



# Invisible China: A Journey Through Ethnic Borderlands

*Colin Legerton , Jacob Rawson*

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## **Invisible China: A Journey Through Ethnic Borderlands** Colin Legerton , Jacob Rawson

In this eloquent and eye-opening adventure narrative, Colin Legerton and Jacob Rawson, two Americans fluent in Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and Uyghur, throw away the guidebook and bring a hitherto unexplored side of China to light. They journey over 14,000 miles by bus and train to the farthest reaches of the country to meet the minority peoples who dwell there, talking to farmers in their fields, monks in their monasteries, fishermen on their skiffs, and herders on the steppe.

In *Invisible China*, they engage in a heated discussion of human rights with Daur and Ewenki village cadres; celebrate Muhammad's birthday with aging Dongxiang hajjis who recount the government's razing of their mosque; attend mass with old Catholic Kinh fishermen at a church that has been forty years without a priest; hike around high-altitude Lugu Lake to farm with the matrilineal Mosuo women; and descend into a dry riverbed to hunt for jade with Muslim Uyghur merchants. As they uncover surprising facts about China's hidden minorities and their complex position in Chinese society, they discover the social ramifications of inconsistent government policies--and some deep human truths as well.

## **Invisible China: A Journey Through Ethnic Borderlands Details**

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### **KB says**

This was kind of disappointing. The premise is super interesting, the introduction was great and really drew me in, but there just wasn't enough depth in this book. The authors travel around China talking with people of different minority groups. The problem, for me, was that they didn't give enough background to some of these groups, and there's not much that links the book together. It's a fine read if you want a jumpy travelogue and some very basic information about select minorities in China. If you're looking for anything in-depth or that has an overarching theme or question to answer, this book isn't it.

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### **Chris Aylott says**

Legerton and Rawson take a fascinating tour through the far corners of China, exploring a dozen of the 56 ethnic minorities living on China's borders.

It's one of those books that reminds you of the true size of China, how different its many peoples really are from each other -- and that China is not so much a nation as it is an (occasionally brutal) empire, whose border peoples have more in common with their neighbors than they do with Beijing.

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### **Adlowe says**

A nice little book on two foreign men traveling around China and interviewing some of the people from some minority ethnicities of China.

Provides interesting insight into minority ethnicities in China, and is a great introduction to foreigners who know nothing about that part of China. However, the book does not go into much detail about each of the peoples it explores. It is more about getting people curious.

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### **Andrea Skinner says**

Very interesting book with well thought-out outline. I liked that there were pictures taken along the way to show the cultural differences and locations. Would've loved more detail and pictures but that would have made for a much longer book I'm sure.

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### **Colin says**

Legerton and Rawson paint an interesting, if somewhat superficial picture of the ethnic minority situation in China. As I went through the book, I was continually amazed at how frankly their subjects shared their views. Reading over their bios, though, it is no surprise that they were able to communicate so well with these minorities. I'm also incredibly impressed that they covered so much ground and spoke with so many

people in only four months - truly a feat.

However, there is far more work to be done in this area. A deeper understanding of exactly how and where ethnic minorities belong in China (there are over 100 million and they are growing) is going to be crucial for not only China's stability, but the world's. As we've seen over the past few weeks, even - let alone months or years - the situation is precarious and it isn't just with the Uighurs and the Tibetans. Legerton and Rawson do a passable job of integrating the background into their narrative - but at the end offer only a few recommendations for moving forward. Perhaps this is in part due to a wariness to anger the Chinese government - but if you're going to write about something you see as an injustice it does not only you as a disservice as a writer, but your subjects as well.

The writing was good, but not spectacular. At times, I felt they tried too hard to draw in the reader with literary devices that just didn't work or were over the top. Invisible China was a nice jaunt through a few of the incredibly complicated issues that surround ethnic minority rights, Han encroachment and the general social fabric of China. If you are looking for the big picture of what things are like in China for ethnic minorities as well as, literally, what they are like, I would strongly recommend this book.

