

## Interview with Orynbek Koksebek

Orynbek: Russian... Because I've worked with Russians before, you know. [pick-up from conversation about whether Orynbek knows any Russian or not, I believe]

Interviewer: In Kazakhstan?

O: Hmm... [other dialogue] ...because the Chinese Communist Party's policies made me forget everything. [unclear sentence about how much he's forgotten]. However, I naturally haven't expressed this to my people. If I had spent another month there, I might not have made it. They might have let me out because of issues with my nerves. I also thought that that might happen to me [mental problems]. But there were days there when I would say that about myself. However, thanks to Allah – Allah wished me well – the men and women there helped me a lot.

I: Yea...

O: So I'd talk with the teachers quite a few times while there... Twenty-two times, at least twenty I think, I can't remember now. My ability to remember things has gotten really bad because of all that. Otherwise, I'd know Russian and remember all of the guys I'd hang out with before. Now I don't remember most of their names, to be honest.

I'm suffering from pain in both kidneys now, and so if I exert myself too much while walking I have difficulty breathing... Sometimes, I think that I...

I: That started after your time in jail?

O: Yes. Sometimes, I think that I might suddenly die. Only Allah knows...

[other dialogue]

I: Could you briefly introduce yourself to Gene? Where you were born, when you came to Kazakhstan...

O: I was born in China in 1980, in the city of Chochek [Tacheng], in the village of Moiyntal.

I was born on February 14, 1980. They call me Orai Koksebek in China now. They don't call me Orynbek. I learned that while I was in jail [might have misunderstood this]. They gave me that name. They gave me that nickname. I didn't know that at first... now I...

I: "Orai" you said?

O: They gave me that name. However, I myself don't know why they gave me that name.

I: Who gave you that name? The locals?

O: The locals there, yea...

Oralman sitting next to Orynbek: Orai is Oral.

I: Ah.

O: Now my name is Orynbek.

I: When was the first time you came to Kazakhstan?

O: In 2004...

I: With your family?

O: I came together with my parents. You know, relatives... but after getting here...

I: Did you come to visit relatives?

O: Didn't have relatives here, just my younger brother. Came in '99.

I: Your younger brother came in '99?

[other dialogue]

I: Your older brother is Hamza?

O: My *younger* brother.

I: Your younger brother.

O: My little bro...

I: Hamza immigrated in '99?

O: That's when he came here, not immigrated. He got married after coming here. In 2005. He was a bachelor when he first came. Came to study. His profession... He graduated from the arts academy. He's an arts guy.

I: Where? In Semei? In Oskemen?

O: He studied in Almaty. Now he's continued with his art, has a family, two kids. Doing good. **He's been in 3-4 movies over the past few years [not 100% sure about all the math here]**. He was in two movies last year. He's been in 3 movies these recent years. He's also been in 2 movies this year.

[other dialogue]

I: Did you immigrate to be with your brother?

O: He's the reason I originally came. But after ten days I took a liking to this place. My parents returned to China. Because we were fairly well off there (in China). We had a lot of possessions there... So, ten days after arriving here I took up a job. At a Chinese company, "Asay", on Suyinbai. I worked as a janitor there for about a year.

I: Whom did you work as?

[other dialogue]

O: As a janitor. Anyway, I took a liking to Kazakhstan. I got Kazakhstan citizenship in 2005. After that I got rid of my Chinese passport and everything. I handed it over to the Ministry of Defense (branch office) in Urzhar.

[other dialogue]

I: Whom did you give it to?

O: To the Urzhar authorities. You know, the people in charge of citizenship issues.

I: In Kazakhstan? [other dialogue] Did you just get rid of it like that, or did you burn it, or...?

O: I don't know. My father took care of it all. My father's passed away now. We got our citizenship after that.

I: When did your parents immigrate?

O: In 2006.... By 2007, all of our relatives had come over.

I: 200 and what? [verifying]

O: 7.

I: 7.

O: In 2005, I bought a home in Semei's Urzhar region. I got my residence there, and that's the place of registration for my citizenship. Life has been good ever since coming to Kazakhstan...

[other dialogue – shifts to topic of camps when we resume]

O: At the end, he... From China... They say it's study, but it's not actually study, it's a jail. Don't call it political study. It's a jail.

I: ...

O: The things I experienced there made it clear that it was a prison. I experienced it [rough treatment, I think he means] too for a week there. Despite being a simple fellow who doesn't know anything, I learned it all while I was there. I learned to write my own name. Like a bear who's learned to read the namaz after being beat with a stick enough times. It was like finding myself amidst a group of women. [no clue what he means with this last sentence...]

I: Relatives... [trying to get back on topic, possibly]

O: But I was blessed by Allah. It's just that my talking and speaking out like this, the goal is... In any case, if in the future they come out, I'll still thank Allah. Because if they get out it won't be because of something I did. One Orynbek isn't going to save them. Forget about *one* Orynbek – *ten* Orynbeks won't be able to save anyone from China.

[other dialogue – shifts to topic of paranoia]

O: So now this is why I think that everyone has sold themselves: when I was there, they said they'd sentence me for five years in Kazakhstan and five years in China. So now I think that we have traitors among us. [don't quite follow his logic here]

[other dialogue]

I: So you think that we have informers among us?

O: I guess it's possible. I mean, I don't know for a fact.

[other dialogue]

O: We just have no way of knowing.

I: But you do think that some are informers?

O: For example, I think that you could be as well. You could say the same of these guys [two Oralman sitting at the table with us]. We don't know who is. No informer will ever openly state that he's an informer, after all.

[other dialogue]

O: Because of the people who've been reported as having made it out of China, there's only me, Qairat, and Aman [he might mean Arman, since this is the witness who's too scared to talk – Aman isn't], who's now sitting scared.

[other dialogue]

O: Before Sairagul also told me that she'd speak about it to the media like me, but I haven't seen it. I haven't seen her. She came out of prison before [probably means "court"]. We greeted her at that time. [I think it's very likely that he was at the final court session.]

[other dialogue]

O: And so we sat at the same table with her. As the two of us sat at the same table and talked, Sairagul told me that inshallah, she'd say everything openly the way I have. But to this day she hasn't openly said anything. Maybe because she's scared.

I: Yes...

O: Maybe she doesn't have citizenship. I don't know.

I: She doesn't have citizenship. According to what her lawyer told me: She doesn't have citizenship now and so China could ask for her (to be taken back) at any moment, and so he's asked her not to speak out. That's what her lawyer told me. Gene was asking you if you kept going to China after immigrating here? Did you?

O: I went to China in 2016 after my father died. I didn't go there again after that. This past time that I went was only the second time.

I: So you didn't go at all between 2004 and 2016?

O: No, I didn't.

[other dialogue]

I: And he didn't have Kazakhstan citizenship?

O: Who?

I: Your father.

O: He did. He's passed away now. He died in 2016.

I: While back in China...?

O: No, he died here. There's a custom for Kazakhs who pass away here: the seven-day ceremony should... [doesn't finish, returns later] The forty-day should take place among one's relatives. So we held the forty-day here. The seven-day we held there, in accordance with Kazakh customs.

[other dialogue]

O: He was born and raised in China.

[other dialogue]

I: He was buried here?

O: He was buried here.

[other dialogue]

O: He had possessions in China. He had a certain name and reputation there.

[other dialogue]

I: You didn't go to China between 2004 and 2016?

O: I did not.

[other dialogue]

O: At the border, they have all the facts to testify to that. When I went and when I returned – it's all in the border computers. As far as I remember, I've only gone those two times. Because I don't seem to remember any other times. My thoughts (memories) are like files being deleted in a computer now.

[other dialogue]

O: They once gave me a shot here because of my nerves getting bad.

I: They did what?

O: For my nerves being damaged... Also to cure some tumor in my head.

[other dialogue]

O: I've gone to the doctor at Oskemen before, then to the doctor at Semei. This is what the two doctors told me: you have a chip in this place here [his head]. But I think I've had it since I was little... The Chinese put it there... [joking about Chinese having implanted a chip in his head]

[other dialogue]

O: That's what they said, that I had a chip here. But that's not possible. **A person's body and heart [not sure what this means]**. You'd never think that something like that were possible.

[other dialogue]

I: You said you went in 2016 for the mourning ceremony, for the seven-day one.

O: Yes.

I: You didn't have any problems coming and going at that time?

O: No one asked me anything then, nothing happened, we just went. They made us stay at an inn at that time. They took us from our relatives' home. The police there were very rough that time. We were staying at my father's younger brother's place when the police came at 12 at night to take some of us away. 'Why?' we asked, to which they said, 'You have to stay at a hotel'.

[other dialogue]

I: The government said this?

O: They said we had to do things by the law. And so we stayed at an inn.

