

“My daughter didn't recognize me”: the impossible reconstruction of Chinese camp survivors

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For Xinjiang's survivors, leaving the camps is rarely a liberation, and often the beginning of a new arduous journey. Now, they have to learn to live again, and slip into a daily life where their traumas go unrecognized.

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When she returns home after an absence of two years, Ajar* no longer looks like herself. Hollow cheeks, gray hair, glazed eyes, she's no more than a shadow, bursting into tears at the sight of her children. *“My son cried out, 'Mommy, Mommy!' but my daughter didn't recognize me, because she was too small when I left Kazakhstan. Even my husband stared at me for a long time after I walked out the door,”* she recalls. Ajar had just turned 34, and had just left a re-education camp in Xinjiang.

Arrested at the border by the Chinese authorities during a business trip, she had emigrated barely a month earlier from China to Kazakhstan to found a new home and guarantee her children a Kazakh education, in line with the traditions of her ethnic group. Today, the new life she had dreamed of has become her burden.

“At first, I was scared of everyone, of everything. My husband asked me if I was relieved to be home, and I said 'I don't know'. For a whole year, I stayed at home with the children, not wanting to go anywhere. The Chinese police often called to ask me what I was doing: I was being watched even in Kazakhstan,” Ajar recalls.

Remembering in silence

Like many Xinjiang survivors, Ajar finds it hard to consider her release from the camps as a “liberation”. Three years on, she is still haunted by the memory of the interminable days spent in cell after cell, anguish after anguish.

As for them, the Chinese authorities take great pains to seal up these memories: each “released” prisoner must sign a form promising not to disclose any information about their detention. While some are forced to claim that they stayed in the camps voluntarily in order to receive vocational training, others must confess to imaginary crimes (terrorism, extremism, treason...), when their only fault, in the eyes of the Chinese government, is that they belong to an ethnic minority group, such as Uyghurs or Kazakhs. It's a way of ensuring silence and keeping up the pressure.

As for Saule*, imprisoned at 76 and released after a year and nine months, she had to get nearly fifty members of her family and her native village to sign a document vouching for her loyalty to the Chinese regime, and responsible for her betrayal if necessary: even outside the camps, the survivors always know that their loved ones and themselves are under the surveillance of the Chinese state.

Facing these threats, many remain silent and, once reunited with their families, find themselves isolated with the weight of their traumas. Even if they are willing to talk about it, victims are often met with incomprehension or powerlessness on the part of their loved ones, whose best willpower is not enough to erase the violence they have suffered.

Living with ghosts

There are the nightmares that come back again and again, the untimely reminders of torture sessions experienced or glimpsed. And then there are the other ghosts: those of lost loved ones.

In Yerke*'s eyes, it's a cold anger that follows the tears when she thinks back to her last months in detention. Sent to a rehabilitation camp in 2018 at the age of 64, her health deteriorated rapidly, and as the seasons passed, the cold of the cells caused her to lose the use of her legs. Authorized to receive visitors, she asks her son to bring her warm socks the next time he visits. Days go by, but he doesn't return.

On the fifth day, a guard tells Yerke that she's going home. *"I was happy,"* she chokes, before continuing: *"When I was brought back to the village, I wasn't wearing a scarf, but just before I got there, I was suddenly offered one, which started to raise doubts in my mind. There were people gathered in front of my house, some of them were Uyghur neighbors; they came up to me, and I understood that something bad had happened. They told me we'd lost my son. After that, I don't know how I got into the house. I asked them to show me my son. When I saw him, he looked like he was asleep. In the corner of the room, I saw a package with the warm socks, and everything I'd asked him for."*

Under the pressure of interrogation, Yerke's son committed suicide. As for her, she was taken back to the re-education camp. *"I don't remember the funeral. My children told me there was a Muslim funeral, but I don't know if it was allowed. Maybe they told me that to comfort me. Anyway, all the imams are in camps,"* she says.

Yerke mourns the loss of her son with every passing day. If she can only testify anonymously today, it's because two of her children still live in Xinjiang, waiting to join her in Kazakhstan. *"When all my children will be here, I'll speak openly, and I'll ask the Chinese government for compensation,"* she enthuses. *I hope times will change and the regime will fall. The world has forgotten Kazakhs, but we must not stop our fight."*

Broken bodies

Former detainees who denounce Chinese repression see themselves as fighters, yet they are fighters with broken bodies. Yerke, who was in good health before being sent to the re-education camp, can no longer sleep because her legs are so painful. *"When I returned to Kazakhstan, I was diagnosed with many illnesses. I have neurological problems, high blood pressure, my legs are always cold, my ears hurt... It's very hard for me to stay focused: as soon as people talk a lot, I get disoriented, I try not to stay in noisy environments,"* she says.

Ospan*, who spent a year in a re-education camp and seven months under house arrest, is worn down by his numerous stints on the tiger chair and the psychological torture he endured while held in China. At 50, this former shepherd, who has found refuge with his family in a small village in eastern Kazakhstan, is no longer fit to work. Physically dejected, prone to constant headaches, it is above all his memory that is failing him:

"Before I went to the camp, I had an excellent memory, I could remember everything: numbers, roads... When I got out, I started to forget everything. Sometimes I get lost and can't remember how to get home. I used to know a lot of songs and I liked to sing, I knew poems by heart, but now I can't sing any more, because I can't remember any words. If someone wants me to give a speech, it's very hard for me to say one or two sentences," he explains wheezily.

