

This is a remarkable first-hand account of life inside a secret and brutal regime

# Escaping from China's camps

CHINA

**Michael Sheridan**

**The Chief Witness**

Escape from China's Modern-Day Concentration Camps  
 by Sayragul Sauytbay and  
 Alexandra Cavelius  
 Scribe £16.99 pp320

This remarkable story of a woman's pride, suffering and resilience begins in the place once known as Chinese Turkestan. Sayragul Sauytbay was born in a yurt at the foot of the Tian Shan mountains, the fourth child of a family of Kazakh herders, in 1976. She grew up speaking Chinese as well as her native tongue, studied medicine and became a doctor at a hospital built by the government as it brought modernity to the vast, remote region of Xinjiang.

On the surface she was an example of integration and progress. In reality she found that Xinjiang was a society divided by race and history.

Her grandfather had been in the resistance movement defeated by the Red Army in 1949. The region's indigenous peoples – Uighurs, Kazakhs and others – found themselves in a revolutionary experiment. An influx of Chinese settlers, ruled by a giant paramilitary apparatus, came to dominate their land, customs and commerce.

By the 1990s, when Sauytbay became aware of her Kazakh identity, the

spirits of her people were subdued. "We hadn't noticed that we were already living in a giant prison," she writes.

At first she was unwilling to surrender the advantages she had accrued. She sent money home, excelled alongside Chinese doctors and conducted a shy courtship with Uali, a kind man who became her husband. But when their two children came home from school crying because they had been chided for speaking Kazakh, the

couple became restless. Sauytbay had noticed the subtle apartheid at her hospital, where Chinese patients got priority. She wearied of incessant political meetings. Feeling growing frustration, she read a clandestine copy of *The Crime*, a novel by Kajikhumar Shabdan, the Kazakh Solzhenitsyn, who died in prison in 2011. The book was part of a renaissance in local culture fuelling unrest.

Kazakhs, like the more numerous Uighurs, practised a mystical and tolerant form of Islam, evoked with great sympathy in the book. But brute repression by the government provided fertile ground for militants, whose scattered acts of violence, largely against innocent Chinese civilians, brought down a hammer on Xinjiang.

Sauytbay and her husband decided that they had no future inside China. Taking advantage of a lull in controls,


Uali moved with the children across the border to Kazakhstan. Trapped by paperwork and politics, though, Sauytbay could not follow. She had left medicine to run a junior school, hoping to evade attention. But in the end the myrmidons of state security came for her.

At this point the book, co-authored by the German journalist Alexandra Cavelius, begins to sink the heart. Sauytbay was summoned to a party meeting, where she was told that "re-education camps" were to be set up to restore "stability". She ended up in one, teaching Chinese-approved history to traumatised detainees. She was interrogated when officials discovered her own family had escaped. The details of abuse in her account are deeply disturbing, in particular her description of watching masked guards take turns to rape a young woman in front of fellow inmates.

Outside the prison surveillance cameras were everywhere. Police monitored phones and computers. They rationed sugar to stop bomb-making. They checked home electricity meters for suspicious amounts of energy use. Guest lists were required for weddings, funerals and group meals. Muslim names were effaced from the records. The Chinese language became supreme.

Eventually Sauytbay was let go and she went to Kazakhstan,

where she endured another ordeal at the hands of its secret police before claiming asylum in Sweden. Her book ends in a dreamlike haze of freedom.

Facts about what is going on in Xinjiang are notoriously hard to pin down. Over decades reporting for *The Sunday Times*, I watched armoured vehicles deploy in one city, counted the fresh graves in another, heard accounts of a massacre in a third and was told of young men executed for helping a British television crew. It is only through accounts such as this one – which is, of course, vehemently denied by China – that the world can sift the evidence for itself. 



**Speaking out** Sayragul Sauytbay in court in 2018