[other dialogue]

I: Because you were foreigners?

O: Because we were foreigners.

[other dialogue]

O: There's a new law there now that if you're a Kazakhstan citizen you don't have the right to spend a night at your relatives' place.

[other dialogue]

I: That was in 2016?

O: When I went in 2017, it felt like Kazakhstan was like some sort of threat to them, that's how it is now. They look at us (people from Kazakhstan) as enemies.

[other dialogue]

I: Whom did you go to see when you went in 2017?

O: That time I went because I wanted to see the place where I was born. I mean, just count how many years it had been since I had last seen it in 2004. When we went back in 2016, it was just to shed some tears and then go back. We didn't go anywhere that time. We didn't have time. Because we went to grieve for my father, to cry for him. However, I wanted to see my place of birth. I mean, the place where you're born really warms your heart. And that's why I went. Though after going there I realized that there was nothing to see.

So I went there, but after 6 in the evening they [the police] would usually come and take me from my relatives' home. They'd come, make a loud fuss, and take me. They'd ask me what I was doing, as if I were some troublemaker. [They told me that] I had to obey the order in the city of Chohek [Tacheng]. But even when I obeyed there'd still be people keeping an eye on me from behind. Sometimes it was 3 people following me. Sometimes 4 people. They were all plainclothes, never dressed in "those other" (uniforms) clothes.

I: When was that? When you went in 2017?

O: In 2017, before I ended up in prison.

[other dialogue]

I: Before you went back in 2017, did anyone warn you that you shouldn't go or something like that?

O: Some people did. My mother said: "Don't you go there." My younger brother too, as I got to the border – he said "come back, get back here, don't cross". I asked why, and he said "I've been listening to the news from there, though I'm not sure how much of it is true." But I told him that I was a citizen of Kazakhstan and had already gone there and back before. At that time, I was very stubborn in my idea of going there, and it wasn't in my character to go back on something that I was set to do. My character's completely changed since.

I: How so?

O: Now, if someone curses or yells at me, I just look at them and laugh. I learned a lot about people's character after going there. I understood the value of freedom. After you've been a slave, oppressed, you understand it. There were many days when we'd cry by the windows: some of us were fathers, daddies. At that time, we'd be crying from thinking how great it would be to fly away like a sparrow. We hoped to be like little puppies and play. I lost all hope, thinking that I was going to be there for five years. But the great Allah gifted me a bright future. Now I'm thankful to god. Things are good.

[other dialogue]

I: Was someone meeting you when you went there in 2017?

O: My father's younger brother. Those guys. Relatives.

I: They met you at the border or at their home?

O: At the border.

[other dialogue – shifts to the topic of his document issues]

O: I didn't hand over my documents when they met me. The local authorities already had my documents in advance. The documents were already waiting for me. So they got there before me. They had been delivered to the inspection office.

I: The Chinese inspected you before you went over to their [his relatives'] place?

O: They did a full inspection and then let me go. I mean, they inspected me for 24 hours. I repeat, 24 hours. They took their time and then let me go. That's a day and a night, as you're aware. That's how it went.

I: So they took you away while you were being met at the border? Or what? I'm a bit lost.

O: When I was crossing the border, they took me aside and inspected me, and also took my documents. After taking the documents they inspected those. Then, after having inspected them, they let me go.

I: After 24 hours?

O: Yes, they let me go after 24 hours.

[other dialogue]

O: They later told me to come on December 15, at another time...

[other dialogue]

I: Did they say why?

O: They said that that's when I'd cross the border back.

I: Again?

O: Again. They said that I didn't have my registration (*hukou*). But I'd keep busy all the way until the fifteenth. I managed to go everywhere [I wanted to go]. But they gave me all my documents. However, when they did... [not really sure about the chain of events here]

I: December 15? One month?

O: December 15.

[other dialogue]

I: They took all of your documents? Your passport?

O: They took them all. Then they'd return them five days later, then take them again after some time

passed. However, they gave me a sheet of paper: a page with Chinese writing on it. I don't understand that language. I got around with that paper. [police issued him a temporary document for moving about, etc. while they were examining his passport and the rest, it sounds like]

I: They took them at the border or when you went [to your relatives'] home?

O: At the border.

[other dialogue]

O: When passing through "Bakhty" [the border crossing at Tacheng]. After inspecting everything for 24 hours there, they gave me back my passport. Then, 4-5 days later they took it again. That's how it went on. They'd keep taking it and inspecting it.

[other dialogue]

I: It wasn't hard for you to get around without documents?

O: My relatives would accompany me whenever there was any difficulty. Relatives that I hadn't seen in 15 years would take me around.

[other dialogue]

I: Where? In the city or in the village?

O: In the city. I only went to the village once or twice. Didn't go again after that. The two times I went, they [the authorities] took me away. They didn't put me in handcuffs or anything like that either of those times. I went to Moyntal in Chocek [Tacheng] – to my birthplace. I was thinking of going to a grave there. An older brother of my mother had passed away there. So I thought of going there. But it turned out to be very hard to go to Dorbiljin [Emin]. They didn't let me go to Dorbiljin [Emin]. It turned out to be a closed city. [note: that Emin is closed is consistent with what I've seen in one or two other testimonies]

[other dialogue]

I: So you were in Chocek [Tacheng] during that time [of his latest visit]?

O: I was in Chocek [Tacheng].

[other dialogue]

O: However, in the place where I stayed [not sure if he means the camp or the city here, probably the latter], there were also people from Dorbiljin [Emin], Shaghatoghay [not sure which place this is], and Altay. They were there because of their registration (*bukou*), since people had to be in the places

where they were registered.

I: Their registrations (*bukous*) were in Chochek [Tacheng]?

O: Yes, in Chochek [Tacheng], but many were people who had come to Kazakhstan, who had houses there (in Kazakhstan). Had kids there too. There was really a lot of people like that.

I: There were many like that in Chochek [Tacheng]?

O: There were many people like that in Chochek [Tacheng]... There were actually a lot of people there that I had known from before. Many of them recognized me, but I didn't recognize them. Because I was 24 when I lived there last. I had forgotten a lot since. They'd often tell me that they knew me well. But we weren't really able to speak freely, only whispering to each other, and afterwards we'd communicate through writing. Then I'd also have lots of correspondence with women, lots of conversations with them. Because I had studied together with women. I'd write to [my?] aunts, for example. I wrote to them to make sure that they were fine and doing well. They said that they were "sitting" without having done anything wrong. Detained without reason while going to visit their relatives. They were tricked into going there. They never told them that they'd suddenly take them away to study. They started by telling them that they'll go find them work, and take them away that way. Then we'll see you off to the border, they said (supposedly). But there it's always... [confused by what and whom exactly he's talking about here]

I: The Chinese?

O: They always arrest you at night there. They don't arrest during the day.

[other dialogue]

I: So where did you go in the November of 2017? To Chochek [Tacheng]?

O: Yes.

I: You stayed at your uncle's – your father's younger brother's?

O: I didn't stay at his home, I stayed with my father's older sister's children. That was where my registration was. Because no one (else?) would register me when I went there. Maybe the others were all scared to. So I wrote down the number of one guy there, but it wasn't a relative, just someone I met. I wanted to stay at that place, and he accepted because he felt bad. Because no one else wanted to register me and put me up. [confused about the details, since he starts by saying that he stayed with relatives, but then concludes by saying that he stayed with a guy who wasn't one]

I: But didn't you need to stay at a hotel?

O: I wanted to, since they didn't really want to put me up. But I think he would have felt bad if I did. Because I had been away for 15 years and had now come to see them. That's probably why he would have felt bad not letting me stay.

[other dialogue]

I: They told you to come on the fifteenth of the month to get the document(s)?

O: They said for me to come, but ended up coming and taking me themselves. They called me.

[other dialogue]

I: When did they take you away?

O: On December 15. They didn't tell me they'd be taking me away on that day, they told me that they'd see me off at the border.

[other dialogue]

I: They wanted to send you across the border at that time? According to what you've said...?

O: They said they'd send me out of the country... to Kazakhstan.

[other dialogue]

O: They don't say "Hytai" (China) there, they say "Zhongguo". They said that they would send me out of Zhongguo.

[other dialogue]

I: Was that at night, or when?

O: I don't remember what time exactly, but during the day, pretty sure.

[other dialogue]

O: But I didn't look at the time. I forget. Maybe I looked but have forgotten since.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they tell you that they were sending you out of the country by phone, or did they come and tell you in person?

O: They called. "Where are you?" they asked me. So I said I was at my father's older brother's home.

[other dialogue]

I: That's where they came after that?

O: They came and took me away from there, yes.

