

Grade 3: Unit 3, Week 1 Food Around the World

Read Aloud: **Mimi and the Tea Ceremony** by Patricia Chao

Wonderful Words: *ridiculous, complicated, barren, elaborate, translate*

Mimi and the Tea Ceremony

My name is Mary Ann Kono. My friends call me Mimi, but at home I'm Mimichan, in the Japanese way.

My parents decided to move to the United States because my father was offered a job with an American firm. Now both my parents are citizens. My younger brother Clarence and I were born here, so we were citizens right from the start.

My father is an engineer, and he's a pretty good guy. We don't see him much except on weekends—on weekdays he usually gets home after the rest of the family has finished eating dinner.

Clarence is in the fifth grade and wants to become a pro basketball player. For a younger brother, he's okay.

The main problem in my life is my mother. She's constantly picking on me: the way I fold sheets (never in a million years will I be able to do them like she does, with all the corners matching perfectly), how I splash water over the counter when I wash dishes, and even how I keep the books in my bookcase. "Small tasks are just as important as big ones," she says. "No task is humble."

My mother works as a receptionist in a lawyer's office, but she's home every day by six to make dinner. After dinner Clarence and I have to help clean up, although it usually turns out that I do most of the work. It isn't just the dishes; it's also sweeping the

floor and making sure there isn't a speck anywhere. I wish I lived in a house like my friend Karen's, where you can eat dinner standing in front of the refrigerator if you feel like it and where the dishes pile up in the sink until someone thinks to do them.

Another thing about my mother is that she embarrasses me. At the end of school, in June, she made me take presents to all my teachers, ridiculous stuff they'll never use, like wooden lamps shaped like miniature houses.

But the craziest thing is, every Saturday morning, for as long as I can remember, my mother has been going to classes at her Japanese tea ceremony club. *Chanoyu* is what she calls the tea ceremony. I know that *cha* means "tea."

Sometimes she goes as a guest, sometimes as the host. Either way, she has to bring utensils. As a guest, it's simple—just a few bright brocade cases and a miniature paper fan. As the host, it's more complicated. She must bring the fan, and then there's this large red cloth, a small black lacquer canister containing tea, a tiny ivory tea scoop, and a tea whisk made of bamboo. She carries everything wrapped up in a big silk scarf.

I am sitting at my desk on my computer when there is a knock on the door. It's my mother.

"I would like to speak to you, Mimichan."

"I would like you to come to the tea ceremony on Saturday. I am hosting, and my old teacher, Mr. Hamada, is going to be there. Also Mrs. Kubo."

The truth is, the last place I want to be on Saturday morning is at some boring tea party with a bunch of my mother's friends.

"Is Clarence going?"

“No.”

“How about Dad?”

“Not this time. You can bring a friend along if you like.”

“Do I have to wear my kimono?” I have one, red with gold flowers, that my grandmother sent me from Japan. It takes about two hours to put it on, what with wrapping the obi sash and all.

“No.”

“All right,” I say not very graciously.

“Fine.” My mother turns to go, and then looks back at me. “Mimichan, before the tea ceremony, please clean your fingernails. You must be pure to touch utensils.”

When she says that, I almost take back agreeing to go. But then I figure, it will only be for a few hours, and if she ever asks me again I can say I did it once and hated it.

“This is just a simple summer tea,” Mr. Hamada says.

We are sitting in the waiting room of the tea ceremony club: Mr. Hamada, Mrs. Kubo, my friend Karen, and I. We have taken off our shoes and placed them in a little cupboard near the front door.

I am relieved to see that Mrs. Kubo is wearing a regular skirt and blouse.

My mother, who disappeared into the interior of the club about half an hour before, is in her light summer kimono, which has a pale blue and white vine pattern. Mr. Hamada looks like what I’ve always imagined a Japanese monk would look like: he’s

about my father's age with a broad, blissful face, wearing a plain dark blue kimono belted at the waist, instead of above it, as a woman's is. His feet are bare.

"Nothing mysterious in *chanoyu*," Mr. Hamada reassures Karen and me. "You just enjoy it while I explain it." He gets up. "Follow me," he says.

Mr. Hamada takes us through a courtyard, which he calls a garden. It is barren, not anything like the pictures of Japanese gardens I've seen—no miniature waterfalls or bonsai trees or anything like that, just a low-growing plant here and there in the dirt. The garden is surrounded by three little houses, one on each side. At one end of the garden stands what looks like a stone birdbath filled with water.

