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Natsuko Oka, *“Wairo” no aru kurashi: Shijō keizai ka go no Kazafusutan* [Living with “Bribes”: Kazakhstan after the Transition to a Market Economy] (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 2019; new ed., 2024), 253+8 pp.

Natsuko Oka started her research career specializing in ethnic Koreans in the (former) Soviet Union; she became a notable expert in Kazakhstani politics in the late 1990s. Around 2010, she began working on the sensitive topic of corruption in Kazakhstan, conducting field studies that sometimes got her into trouble. Part of her findings were published in three international journals in 2015¹ and 2019.^{2,3} In these studies, the author analyzed the state of informal payments in Kazakhstan, theoretically building on previous research on everyday corruption in post-Soviet countries.

The reviewed book presents a comprehensive summary of the research findings that adhere to academic methods. At the same time, it is written in a way that is easy for general Japanese readers to understand. It contains many real opinions from interviewees and the author’s own observations. The book consists of a prologue entitled “Eyes on ‘Bribery’” and six chapters: “Kazakhstan, an Emerging Country in Central Asia,” “What the Market Economy Has Brought,” “Corruption in Law Enforcement Agencies and Judiciary,” “Business ‘Under the Table’,” “Admission and Grades Depend on Money,” and “Hippocrates is Weeping,” as well as an epilogue, “Inequality and Corruption.” The book details the characteristics and background of corruption in various sectors—from the police, judiciary, and military service to business, education, and healthcare.

The main part of the book is based on the interviews the author conducted with 146 Kazakhstani citizens in diverse professions between 2011 and 2016, mainly in the city of Almaty and partly in its suburbs and Astana. Although Western and local researchers have conducted in-depth research on corruption in Central Asia, no comparable work has vividly depicted the reality of corruption in daily life. This demonstrates Dr. Oka’s outstanding communication and research skills and how she excelled in building relationships with people to have honest discussions.

The key argument of the book is that bribery is widespread in Kazakhstan’s society not due to its backwardness but due to the changes associated with its transition to a market economy, which has increased the speed and cost of life. An increasing number of people want to avoid lengthy and nerve-wracking procedures, while officials want to recoup the cost of the bribes they pay to hold public office by taking bribes after assuming office. Previous studies have shown that the central means of fraudulent problem-solving have shifted from using personal connections in the Soviet era to money after the transition to a market economy; however, the author points out that connections remain important for gaining access to decision-makers and securing deals. The analysis of the different uses and combinations of connections and money is a unique feature of this study. Overall, the author does not simply denounce bribery as

1 Natsuko Oka, “Informal Payments and Connections in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 34, no. 3 (2015), pp. 330–340.

2 Natsuko Oka, “Grades and Degrees for Sale: Understanding Informal Exchanges in Kazakhstan’s Education Sector,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 5 (2019), pp. 329–341.

3 Natsuko Oka, “Changing Perceptions of Informal Payments under Privatization of Health Care: The Case of Kazakhstan,” *Central Asian Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1–20.

an evil, but sees it as a problem related to changes in human relationships and values, and portrays the resilience of people who live by using “informal problem-solving” methods, including bribery. This observation testifies to the author’s deep penetration of Kazakhstan’s society and the warmth with which she viewed it.

The relationship between quantitative data and interview findings, as well as the changes over time, warrant further discussion. Naturally, the author’s informants included people with extensive knowledge and experience about bribery, and their stories give the impression that it is nearly impossible for people in Kazakhstan to live or work without resorting to bribery. However, according to the results of the commissioned questionnaire survey presented in Chapter 2, less than 40 percent of the respondents said that they had bribed officials in the past twenty years. In Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, from 2011 to 2016, when Dr. Oka conducted field research, Kazakhstan ranked low, between 120th and 140th, but was average among developing countries and not poor among CIS countries. Since 2017, the country’s rating has improved; in 2024, it ranked 88th out of 180 countries, which is mid-level worldwide.⁴ There is no doubt that corruption in Kazakhstan is serious, but it is necessary to compare it with other CIS and developing countries and track changes in its situation since 2017.

Unfortunately, the author’s untimely death in 2022 made it impossible for her to address these issues herself. However, this book, which meticulously records and analyzes the changes in the behavior and values of the people of Kazakhstan since its transition to a market economy, provides ample useful material for future research.

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4 Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index,” [<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/>] (accessed January 29, 2026).