[other dialogue]

O: I entered the camp on the fifteenth. On the fifteenth. That's on December 15, 2017. That's when I went in there. I came to China on November 22, 2017 – that's when I crossed the border. I went into the camp on December 15, 2017. But I didn't think that I would end up in there. Like I told you yesterday [interview was spread out over two days].

They called me to say that they would see me off across the border. They first took me to a doctor to get examined. Everything: my health, all portions of my body. The doctors took all the medical forms and handed them over to the jail administration. Though I didn't think it was the jail administration at the time. I'd only learn that later. They said I'd go there to study. Not to study, to be inspected, they said [I think he's correcting himself here]. I didn't know what kinds of inspections there were, but they told me that I just needed to get this one stamp done. They'll give you a stamp on Monday, they said. So it turned out that I got locked up for needing to get a stamp [not really sure what he means].

My big mistake was signing that one form the time before [according to other outlets, he was “tricked” into signing a form to reestablish his registration (*hukou*) in China]. I thought that form was for crossing the border out of China, but they had simply tricked me. It wasn't a form for leaving China, but a Chinese citizenship form. A form to once again reclaim my Chinese citizenship. It was a form to restore my registration (*hukou*) they said. To get my *hukou* back, that's what they said this form was. So after restoring my *hukou*, they used this as the reason to take me to jail. After which I'd spend 125 days there.

We didn't count months there, we counted hours. 24 hours in a day. One day was 24 hours. By counting the time this way – by hours – we counted the days. Months, phones... we forgot everything. We even forgot what tea was, to be honest. Even if I lied about it, it would be obvious – I don't know what it's like for those there now, but that's what it was like for us. That... There was that guy Aman who came out with me. And Arman too. They can testify to that as well. What we drank [ate?] there, what we saw there. They know as well. But they're afraid of talking about it. I don't know what they're afraid of. I only know what they've told me, not what they told them [by “they” he means the prison officials, when releasing them].

When leaving... When we were leaving the prison, they told us that we were leaving “political education”, though it was actually prison. To call things by their proper names, it was prison. When we were leaving there, they said: “If you talk about this to the media or to anyone else, we'll sentence you to five years in Kazakhstan and five years in China.” Those words have stayed in our hearts. In our minds. They've really permeated us. When they said that, it stuck to us like dust to clothes. The “we'll sentence you” part. It struck panic into us. So we didn't say anything to anyone, because we were afraid to.

That's why we ask people now – everyone – if they're an informer. At that time, they jailed me on the grounds that I was an informer/traitor. Just the word “informer” scares me now. It's penetrated to my heart now. Is that an informer, I wonder...? Like, if someone sits down close to me, I pay attention to what they say. I wonder if they might be a Chinese spy, for example. That's how I think.

If I had done something wrong, had killed someone, had raped a woman... But they put me there for no reason at all. It was a guy named Zhenis who got me locked up. When leaving there, I had sworn on Allah's name – may he forgive me now – that I wouldn't talk about this to anyone [not sure if the prison authorities made him swear on Allah's name or if he did by his own volition]. Not at weddings, not at funerals. The proof is on the audio recorder there [in the prison]. Everything is there. That's why I'm not filing a complaint. Otherwise I would have filed one after returning here. After coming back, I spent about a month at home, laying low, going to the store occasionally, following my mother around, coming back home, laying around some more. Going to the toilet, eating. However, I no longer had that – what's it called? – sense of pain that I had before. If someone pinches me now I don't feel it. Because they gave us shots when we first arrived there [in prison]. I suspect it might be from that. It was an anti-flu shot. When I ask the others [who were also there?] how their health is now, they say it's good. But I don't know if that's true or not. That's about how it is.

[other dialogue]

I: You said that they did a medical examination and different analyses? Where was that? In a hospital, in jail, or where?

O: In a hospital, in China.

I: Not in jail?

O: Not in jail.

I: They brought you to a hospital first?

O: They brought me to a hospital first. In Chochek [Tacheng].

[other dialogue]

I: Do you know which hospital it was...?

O: I don't know which hospital it was. They had us get into one of those cars. The kind that drive around the streets with sirens and arrest people. One of those. It was pitch black inside.

[other dialogue]

O: There was that thing that wails [siren] on top.

[other dialogue]

I: You say the inside was pitch-black?

O: Pitch-black, and once you got in you couldn't see what was outside.

[other dialogue]

I: You were alone inside that car?

O: There were three, four, five Chinese with me.

[other dialogue]

O: Policemen... All of them.

[other dialogue]

I: What kinds of analyses did they do?

O: They did a full general health exam, examining all portions of the body, the head, the heart. They took urine and stool samples also.

[other dialogue]

I: Blood tests also?

O: Blood tests also.

[other dialogue]

I: And X-rays?

O: They took an X-ray too. They did everything [not sure if he means entire body].

I: You stood like this, holding your breath?

O: Yes, that's how they did everything [not sure what he means by "everything"].

[other dialogue]

I: Did they pay for it, or did you?

O: I didn't pay a penny. They must have covered it.

[other dialogue]

I: How many hours did it take?

O: I don't know how many hours or how long it took. But it didn't take too long.

I: Less than a day? Two days?

O: Less than a day. It was all done in that one day.

[other dialogue]

O: They put me in there [camp] on December 15.

[other dialogue]

O: After the exams... 2017...

[other dialogue]

I: They took you from the hospital to the camp?

O: They took me to the camp. Although I didn't know that it would be a camp when they first took me there.

[other dialogue]

I: That was during the day?

O: During the day. I thought... that they were taking me to the border to be taken to China [he probably means Kazakhstan?].

[other dialogue]

I: Did you see the surroundings?

O: Which surroundings?

I: The jail's.

[other dialogue]

I: When you were being taken there.

O: It was fenced off. **That typical fencing [not 100% sure what he means].**

[other dialogue]

I: Were you able to see what the streets were like? The streets...

O: There were no streets.

I: Were there buildings? What kinds of buildings were there?

[other dialogue – I ask him if they drove through fields]

O: There were no fields.

[other dialogue]

O: Oh yes, there was that kind of building. [not sure what he means]

I: Did they take you to a place inside the city?

O: I think it was inside the city, yes.

[other dialogue]

O: Inside the city.

[other dialogue]

I: What happened when you arrived there?

[other dialogue]

O: When I arrived there...

I: Who met you there?

[other dialogue]

I: What happened on the first day in camp?

O: They inspected me for 24 hours on the first day. They stretched it out over 24 hours, that's when they asked me all the questions, and then suddenly took me to the other guys. To the room. They had me strip all my clothes. I was stripped down to my underwear and with my hands behind my back when they interrogated me. After which they'd ask me questions like where I had gone, what did I sell [not sure if he means "betray"]. Basically, it was the same question over and over. After a hundred and twenty-five days I got really sick of that question.

[other dialogue]

O: They'd ask the same question over and over in different ways.

[other dialogue]

I: Were you in a separate room?

O: No, it wasn't in a separate room. When I arrived, there were eight or nine guys there, not sure

anymore.

I: No, no, I mean: where did the inspection take place?

O: The inspection... I already told you. When I was leaving Kazakhstan, that's when there was the 24-hour inspection. I told you yesterday. [misunderstanding]

I: Not in the jail?

O: Not in the jail. 24 hours.

I: And so what happened in jail?

O: There was an interrogation when I arrived at the prison. There were people there during the interrogation [not sure what he means and what people]. They asked, they inspected. They gave all the bloodwork forms to these guys. They had me strip down to my underwear. "So I'm going out in underwear now?" I snapped at them. "I'm a Kazakhstan citizen. Let me go." For which they put cuffs on my hands and legs. They brought me over to the other guys. They [the people in his cell?] didn't know Kazakh, I didn't know Chinese. We were mute, basically. We lived out a mute life. Except that our eyes were tearing and our hearts were bleeding. But that was our lot, I suppose.

We lived a life of tears in that place. I never thought that going to China would lead to such tears. On the seventh day after that, the seventh day... [stops and returns to this later] They'd [the other inmates?] would be gone during the day, and would come back in the evening. I later heard that they were going to classes, studying, then coming back. That's how it was with them. I heard that later. On the seventh day, they took me out. That was for the *tanbua* – *tanbua* means a chat between two people. They call it "tanhua" in Chinese. This chat would consist of this one question. When they interrogated me for 24 hours before, they had asked me this question. "What'd you come for? Why did you come? What's your purpose in coming?" So I just told them everything.

I said I came to visit my relatives and that I came to deregister from my *bukou*. *That thing about deregistering from my bukou I learned from Zhenis – he told me that I'd get out quicker if I said that.* So I told them there that I came to figure out the situation with my *bukou*. However, they told me that I was a Chinese citizen and that I should strip the word 'Kazakhstan' from my vocabulary. When I asked them what happened, they told me that they'd explain it to me. My hands and feet had really bad rashes at this point, and had wounds. I was wondering if I was going to make it out of there.