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### **Elizabeth says**

Invisible China by Colin Legerton

Very informative book telling about people in different parts of China. I enjoyed learning about minority ethnic groups. Culture, history, foods and customs, a great book for anyone interested in China in general but especially good for those researching ethnic groups of China, the "Middle Kingdom."

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### **Ellen says**

An interesting and fast-paced look at some of China's minorities. I'd only heard of a few before reading this book, and now I'd really like to learn a lot more about these intriguing groups.

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### **Marge says**

Gives a sense of the wide variations between minorities. I learned that potatoes are a major Chinese crop.

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### **Leasha says**

I received this book from the publisher in a Goodreads giveaway.

"We Chinese aren't like you Americans. We don't discriminate against our minorities" (43).

In Invisible China, Colin Legerton and Jacob Rawson share an account of their travels in some of the most remote, least accessible, and most ethnically diverse areas of China. This is certainly an account - a travelogue. While certainly their journey was intentionally designed for them to spend time with the minority

peoples who make up a significant proportion of China's population, the story they tell here is less the story of those peoples and more their story of visiting those peoples. Invisible China is neither anthropology nor history; it includes history and anthropological observations made by well-studied individuals, but it is not an in-depth analysis of any of China's minority groups.

I spent a majority of this book both surprised and impressed by how many opportunities the authors chose not to take to criticize and to judge China's actions as a state. I wondered how it was that they came to write such an "agenda-less" book about such a potentially fraught topic. Reaching the end, I realized that Legerton and Rawson were not agenda-less, but that they truly did seem to want to let their readers come to their own conclusions. Throughout Invisible China, the authors introduce their readers to the people and the places that they love - and Legerton and Rawson do most certainly love China -and pull back from moments where they interpret what they see according to their own beliefs about the situation. They want their readers to see China as they have seen it and choose to love it as they have loved it.

As you reach the conclusion of the book, however, you see that Legerton and Rawson do, in fact, have more to say than, "see China." China presents their minorities to the world in a show of inclusivity; their official line matches the statement of the boy on page 43: we do not discriminate. Legerton and Rawson's journey contradicts this statement in every way. Every group they encountered is marginalized in some way - whether overtly as they are excluded from educational and economic opportunity, or subtly as they are ignored and conflated with one another. "There aren't any differences. All these ethnic groups...The only difference is in the languages they speak" (221). Ultimately, traveling through the ethnic borderlands of China reveals that Han China is obsessed with the cultural superiority of the Han and that propaganda to that effect "pervades the government's version of history" (217).

For anyone who wants to be introduced to the diversity present in China, this book is a good start. The reader gets to meet the Uyghurs, Oroqen, Mongolians, Wa, and others, but since this book operates on an "awareness" or "introduction" level, it is up to the reader to go learn more. A budding interest in China or in ethnic diversity in general should find Invisible China to be a good companion. For the reader who already knows that these people exist, and furthermore, how they have been marginalized, this book offers little.

"[W]hat happens in [China's] border homelands will undoubtedly shape the country's future" (224).

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### **Aminta Arrington says**

Sigh. I couldn't bring myself to finish it. The "Invisible" part would be the authors themselves, who reveal absolutely none of their personalities, even conversations. AS a result, there is little to tie the book together but a series of vignettes. The writing was high-quality, the concept was great, but with absent authors, it just fell flat.

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### **Josh Summers says**

From the very beginning, Invisible China felt to me like an interesting cross between a travelogue, a social commentary and a piece of journalism. As odd as that may sound, it blended quite well into an entertaining, informative narrative.

Readers follow Legerton and Rawson as they travel from the border of North Korea in the east to the far

western border with Pakistan in the west, intentionally spending time with 14 minority groups along the way.

The beauty of spending time with them on their journey is the opportunity to experience the unique stories of individual people within each ethnic community. Instead of falling into the popular trap of describing Xinjiang as a restive region full of ethnic conflict, Legerton and Rawson allow the characters to speak for themselves.

\*\*Read the rest of this review, including an author interview, on this China website.

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### **Ethan Cramer-Flood says**

This is a fantastic, entertaining, easy, and informative read. I guess you'd call this commercial non-fiction, though there are hints of journalism and academia buried in here as well.

