a fellow university student, like a "pain killer," "as if a stove was lit within me that burned away loneliness and depression." This new love with a girl who saw him for who he was, and vowed to stand with him no matter what, was like a "shining sun [that] disguised every cloud."

Once he had a girlfriend, Lei was especially motivated to find a way to access top surgery. With ingenuity and perseverance, Lei Ming was ultimately able to sidestep seemingly insurmountable barriers to access testosterone and top surgery, and live authentically as the man he always knew himself to be. His description of the joy of swimming shirtless, tempered by his panic in the river's flooding current, is a powerful image that speaks to his lifelong journey of finding body congruence, a peaceful existence, and love.

Though the relationship with Shao Han ended, Lei persevered. Despite religious persecution, systemic barriers, and a lifetime of so-

cial isolation, Lei exemplifies profound strength of the human spirit. He is truly remarkable in his determination to live authentically, and his ability to forgive those who mistreated him. Like scrubbing away the dirt that had accumulated over a year, Lei Ming strips away the layers that were necessary for his survival, and emerges clean, resilient, and triumphant, a man living with and beyond his body.

Willy Wilkinson, author, Lambda Literary Award winner,  
*Born on the Edge of Race and Gender:  
A Voice for Cultural Competency*