*There was a "deep place" [a sort of pit/well] there, and after I told them I didn't understand, they took me there to "explain". Their explaining consisted in cuffing my hands and legs and having three or four guys put me in the pit – didn't shove me in there or anything like that, though. They raised me like this and threw me in. I didn't put up any resistance. Then they told me to look up. I raised my hands and tried to move them around but couldn't [it was really cramped]. They then dumped water on me, I don't remember for how long anymore. I'm not sure how long I spent in there. When I asked the other guys they told me it had lasted until noon.*

They'd bring me back to those guys [not sure which guys – probably the interrogators]. A Kazakh guy showed up. Don't know where he came from, but I didn't speak with him that much. That Kazakh guy then told me to confess. What was I supposed to confess when I hadn't done anything wrong? *What they accused me of was taking advantage of two citizenships, of having land here, of being in*

debt here. The three of them called me a traitor. They didn't accuse me of anything else. If I had stolen something or killed somebody, then fine, treat me that way. They said I'd now have 1.5 years to learn Chinese. When I protested and asked what if I didn't learn in 1.5 years, being a Kazakhstan citizen, they told me that I wasn't a Kazakhstan citizen. They said I was a Chinese citizen.

And so that's what my life in this prison became like. On the seventh day I'd lose consciousness. Then they'd take me to some other room. The number "8" was written on the outside. When I entered, I saw other Kazakhstan citizens, which made me very happy, but I didn't tell them about what I had been through. Everything about my rashes was written down there [not sure where exactly]. I don't know what ointment they smeared on me. They took full charge of it. Then they took me to the other guys. They took me to them with my rashes completely sorted out. [it sounds like they gave him light medical treatment for the rashes/wounds probably caused by the cuffs, just before transferring to the cell with the other prisoners]

I wouldn't tell those guys [in the cell] anything – about the trials I had just gone through, all that stuff. I thought it might harm them if I told them about those. I might have been a Kazakhstan citizen, but all that abuse from before was fresh in my mind, and so I was afraid to say anything. I thought that they might punish me and throw me in the pit again, bury me in there.

Afterwards, I became impartial to death and would push myself towards it. I tried to do away with myself with my own hands. I had a red shirt, which I ripped and tried to use to strangle myself in the toilet, but there was a camera there that I wasn't aware of, and which they saw me through. That's where they'd beat me before taking me out. The Kazakh guys separated us. [not sure exactly what happened – it sounds like the inmates stopped him from fighting the prison guards?] But it's not like I didn't get abused there. I did. Because I talked back to them. I told them I was a Kazakhstan citizen. I didn't hit them. They hit me. I didn't raise my arms at them, at all. My health wouldn't have allowed it anyway.

Then they'd give shots – not just to me but to everyone. A general shot. I'm a Kazakhstan citizen, right? So I figured I had the right to ask them: "What kind of shot is this?" They said it was an anti-flu shot. They asked me why I wanted to know. I said: "I'm a Kazakhstan citizen, will you answer my question?" "We answered," he said. "It's against the flu." What could I do? He said it was against the flu. The order's severe but life's precious, so what can you do?

Every day we'd wake up in the morning, sing songs, singing *qilai*, *qilai*... We'd sing when having tea. Whenever we'd eat, we'd sing. If we didn't sing, they wouldn't feed us.

I: What kinds of songs?

O: The first was *mei you gongchandang*, then *dongfanghong*, then *qilai*. Those three songs.

I: What songs are those?

O: I didn't get the *dongfanghong* song. *Qilai* was a national (patriotic) song. It's the Chinese national anthem, apparently. That's *qilai*... *Mei you gongchandang* is opposed to a newly established country, a newly established political system [I think he probably means "opposed to doing away with Party rule" or something of the sort]. Anyway, you sing *mei you gongchandang*, *mei you xin zhongguo*. That's how it goes. I don't know what that song means.

I: You don't know?

O: But it was against the [a new?] political system. It was a song in support of the [current?] political system.

[other dialogue]

O: They wrote down those three songs for me when I arrived there. You'll memorize these three songs, they said, and if you can't do it in a year and a half you won't leave here. The walls in that room weren't white [clean/empty] either – they were filled with Chinese writing. It was all in Chinese, nothing in Kazakh. There was both Chinese and Uyghur. Chinese on one side and Uyghur on the other. The songs were written out in both languages. There were both songs and their lists (of rules). How do live, how to talk... All of that was written there.

[other dialogue]

I: What kinds of writings were there?

O: There were both Chinese and Uyghur writings on the walls.

[other dialogue]

O: Then they would inspect us on the days off. Sunday was the day off. That's when they'd inspect us. We didn't look directly at them. We'd look at them furtively. At that time, we'd keep both hands crossed like this [forget the exact visual]. You'd look at the floor. We'd steal glances at them while looking at the ground. I was the only one who would just look at the ground [didn't want to look at inspectors or too afraid to]. The others would look [at the inspectors]. They had weapons on them. That place had its own military order (way of doing things).

We'd often look out the window. We'd look out now and then. We were still humans, after all. We were just thankful to see the sun. There were days when we didn't. Those felt like days lying in a dark cage. Although, thinking back to it, it all seems like it was a dream, to be honest. Like a dream. But for you it's funny [might also mean "interesting"/"entertaining"]. Not just for you, but for the others who've come to hear about it. The media in Kazakhstan as well. Those who want to know the truth. However, regardless of how much I tell you about it, it doesn't accomplish anything.

[other dialogue]

I: Yes, I couldn't help laughing, because you said that although you tried your best to talk about the real situation in China, there was no result.

O: That's the reality, no?

I: Yes, it is. I was trying to explain this. If it were in our hands, we would destroy those camps, but

it's not.

O: I have all the evidence. They imprisoned me there, tortured me, but the Chinese will never say they tortured me. They will say they did nothing to me, never bitten ["abused"?] me, because they threatened me by showing me my relatives' photos. [from another media outlet and his own account later: there was an interrogation where they took out photos of his family members and asked him about them]

I: How? How did they torture you?

O: Their torture... It was so hard for me to sleep with shackles pressing on my wrists. Then they put me into that pit/well, which hurt badly. Then in the second prison, that was the second time they'd torture me. The third time was when they were transporting me to the second prison from the first: I had to wear a black hood on my head. The fourth time they showed me my relatives' photos to threaten me. My heart was broken when they did that.

[other dialogue]

I: Did you have to wear that black thing for the whole night? [black hood during camp transfer]

O: They took us in the evening. We got there in about an hour or an hour and half, I think.

[other dialogue]

I: How did they take you to the second prison? Were you taken outside? How did it happen?

O: We went outside. Yes, outside. When we were outside, I saw, you know, I saw a building like this, but it was bigger [we were sitting by a typical multi-story in the center of Almaty]. I'm not sure if it was 5-story or 7-story building, the rooms and the building itself were so tall. We got out of the car(s), we were told there were approximately 500 people. I didn't count, the teachers told me so. No need [for the teachers?] to lie about that. However, they tied us to each other and made us wear hoods... [this is what Amanzhan said as well]

I: How many people were there in your prison cell? In the room, I mean.

O: In the beginning there were nine or ten people. During the first days...

[other dialogue]

O: Then the second day there were 14 people. The third day... it differs actually. There were different people every week.

[other dialogue]

I: How many people were there in the cell in the second prison?

O: 24 or 25 people.

I: How did you sleep?

O: There was a bed. We slept in beds. Chinese beds, two beds [bunks?]. We slept there. **When we had just gotten there, there were no beds. There was just a wooden frame to sleep on. That's what we slept on.**

I: For one day? Did you sleep without a bed on just the first day?

O: There were lots of beds. We slept there for 25 days.

I: Didn't you say you slept on a wooden frame?

O: **We spent almost a month on the wooden frame. I slept on the wooden frame till I left.**

I: Without a [real] bed?

O: Without a [real] bed. When I first arrived at the second prison we slept without a [real] bed.

[other dialogue]

O: Because there weren't any beds. There were 25 people. There were beds in the other cells. Because there was a lack of beds. They told us they would bring beds, but I would already leave the prison by the time they brought them.

[other dialogue]

I: How was it possible for 25 people live in a small cell?

O: The cell was big. How can I put it...? Its length was from here to there [about the length of our outside seating area at café]. Yes, that's right. Width is from here...

I: From there to here?

O: Yes, that's right. The length reaches there. I think so. **[maybe something like 40-60 square meters, if not more... if memory serves correctly]**

[other dialogue]

I: Wasn't it crowded?

O: Sorry?

I: I mean the room, the prison cell. Wasn't it crowded?