The gist is that two recent college grads from America with an impressive knowledge of the Mandarin, Korean, and Uygur languages set off across China to explore China's often invisible minority cultures. There are 56 official minorities in China, of which the authors were able to visit 12. Doesn't sound like much, but it took them a year and many tens of thousands of miles on cramped buses, trains, and other less comfortable forms of travel just to spend a week or two with each of these groups.

Although no one can claim that the Tibetans or Uygurs are invisible these days, most of the other minorities are either completely unknown to the West (and to many Chinese), or are stuck in displaced limbo like the millions of ethnic Mongolians and Koreans whose ancestors ended up in China and who are expected to become "Chinese".

Han Chinese make up 90% of China, and thus perhaps rightly dominate the world's understanding of what it means to be "Chinese". However, given that 10% of China equals 120 million people, Chinese minority culture and history seems like a vast wealth of untapped richness. If China's minorities became their own country, they'd be the 10th largest nation on earth.

Colin Legerton and Jacob Rawson, two college buddies who wrote this book and are now working on their PhD's, are unlikely ever to be welcomed by the Party authorities in Beijing. I'm sure this book is on the highest level of BANNED possible. In their travels they encountered more than one member of a minority that asked them hopefully whether or not the US was planning to invade China any time soon to set them free. Although some minorities are much more oppressed and mistreated than others, almost none of them approved of their treatment at the hands of the central government or their place in society vis-a-vis the Han. Not all of them wished to be independent from China, and not all advocated a Western style democracy, but every last one of them would qualify for jail time if they spoke to government officials the way they spoke to Legerton and Rawson.

This is an enlightening and illuminating book, and I hope there's a sequel.

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### **Sharlene says**

This book had such potential! Just look at the synopsis:

Colin Legerton and Jacob Rawson, two Americans fluent in Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and Uyghur, throw

away the guidebook and bring a hitherto unexplored side of China to light. They journey over 14,000 miles by bus and train to the farthest reaches of the country to meet the minority peoples who dwell there, talking to farmers in their fields, monks in their monasteries, fishermen on their skiffs, and herders on the steppe.

Doesn't that make you imagine the possibilities? The wonderful conversations they must have had? The sights they must have seen?

Well we do get a sense of that. But the authors tend to spread themselves a little too thin here, covering way too much ground and not going as much in-depth as I'd like. I wasn't expecting a scholarly thesis on ethnicity, but there was something that was a little too general, a little... perhaps less insightful might be the right phrase for it. It did pique my interest in the many ethnicities of China though, and the bibliography they provide at the end might be a good way to start.

Perhaps I should've started this post with some of the good bits. I don't want to put you off this book, as it does provide a very readable overview of this different – and less recognisable – part of China. I did learn quite a few things. For instance, did you know that there are 2 million Koreans living in China? Most of them live in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture where they speak Korean, retain their own culture, and attend their own schools. The North Korean government even owns and operates expensive North Korean restaurants there, to promote their culture and create an influx of foreign cash.

And the Mosuo people, who live on the shores of Lugu Lake, belong to a matrilineal society. The women choose a male partner to visit her quarters, solely at night, for as long as she likes. The resulting children are raised by his mother and uncles. The men however, continue to be in charge of business outside of the home. Fascinating!

You know how that synopsis talked about the authors, Colin Legerton and Jacob Rawson? Well I finished the book with absolutely no inkling about these two men. They could've been cardboard characters for all I knew. They seemed to be relatively fluent in languages, enough to converse with all kinds of people, but the reader end up having a better idea of the characters they meet than the two of them. It was kind of intriguing. Was this intentional or were they really that colourless? I thought back to one of my favourite travel books, Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita*, which was full of fascinating facts on Antarctica, but Wheeler's personality shone through – her great sense of humour, her gungho-ness, her passion for Antarctica. I didn't get any sense of Legerton-Rawson (the two are quite indistinguishable) at all, and had to turn to the backflap where those short passages about the two authors told me more than they revealed about themselves throughout the whole book. Pity, that.

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