At his side, his wife completes his testimony: his eyesight has also deteriorated, due to the blinding light that was constantly on in the cells, he suffers from hearing, and has lung problems. After he returned to Kazakhstan, Ospan was able, after long months of waiting, to consult a neurologist, who told him he was prone to stress, and prescribed medication, something *“for the blood vessels in the brain”*. He's not sure what it is, but takes it every day. His wife brings a box: it's simple vitamins, just like Yerke's.

Medical wanderings

In Kazakhstan, medical care for camp survivors is often poor, if it exists at all. The vast majority of returnees are simply not cared for and have to make do with consulting a family doctor, who most of the time confines himself to confirming symptoms, without being able to identify a specific pathology.

Many people rely on traditional medicine, like Yerke, who was advised to have a dog butchered and wrap the still-warm skin around her legs – on the third attempt, she noticed an improvement. More traditionally, remedies based on herbal medicines or specific diets are the most widespread, and are used to treat memory loss, post-traumatic stress disorders, sleep disorders, low back pain, liver or lung disease or infertility – all recurrent ailments among camp survivors.

In any case, the cost of more extensive treatment cannot be borne by the patients, all of whom were downgraded on leaving the camps. In the absence of access to suitable care facilities, the survivors are condemned to suffer without necessarily knowing what ails them, while the luckier ones rely on humanitarian aid, which is as rare as it is precious.

Thanks to a fund-raising campaign launched by researcher and activist Gene Bunin, founder of the Xinjiang Victims Database (Shahit), Tursynbek Kabi was able to finance the hearing aid he needed after his eardrum was perforated by prison guards during a violent altercation.

Rebuilding trust

An organization like the International Legal Initiative (ILI), which supports requests for the release of people detained in Chinese camps, has been working since 2019 to develop a medical support pathway for certain victims, based on the recommendations of Médecins Sans Frontières:

“We organize a first consultation with a doctor to determine what medical tests the victims should undergo, then we redirect them to specialists, who will suggest a treatment that we take charge of. But one of the big problems in Kazakhstan, which is a legacy of the Soviet Union, is that the doctors speak Russian, while the victims speak only Xinjiang Kazakh. It was a disaster five years ago, but now things are a bit better,” explains Aina Shormanbaeva, lawyer and director of ILI.

But the language barrier is a healthcare barrier as well: mental health remains the blind spot in the care offered to victims, for the simple reason that there are almost no interpreters willing to accompany them to a psychologist or psychiatrist. *“Even when a translator is provided, some patients don't dare to speak. They have major psychological problems but can't say everything they'd like to,”* laments Anara*, a doctor in a Kazakh hospital who has examined some 50 camp survivors since 2020.

It's also a relationship of trust that needs to be established between practitioners and victims, even though the latter have been plunged into a regime of terror in Xinjiang, and subjected to non-consensual medical treatment based on more or less regular injections – allegedly against the flu – pills hidden in food, and sometimes even surgical operations. *“The first survivors who came to us didn't*

tell us they'd been to the concentration camps, because they were afraid. It was only through word-of-mouth, seeing that we wanted to help them, that they came in greater numbers and confided in us,” explains Anara.

As a specialist in endocrinology, Anara has noticed recurrent infertility problems among her patients: *“Whether men or women, a great number of them have damaged genitalia. Some told me they'd been given drugs, others said they'd been raped. As they didn't come to us just after being released from the camps, but sometimes two years later, we can't know what products were administered to them in Xinjiang.”*

Living again, somewhere else

Between the chronic pain and the memories of the camps, one still have to go on living. Returning to one's family is however far from being easy. Years of distance, different experiences, misunderstandings, difficulty in communicating, and sometimes resentment, all combine to disrupt a reunion that is not always happy.

When she returns to Kazakhstan after more than a year's absence, Rahima Senbai is confronted with the silence of her husband, who leaves the family home after seven days, and files for divorce. Rahima, who underwent a forced abortion before being sent to a camp in 2017, sighs: *“He heard a lot of stories about women released from the camps: many were raped, tortured... Maybe that was the reason he left. After that, he remarried another woman, with whom he had a son.”*

For Ospan, supported by his wife who worked for his release, it was the gaze of his former friends that was most painful: *“After arriving in Kazakhstan, I felt under pressure. All the people who knew me came to visit me and asked me why I had been in the camps, what my crimes were. It was hard for me to say anything. I could see in their eyes that they didn't believe me. At first it was very hard, but as time went by, more and more people were sent to the camps and came back, and they began to understand that it had to do with deceptive Chinese policies.”*

But leaving the camps also means finding oneself at a loss: job lost, unable to work, pension suspended, account frozen... And no aid specifically provided by the Kazakh government for survivors or their families. Having left Xinjiang, the persecuted minorities now find themselves in the strange situation where all the violence they have suffered goes unrecognized, and seems to exist only in their privacy: denied by the Kazakh authorities, generally ignored by civil society, invisible to the medical profession, they now have to “get over it”, in silence.

Facing a general indifference, it is within small circles of survivors, who have experienced more or less the same ordeals, that the returnees from Xinjiang can find support, and help each other if needed. Recently, Ajar bumped into one of her former fellow inmates while shopping in a small village. It was only by the sound of their voices that they recognized each other: physically, neither of them looked alike.

**For security reasons, some names have been changed, as most of the witnesses have relatives living in Xinjiang.*