O: It was, but what could we do? It was cold there. I mean, in the second prison.

[other dialogue]

O: **The second prison was cold, because it wasn't completed. The second prison wasn't constructed well.**

[other dialogue]

I: How long did it take you to get to the second prison from the first?

O: I think it took us an hour, or an hour and a half.

[other dialogue]

I: By bus?

O: It was that vehicle with the sirens. We got into that car. The white vehicles I mean. The ones that make those harsh [maybe better translated as “annoying”/“unpleasant”?] on the streets. The ones they usually use to arrest people, you know? I’ve told you before.

I: You mean the...?

O: It’s similar to a GAZelle [kind of Soviet minivan].

[other dialogue]

O: There were seats. We sat in them.

I: Did you sit in a row?

O: Yes, we sat next to each other. There were people in front of us as well.

[other dialogue]

O: There were many cars like that. I mean, it’s not easy to transfer 500 people. So there were many of them. All the cars had sirens. We heard them.

[other dialogue]

I: What about your head?

O: We were wearing those sacks on our head. We couldn’t see. It wasn’t like the ones the burglars wear – they can at least see, right? We couldn’t. It was a sack.

I: How was the second prison? Was the building big?

O: No, it wasn’t. It was a small one-story building. [also consistent with Amanzhan’s testimony – second prison was a single-story building close to the race track]

[other dialogue]

O: It was wide... The volume, I mean.

[other dialogue]

O: It was long, and there was a rail like this, which divided the hall into two parts [not sure which hall he means].

I: You mean two blocks?

O: Yes. Two blocks.

I: You said a one-story building?

O: Yes, one. There are two things in two sides [not sure what this means]. But it is long. Tall [wide?] and long.

[other dialogue]

O: I didn't have my phone with me. Otherwise, I would have photographed all of it and showed you now.

[other dialogue]

I: What did they take from you and what did they return to you when you were released?

[other dialogue]

I: What did they take in the first prison?

O: Sorry?

I: Did they take anything from you?

O: They had taken all of my stuff. But they'd return when I was released. For example: documents, phone, etc. They had taken everything.

I: Did they return them while you were being transferred to the second prison?

O: No, they didn't. They returned my stuff when I was released from the prison. The first and second were connected to each other [still prison]. They just changed the location.

[other dialogue]

O: We didn't have a proper bag. They gave us a black [plastic] bag. We put our blanket, pillow, and clothes in it. [prior to the transfer]

[other dialogue]

O: It was similar to that black bag that we wore on our hands a short while ago. [had just eaten hamburgers, for which the café provided black plastic gloves to avoid hands getting messy]

[other dialogue]

I: Where were the things you took with you when you went to China?

O: I put it in a bag. They returned it when I was leaving.

[other dialogue]

I: Did you have only a few things?

O: Yes, there weren't many things. Just clothes.

[other dialogue]

O: Because I couldn't buy anything there. I didn't have time for shopping.

[other dialogue]

O: I left the prison with the clothes that I wore in the cell. I found new clothes when I opened my bag. I think my relatives might have brought them, the new clothes. So I put them on.

[other dialogue]

O: The old clothes I threw away when I left the prison.

[other dialogue]

O: So, now I don't have those clothes with me. I didn't bring any of the stuff I had in prison with me. I threw away all that stuff.

[other dialogue]

I: How did you spend your days there? In the first prison.

O: How I spent my time...? I didn't get you.

I: For example, what did you do after waking up? That's what he's [me] asking about.

O: After getting up we needed to recite songs, then take lessons until the evening. You have to study. You don't need to work there.

[other dialogue]

I: Did you have a teacher?

O: The teacher would stay for about forty minutes, and then leave the class. Sometimes they'd leave

after 20 minutes. The rest of the time we'd have to study by ourselves, for ourselves [not sure what is meant by "for ourselves"].

[other dialogue]

I: Did the teacher come to your cell or did you have a dedicated place to study?

O: No, we had a school there. A separate school. We studied with women. [not sure if he means a separate building or a classroom]

[other dialogue]

O: The school was very close.

[other dialogue]

I: How many women were there?

O: About 80 or 90.

[other dialogue]

I: In the whole prison?

O: In our school, there were five classes – from the first to the fifth class. There was that amount of students in a class. [not sure what he means]

[other dialogue]

O: It was like this. For example, if we had lessons from nine to ten, then other inmates would come in after us. We had a lack of schools [not sure if he means "classrooms"].

[other dialogue]

O: Because there was a lot of people. That's why we had to take turns having lessons. There were five classes and all of them had the same system.

[other dialogue]

O: The most serious crime there was, according to the Chinese law... [digression?]

[other dialogue]

I: So there were more than a hundred people in a class?

O: Sometimes yes, sometimes less than that. It depended on the numbers of inmates...

[other dialogue]

O: Because the number of the detainees kept growing and no one was released.

[other dialogue]

I: What did you learn in those classes?

O: We learned how to write. We learned discipline, and how to communicate with others. [note: Orynbek is mostly illiterate, having only done 2 years of grade school]

[other dialogue]

O: We learned songs, as always. But we were thinking about other things while we were writing. We couldn't concentrate. We were thinking about what was happening with our relatives, what they were doing. And having regrets about our own lives, for example.

[other dialogue]

O: There were regrets about coming to China. I asked myself why I came to China, why I didn't stay in Kazakhstan...

I: How many Kazakhs and how many Uyghurs were there in your class?

O: I'm not sure. I don't know how many, but there were many of them.

[other dialogue]

O: I mean, the numbers of Kazakhs and Uyghurs were the same there, so if you had 1000 Uyghurs, then there'd have to be 1000 Kazakhs too.

[other dialogue]

I: Who were the people who were in your class or around you?

O: Next to me sat a Kazakh boy, and there were women on the other side.

[other dialogue]

O: The desk was like this, you know. You needed to sit in a row. Two people per desk.

I: In a row like this? [not sure how]

O: Yes, that's what we sat like. We didn't count the number of people there. Because we were so tired psychologically. All we thought about was how to leave the prison.

[other dialogue]

O: If we were to count the number of the people there...

[other dialogue]

O: There were Hui, Uyghurs, and Kazakhs. Tatars and Russians.

[other dialogue]

O: Han Chinese as well.

[other dialogue]

O: There were Han Chinese. There were two of them. Aman [other ex-detainee] said he saw 10. But I hadn't seen 10; I'd only seen 2.

[other dialogue]

I: Were the two Han in your cell?

O: There were two Han.

[other dialogue]

O: One Han was in the first prison cell, and then there was another in the second prison cell. [not sure if he means different cells or prisons]

[other dialogue]

O: Later they were transferred elsewhere. Both of them disappeared. Never saw them again. They told me they were Han. Since I don't understand their language, I didn't actually talk to them personally. It was the other inmates who told me so. Lots of people in the prison wanted to talk to me, since they were Chinese citizens. They wanted to hear about Kazakhstan. They asked whether I would take them in if they went to Kazakhstan, because they didn't have any relatives there.

[other dialogue]

I: Did you talk to each other?

O: Yes, sometimes we did when we had time. We didn't talk every day. If there is too much talk, then the monitor will inform the Chinese. If you say something bad about them [the Chinese or the monitor?], they go to the Han Chinese directly.

[other dialogue]

I: Was he Kazakh?

O: He was Uyghur... But there were Kazakh monitors too.

[other dialogue]

O: The Kazakhs were the natives. They were arrested because they had a fight with someone a decade ago. [don't understand what he means]

[other dialogue]

O: We had military training sessions. I don't know why, but we did.

[other dialogue]

I: Where? In the prison or outside? The training, I mean...

O: The training was outside. I mean, in the hall. I've told you that it was long and yes, two gates fencing off the two sides. It's impossible to cross them. We could see nothing but the sky. [it sounds like it was an open-air yard/space inside the building, fenced off on all sides]

[other dialogue]

O: It was like this. Basically, the wall is like this one that's surrounding us. Only the sky can be seen. There is a wall around it. [not 100% clear here]

[other dialogue]

I: What kind of training was it?

O: It was like doing sports. As well as proper military walking [marching?]. Also lying down quickly and doing it as usual [?]. You needed to move your body.

[other dialogue – I ask if there were martial arts drills]

O: They taught us how to fight. Yes, they did.

[other dialogue]

I: How many hours did it last?

O: 20 or 30 minutes a day, I think. For example, if they trained us for half an hour, they'd then train the others for that same length of time. Our trainers were detained there themselves. They had never visited Kazakhstan.

[other dialogue]

I: Were the trainers from China?

O: Ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs from China.

I: They were inmates, right?

O: They were political re-education camp inmates.

I: The people who were being politically re-educated trained you?

O: Yes, because that was the order. They were ordered to do so.

[other dialogue]

O: All of the training was in the second prison. In the first one there was no such thing, actually.

[other dialogue]

I: You didn't have training in the first prison?

O: No, we didn't. In the first, we would recite songs. Take lessons. Study discipline, how to communicate with others. And we had to speak Mandarin.

[other dialogue]

I: Who taught you?

O: What? Songs?

I: Songs.

O: The guys in the prison taught me. They did it because they were told to do so. This is the rule – if you speak Mandarin, you must teach the ones who didn't. They would be reprimanded if they didn't. In order to be freed, you had to teach someone. This was an order – if you wanted to be

released, you had to do it.

[other dialogue – I ask him about instructors]

O: There was a woman named Asiya, in the second prison. She was in her fifties. She was our teacher. She refused to teach us at the beginning, but then they took her away. When she came back, she started teaching us. That was an order.

[other dialogue]

I: Was she Kazakh?

O: Yes, Kazakh. She had lived in Kazakhstan. She had intended to obtain Kazakhstan citizenship. I really feel bad for her. I hope she can return home soon... All of her family members are in Kazakhstan. She has nothing there in China, not even her own house.

[other dialogue]

I: Did she say she would obtain Kazakhstan citizenship?

O: She was one of the people who wanted to get Kazakhstan citizenship. She told me herself.

[other dialogue]

I: Did she speak Chinese?

O: She had taught Chinese at a school. She was my sister's teacher [this is the first time Orynbek mentions having a sister – not sure if he means a female relative or a sister-in-law]. She taught lots of people. She was well known in our county.

[other dialogue]

I: What was the food like? How many meals did you have a day?

O: We had three meals a day: in the morning and in the evening. In the afternoon, we always had rice. Just rice. They didn't add any salt in the food. I spent 125 days in the prison and never had a meal with salt. [this contradicts another published report where he tells of the day they brought them salt and it was a really big deal]

[other dialogue]

O: For each meal, we were given a *mantou* – a steamed bun – to eat. We had to eat three steamed buns over the course of the day. In the evenings, we had soup. Watery soup.

[other dialogue]

O: However, we never starved there. I don't know the reason, but we were usually full.

[other dialogue]

O: But although we never starved, it wasn't because the food was nutritious. Meat was hard to find. We had meat every 10 or 15 days, and we were delighted "as if our fathers had been resurrected" [should check the translation here – probably a Kazakh idiom].

[other dialogue]

O: Sometimes, I think back to it and cry.

[other dialogue]

I: What did you have for lunch?

O: Always had rice for lunch. We had rice for lunch every time.

[other dialogue]

I: Didn't you have anything else apart from rice?

O: Nothing else. Just rice. They served the rice in a large bowl. This big. [forget the visual here, but probably just means a big communal pot or something of that nature]

I: What about dinner?

O: It depended. We ate what they brought us.

I: Which was...?

O: We sometimes had soup. What do you call it...? "Bone soup"? [probably means 骨头汤] And corns [corn on the cob?]. You know, all the Chinese things, their traditional food. I forgot what those foods of theirs are called.

[other dialogue]

O: Someone once asked me about the food there. It makes me laugh talking about the food, you know.

[other dialogue – I ask why]

O: Because they served the food in a bowl. Not a bowl, but what I would call a “tegesh” [dialectical word meaning “basin”].

I: “Tegesh”? What is that?

O: It’s for pouring water. How do you call it? Do you call it “baqyr”?

I: Mugs?

O: Mugs? It might have been a big mug then. We had soup in mugs.

[other dialogue]

O: We just joked to each other, saying “let’s have our meat soup”. Anyway, it was just soup.

[other dialogue]

I: Did all of you have it? Or were there people who didn’t eat or drink?

O: You had to have it. Otherwise, you’d starve.

[other dialogue]

I: Did anyone refuse to eat?

O: If there had been such people, they would have starved. If you don’t eat, somebody else is ready to eat it for you. [this sounds different from what Amanzhan said about some people refusing to eat because they thought there were drugs put inside]

I: How did you get acquainted with Aman?

O: We got acquainted when we were released. We knew each other [from the prison]. We saw each other, but couldn’t talk to each other.

[other dialogue]

I: Were you in the same prison as Aman?

O: Yes, we were in the same prison. We had a meal together there, but I mean, we were afraid to talk to each other. [not sure how they would have had a meal together, since I don’t think they were cellmates – maybe during some special circumstances]

[other dialogue]

O: We were in the same place.

[other dialogue]

I: Were you together in both prisons?

O: Yes. But while we'd see each other, we didn't dare talk.

[other dialogue]

O: We were "like a cat and a mouse" [probably a Kazakh metaphor – not the same implication as in English]. We'd keep watching each other like a cat and mouse. **We slept in the same cell in the second prison.**

I: When was he released? Were you released at the same time?

O: We left the prison at the same time.

[other dialogue]

I: In March or April?

O: We were released on April 12... That was it. I don't have anything else to talk about, to be honest. I'm really tired of talking about this, you know. And anyway the story is too long to finish. We need to burn the midnight oil here if we're to finish it. I mean, the three of us would need to sleep in this restaurant.

[other dialogue]

O: Because I spent 125 days there...

[other dialogue]

I: Did anything happen there that affected you deeply?

O: Affected me deeply? Like, torture?

I: Okay, it can be torture...

[other dialogue]

O: First, the feeling that I was imprisoned despite being innocent. That tortured me. And I felt terrible when they showed me photos of my relatives.

I: When did they show you those photos?

O: In the second prison. 5 or 10 before I'd be released... I don't remember now.

I: The guards showed them to you?

O: The prison staff. I don't know who gave them the photos, or where they got them.

[other dialogue]

I: Were you in those photos or just your relatives?

O: No, I wasn't in those photos. They were my relatives' photos – relatives in Kazakhstan, not in China. All were relatives who were in Kazakhstan. When I saw the photos, I thought...

[other dialogue]

I: Do you have those photos with you?

O: No, I don't have them. I left them in China.

[other dialogue]

O: They were just simple photos. I wonder how they got those photos.

I: They might have taken them from here. [might be referring to Orynbek's wallet]

O: No, I didn't have any photos with me. I didn't have any photos in my wallet. I don't know how they got them. When I saw the photos I thought that they had seized all of my relatives in Kazakhstan, that they arrested them all.

[other dialogue]

O: It was like this, you see? [shows a typical ID-style standard photo]

[other dialogue]

O: This is my father's photo.

[other dialogue]

O: They put all the photos like this... Maybe... I think...

[other dialogue]

I: Did they do the same thing to other inmates?

O: I don't know.

[other dialogue]

I: Where [did this take place]? In the cell?

O: Not in the cell. I was shown them when I was about to be released. I thought everybody was...

because of me...

[other dialogue]

O: I mean, I thought that maybe all of them came to rescue me.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they talk to you in Kazakh?

O: There was a Han sitting next to me and a Kazakh guy who translated for me.

I was in jail for 125 days, but I didn't learn any Chinese. I spoke to whoever came in only Kazakh. They wanted to beat me, but couldn't. They hit me in the beginning, even tortured me. Because I was a rebel, you know. But I didn't fight, just bickered, as I was a citizen of Kazakhstan, not China.

[other dialogue]

O: Kazakh teachers told me quite openly to go back to Kazakhstan as soon as possible. When I asked them why, they said that I was a burden for them. I didn't learn Chinese. I could only say "ni hao". That was it. Nothing more.

[other dialogue]

O: I could learn anything else, to be honest. I only learned how to write my name. In 125 days...

[other dialogue]

O: During my 125 days in prison, it took me a month or a month and half to learn one song, you know. Many people doubt it. Because I... Chinese...

[other dialogue – I ask if he learned to write]

I: He is asking if you learned how to write.

O: Yes, but I can only write a few things.

I: Did you learn anything [else?]?

O: Yes, a little.

[other dialogue]

I: Were there tests?

O: Yes, there were. I scored 100 points on all the tests because the guy beside me helped me. The teachers helped me as well.

[other dialogue]

I: In the cell?

O: Some people might have monitored us through the camera, because the teachers helped me a lot.

[other dialogue]

O: Actually, that was my priority there since I was illiterate. My being uneducated made things simpler. The teachers described me as a bad learner, to whom it is impossible to teach anything there in prison, seeing as how I had never been able to learn anything even before my imprisonment.

[other dialogue]

O: The teachers told me to my face: “Orynбек, it would be better if you left for Kazakhstan now”. When I asked why, they told me that they were exhausted from constantly worrying about me. Because, you know, they’re Kazakh and the Hans accused them of being unable to teach me Chinese.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they punish you for that?

O: They told me I would spend 5 years in prison, which [them telling him?] was enough punishment for me.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they show you any documents?

O: Actually, they said that they would give us a piece of paper when we left the prison. But they didn’t give it to me. Maybe because I didn’t pass their exam. In the end, they just gave this to me, not that document. [he’s referring to a small slip they gave him for getting his documents done, I think]

[other dialogue]

I: Did they beat anyone?

O: Where?

[other dialogue]

O: No. Hmm, yes, I witnessed some. But they weren't beaten because of me.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they beat others?

O: Yes, I saw that they hung a few people. I don't know why they hung them but they did. It was in the second prison.

[other dialogue]

I: Where did they hang them?

[other dialogue]

I: Where exactly?

O: I don't know the exact location. The second prison is in Chocek [Tacheng].

I: No, I mean: in the cell or in the prison?

O: Inside the prison. Not outside.

[other dialogue]

I: How did you know they were hung?

O: We saw it. They showed it to us.

[other dialogue]

I: How many people [were hung]?

O: Two. They were hung facing each other. I don't know the reason for why they were hung.

[other dialogue]

O: We didn't ask [the reason]. But they kept them hanging for the whole day. 24 hours, I think.

[other dialogue]

O: Hearing them cry out, we didn't dare do anything against them. We couldn't fight back. There were small fights among the inmates though.

[other dialogue]

O: Yes, there were fights among ourselves. Because we were explosive. We had become ill-tempered.

[other dialogue]

O: For example, if I keep asking you the same question, and you get fed up with it, since you don't even know why you came there, right? Then it leads to a fight. That is what usually happened there.

[other dialogue]

I: How many fights did you witness?

O: I witnessed one or two.

[other dialogue]

O: In the first prison, I was kept in the cell for thirty days [he is probably talking about a stretch of 30 days – not that he spent 30 days there total, which wouldn't mesh with the other dates]. I didn't go out of the cell. The doors were closed. Our food was delivered to the doors.

[other dialogue]

O: The toilet was inside the cell.

[other dialogue]

I: Did the people who get in fights get punished?

O: No, there was no additional punishment. If you shouted, you would be put in a separate small room. [solitary confinement]

I: Could you be hung for fighting?

O: It happened only once or twice. [not sure if this is negative or affirmative]

[other dialogue]

I: You said there was a separate cell?

O: Yes, there was a small cell. It was only the size of a desk, about.

I: Were they locked up there?

O: Yes, they were. It didn't have a window.

[other dialogue]

O: There was neither a window nor a light in that [solitary-confinement] cell. It was pitch-dark.

[other dialogue]

O: No beds inside.

[other dialogue]

I: No bed, just cement. What about the heating?

O: There was heating in the first prison. We were dressed like this (what I am wearing now) in the first prison. [light summer clothes, long pants and a T-shirt]

I: I mean the heating pipes.

O: Yes, there were the heating pipes. I didn't see anything like that in the second prison. We had to put on more clothes.

[other dialogue]

I: Did the inmates get sick?

O: Lots of them did. Plenty were sick.

[other dialogue]

O: There were many sick people.

[other dialogue]

O: Too many. I was sick because it was cold there. Not once but several times I had to stay in bed because of my illness. But you can't say you're ill when you are ill. [does he mean "not allowed to say you're ill"?]

[other dialogue]

I: What illness did you have?

O: The flu.

[other dialogue]

O: Then I started suffering from mental problems.

I: What?

O: Nerves. It is too noisy... [he means our surroundings]

I: Nerves? What do you mean?

O: My brain can't bear it. I can't bear noise or when people talk too much. I don't like going to the places like clubs, for example.

[other dialogue]

O: I hate those things. I spend my free time on my phone now. I talk a lot on the phone. I want to forget everything, you know, but people like you don't give me the chance to forget them. You never stop asking.

[other dialogue]

O: I talk a lot on the phone now, and make friends via the phone.

I: How do you get acquainted with others?

O: Through Facebook, for example. I chat with others like everyone else does.

[other dialogue]

I: But how can you get acquainted with people via the phone?

O: There are groups like these, and you can talk there, introduce yourself. [I think he just means WhatsApp chat groups and the like]

[other dialogue]

O: You know what's happening in the group. And I'm single, so it's okay for me I think.

[other dialogue]

I: [You talk] with girls?

O: Girls and guys.

[other dialogue]

O: Now, a lot of people want to know about China. Why? Because many people have relatives in China who are in detention. And there are rumors...

[other dialogue]

O: Not long ago, someone asked me if the rumor that the inmates got abused by wearing headphones is true. That one is not true. [I think he's referring to that story about helmets that played bell noises for 21 hours a day]

I: What do they do?

O: They abuse them by making them wear headphones. They don't abuse anyone like that. I've never seen it.

[other dialogue]

I: So they don't make you wear those helmets or anything like that?

O: No, there isn't any such thing.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they turn off the light at night?

O: The light was turned off at night. We guarded at nights.

I: Whom did you guard?

O: Whom else could we guard? Ourselves. We guarded ourselves.

[other dialogue]

I: From being beaten up?

O: Two people would guard for an hour, in turns. Guarding the others until morning. [this is actually what the university student who claimed to be detained at the detention center in Urumqi for 6 months also said they did – to prevent people from committing suicide, etc.]

I: How did you turn the light off?

O: They did it. [the guards? not sure]

[other dialogue]

O: We didn't care about the light. It's none of my business if China's energy is wasted or not. They told me very clearly: "If you stay here for a year and a half or even for five years, the expenditures will not affect our budget even slightly."

[other dialogue]

O: The warden told me this in Chinese, you know. When I said I didn't understand his language in

Kazakh, he was furious that I hadn't forgotten how to say that sentence in Kazakh [furious that Orynbek was still speaking Kazakh?] and hadn't learned any Chinese. He said that this was because my mind was toxic. Otherwise, I would have already been speaking in Chinese.

[other dialogue]

O: They said quite clearly to me that feeding me for another five years wouldn't be a problem for them. They told me not to worry about it. They wouldn't ask for money, and they wouldn't give me money either. There was enough budget money to sustain me.

[other dialogue]

O: They kept their word, you know. They didn't ask for any money. I didn't pay for the meals, didn't pay for anything. I neither borrowed nor lent money.

[other dialogue]

I: Was the toilet in the cell?

O: It was inside the cell. Next to where we slept.

I: In which part of the cell? In the corner?

O: It was in the corner in the first prison, but it had a door. In the second prison, it was open and there was no door. [consistent – this would be expected if the first prison was an established elderly care facility and the second was just a hastily constructed detention facility]

[other dialogue]

I: Was there a camera?

O: Yes, there were cameras everywhere.

[other dialogue]

I: In what part of the cell was the camera installed?

O: In the corner. They see us. [not sure what he meant]

I: Was there a room or a place without cameras?

O: The cameras were everywhere. The separate small room I told you about [solitary confinement] didn't have a camera.

[other dialogue]

O: I was locked there several times. It was a dark room.

[other dialogue]

I: For what?

O: Because I didn't speak Chinese.

[other dialogue]

O: I was accused of speaking for Kazakh and in Kazakh [not sure what he means by "for Kazakh"].  
I was the main criminal.

[other dialogue]

I: How many times did you get locked in there?

O: I'm not sure if I remember it correctly, but three or four times, I think.

[other dialogue – I ask about how long each lock-up lasted]

O: Sometimes two hours. For example, the first time I spent two hours there. The second time was four hours. But I was never locked up for 24 hours or anything like that. [I don't know if he means to contradict other testimonies – i.e., by Omirbek or Qairat – where they attested to days of solitary confinement]

[other dialogue]

I: What happened during the two hours in that room?

O: You had to contemplate, to reflect on your misdeeds. That meant having to think about staying in China.

But regardless of what they did to me, they weren't able to make me stay in China. Because Allah was with me and let me go. Because I believe in God. If I didn't believe in God, you know, nothing would have stopped my hands from moving when I tried to commit suicide by strangling myself. That was God stopping me. I really wanted to kill myself, but I couldn't.

[other dialogue – answering why he tried to commit suicide]

O: The reason for committing a suicide was...

[other dialogue]

O: "What's the point of living?" I thought. "Why do I need to live? I'm alone anyway."

[other dialogue]

O: But then I understood that I wasn't alone in this life, you know. I have my motherland – Kazakhstan.

[other dialogue]

I: And that's why you didn't kill yourself?

O: On the other hand, it's not like they would have given me the chance. They were watching through the camera. How could I...? [a bit contradictory, since he says earlier that the solitary confinement room didn't have any cameras]

[other dialogue]

I: Were there other people who... [tried to kill] themselves?

O: I have no idea.

[other dialogue]

O: But there were many people who went mad.

[other dialogue]

I: How did you know that they went mad?

O: We could hear them shouting.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they shout for no reason?

O: People shout when they go mad. What else can they do? They scream, for example. They hit themselves against the wall.

[other dialogue]

O: They had lost their mind. For instance, say you're imprisoned for 125 days, they don't give you permission to leave, they don't give you a phone, they don't let you drink tea. Will you shout? It's just

like that. You'll find yourself shouting "Let me out!", won't you?

I: Were there people who cried?

O: There were. I was one of them.

[other dialogue]

I: Did you hear each other crying?

O: We did. When I screamed, the men and women on the third floor heard it. [presumably in the first prison, though one wonders how he knows that they heard it, given limited communication]

[other dialogue]

O: We heard lots of people crying out. I heard that they tortured one Han man for seven days. He was tortured inhumanely. I don't know why they did it.

[other dialogue]

I: Did he cry?

O: He did.

[other dialogue]

O: He told me that himself actually. He spoke Chinese, but the guy next to me translated. He said he was a man, and so would never cry. He told me I wasn't manly when I cried. He told me I didn't experience what he had experienced. He was telling the truth, because he had been tortured unbelievably.

[other dialogue]

O: The inmates there encouraged me a lot and said that I would be released. They told me not to give up.

[other dialogue]

O: The Kazakh inmates told me that the Han would easily kill anybody. Killing you wouldn't be a problem either. So if you wanted to be freed, then you had to discipline yourself. Just don't go against what they say. I agreed. What choice did I have?

[other dialogue]

I: How old were those inmates?

O: There was a man as old as 82 and a man as young as 18. In the first prison, I also saw a pregnant woman.

[other dialogue]

O: I also saw a disabled man.

[other dialogue]

O: He was on crutches. These are the ones I witnessed myself. I asked the 18-year-old why he was there. He said that he was sent there for having WhatsApp on his phone. If you grow a beard, you are a Wahhabi. If you pray, you're a terrorist. What do you call those guys who bomb...?

I: Terrorists.

O: Yes. If you pray, then you're one of those. In which case, using WhatsApp is considered to be a second crime, one that makes you a member of a criminal group. The third crime is visiting abroad, especially visiting Kazakhstan, Turkey, and even going to Kashgar or Hotan. They are detaining those who've visited Urumqi, you know.

[other dialogue]

I: What's wrong with going to Urumqi or Hotan?

O: I don't know. They never give the reason.

[other dialogue]

O: I'm not sure if the guys in prison were telling the truth or not. That's just what they told me.

[other dialogue]

O: But the people who were in the same cell with me told the same thing.

[other dialogue]

O: There was an Uyghur guy whose feet were swollen. He had gotten a serious illness. When I asked the reason for his detention, he told me that they found him guilty of delivering and selling gravestones in Urumqi.

I: You said his feet were swollen?

O: He didn't break his leg. His feet were swollen. His feet would swell up whenever he walked, but wouldn't when he rested. So he had to remain lying down. But he was a really skillful guy, you know. He was an Uyghur guy, but he could sing in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Mongol. And then he could sing English songs as well. Like me, he had never gone to school. It was his natural talent. He told me: "Aga (Brother), I've never been to Kazakhstan. If I go there, will you meet me?" I said to him, "Yes, I'll meet you. I'll help you get married." He said he was married already. I even told him that if he came along with his wife, I'd help them get a patch of land from the government before the other guys and help him obtain Kazakhstan citizenship.

[other dialogue]

O: But now it seems unrealistic. When will he be released? Will he be released at all? Will he be given a prison term? All questions without answers.

[other dialogue]

I: What was the smell in the prison like?

O: What?

I: How did the prison smell?

O: How the prison smelled? No need to talk about that.

[other dialogue]

O: It was awful, of course. Is there a good prison [smell]?

[other dialogue]

O: How else could it smell when you've got the toilet inside the cell?

[other dialogue]

I: Did they clean it?

O: We cleaned it ourselves.

[other dialogue]

O: Hygiene did us a lot of good.

[other dialogue]

I: How did you clean?

O: There was water and a cleaning cloth.

[other dialogue]

O: We took turns cleaning the toilet. Two people would clean it each time.

[other dialogue]

I: Did you clean all the rooms?

O: Only ours.

[other dialogue]

I: You said they put you in a pit/well. When was that?

O: That was after seven days of being in the first prison.

I: During seven days?

O: In seven days, inside not outside. [translator's note: "I think the translator and Orynbek didn't understand each other."]

[other dialogue]

O: They tortured me for seven days, then stopped torturing me.

[other dialogue]

O: Their aim was...

[other dialogue]

I: What was the level of the water?

O: It was cold. But it wasn't deep. Just a little water.

I: At what level? Was it at the level of your legs?

O: I wasn't able to look at my legs. They poured water on me.

I: Ah. On your body?

O: Yes.

[other dialogue]

I: So you don't know how deep the water was.

O: No, I don't know. The well was deep. My height's 170cm. I think it was comparable to my height, could have been 180cm. Because my head couldn't reach the top, my arms were outside.

[other dialogue]

O: I wondered what I did to deserve such torture. Had I killed one of their parents or something?

[other dialogue]

I: Did you know that you were going to be released?

O: Not at all.

[other dialogue]

O: Actually, I only realized it when I was given my passport and crossed the border.

I: Didn't you know the approximate date of release? Didn't you feel it coming?

O: I didn't. I didn't have any feelings. My feelings were dead.

[other dialogue]

O: I could still feel the fear. But my body stopped feeling pain. I even stopped shouting and screaming, I just kept crying. When you're terrified, you just cry.

[other dialogue]

O: My body was...

I: Was there any sign of them getting ready to release you? Or actions, I don't know. Didn't you feel that you might be released in a few days?

O: No, I didn't, since I thought I would be staying there for five years. I didn't think I'd be released any sooner than that.

[other dialogue]

O: When I just got there, I thought I would be released the next day. On Monday. [slight inconsistency here, unless he uses "the next day" liberally or just got mixed up: Orynbek was jailed on December 15, which was a Friday, making Monday another 2-3 days away] I just needed one more stamp. The guys there started teasing me, because I told them that I needed one more signature or stamp and

would be released on Monday. But I wasn't released. They tricked me like I was a child.

I: Who tricked you?

O: A man named Zhenis had told me so. [about Orynbek needing one stamp before he'd be allowed to go]

[other dialogue]

I: Where did they take you when you were released?

O: They took me to the second prison again.

I: What?

O: They took me to the second prison from the first, again, on the day of release.

I: From the first to the second? Weren't you released from the second?

O: I was brought to the first again when I was released from the second.

I: When? You were locked up in the second prison, and then... Which one were you released from?

O: I was released from the second.

I: How did it go?

O: On the morning of that day, somebody called my name while I was in class. I said "*dao*" ("present"). They didn't release me right away. They asked me questions first. They required me to do things. The first was that I not bring my books with me [the indoctrination materials, I assume] and the second was that I not say goodbye to the other inmates. When I asked what would happen if I brought my books with me or said farewell to the others, I was answered with a threat: "You will stay for another two months for bringing the books and another three months for saying goodbye."

[other dialogue]

I: So how did it proceed? Did they leave you out on the street?

O: No, they didn't kick me out or anything. A vehicle came, and they apologized for their wrongdoings. I got into the car. It was pitch-black inside.

[other dialogue]

I: So which prison were you released from?

O: From the second to the first.

I: They took you to the first from the second?

O: Yes. [kind of confused about this, still]

I: And then?

O: And then I signed several papers there. I don't know how many papers there were. 40, maybe. If I'm not mistaken, there were 30-40 papers to sign. I didn't know why I signed, but I did.

[other dialogue]

O: I only realized [that I was free] when I arrived at the border, to be honest. I had thought that they were going to imprison me again.

[other dialogue]

I: Did they take you to Bakhty?

O: What is the border in Urzhar called? Is it Bakhty? Then yes, they brought me there.

[other dialogue]

O: Chochek [Tacheng] Baqty, yes.

I: What happened then? Who met you at the border?

O: You mean on this side of the border? The Kazakhstan side? Soldiers met us, no one else.

[other dialogue – I asked him how he got back home, I think]

O: I got there by taxi. Then I went to my sister's.

I: Did you go to Urzhar?

O: Yes, I did. I was surprised when I came, you know. There was a big celebration at home.

I: What happened?

O: A big celebration. In Urzhar County, as well. Many people gathered there. Then I understood that they were celebrating my arrival. There were people there whom I didn't know. I was wondering if it was a wedding or if something bad happened when I first saw the crowd. When they had shown me the photos [in the prison], I had thought that all of my relatives were imprisoned. When I entered the house, I saw them safe and sound. My mother was lying down.