We follow Mr. Hamada to one of the houses. He slides back a tiny door, no higher than a child, and climbs in. Mrs. Kubo follows, and Karen and I after her.

The room is minuscule. The four of us can barely fit. It's also very plain. In the corner is a metal pot sitting on an old-fashioned hot plate.

This room is the quietest place I've ever been. All I can hear is the water simmering in the pot, as faint as breathing.

We kneel down in a line on the straw matting that covers the floor, with our elbows nearly touching. Mr. Hamada is on the far right, then Mrs. Kubo, then me, then Karen.

The paper door next to the metal pot slides open and there is my mother, also kneeling. I can see that there is another tiny room in back. My mother puts her fan, folded, on the floor in front of her and edges toward us on her knees. With each movement forward she pushes the fan a little further.

I see that Mrs. Kubo and Mr. Hamada have both taken out folded fans of their own, which they lay in front of them. Then they bow. “You, too,” Mrs. Kubo whispers to me, and so Karen and I bow, too.

No one is talking. I can feel Karen trying hard not to laugh. I don’t dare look at her.

My mother goes back and forth several times to bring things into the tea room: a giant clay jar, bowls, her lacquer tea unit, some utensils.

“This is the whole purpose of the ceremony,” Mr. Hamada explains to Karen and me. “We enjoy this room, which your mother has prepared for us, and we enjoy the tea. What is most important is the spirit, but it isn’t good unless you have the *proper* spirit.”

Finally my mother brings in an orange plate with four very thin golden cookies. She sets this plate down in front of Mr. Hamada. I haven’t eaten breakfast and could easily finish all the cookies myself, but no one offers them to me. Mr. Hamada reaches for a cookie, takes out a white paper napkin from the sleeve of his kimono, lays the napkin on the matting, and places the cookie on the napkin.

My mother takes the red cloth that she has tucked into her sash and begins to fold the cloth in an elaborate way. It reminds me of how she folds sheets at home, or the origami animals she made for me when I was little. Then she uses the folded cloth to dust off the lacquer canister and the tea scoop. Each movement seems deliberate and slow.

Next, my mother lifts the top of the pot, and, with her other hand, using a long, thin, ladle, begins to dip hot water into one of the bowls. She then swishes the whisk around. What a weird way to make tea! Of course I knew they wouldn’t use tea bags, but

where are the tea leaves? Maybe they're already in the bowl. I crane my neck to look, and just as I do, my mother picks up the bowl and dumps the water out into the jar.

I give up trying to figure it out and watch my mother wipe the bowl with another cloth, this time a white one. As she starts scooping tea from the lacquer canister into the bowl, Mr. Hamada begins to crunch his cookie. I wish Mom would hurry up. She ladles water from the pot into the bowl again and begins beating it with the tea whisk, like whipping egg whites to make meringue. The sloshing noise the water makes is loud in the quiet room.

"Watch how she handles the utensils," says Mr. Hamada. "In a tea ceremony, light things, like the whisk, are heavy. And heavy things like the water jar, are light."

When the tea is ready, my mother turns slightly and puts the bowl in front of Mr. Hamada, who edges forward to pick it up. Resting the bowl in the palm of his left hand, he turns it around a couple of times with his right hand before drinking. After the first sip, he says something in Japanese. When he's done, he turns the bowl around the other way and then places it down on the matting to examine it. I watch all this carefully, hoping I'll remember when it's my turn.

"First I praised the tea," Mr. Hamada explains. "And then I showed my appreciation of the tea bowl itself." I notice that Karen, like me, is now watching attentively, without giggling.

My mother makes another bowl of tea for Mrs. Kubo, using exactly the same motions. Finally it's my turn. When the cookies are passed to me, Mrs. Kubo hands me a napkin, which I hold under my chin as I eat. The cookie has a faint honey taste.

When my mother bows and gives me my bowl, she says, “Don’t worry, Mimichan. You and Karen can drink as you would normally. No need to be formal.”

But I don’t drink right away. First of all, the color of the tea is green, but not a regular, dark green, like you would expect of Japanese tea, and not even the medium green of green tea ice cream. It’s a bright, light green, like the first leaves of spring with sun on them, only even more brilliant. I bring the bowl up to my mouth, take a sip, and swallow.

“What does it taste like?” Karen whispers.

“Strong,” I whisper back. At home I have my tea with milk and sugar.

While I’m drinking, my mother takes back Mrs. Kubo’s empty bowl and then makes Karen’s tea.

When Karen has finished and placed the bowl in front of her, Mr. Hamada says something to my mother in Japanese. My mother bows.

Mrs. Kubo translates, “It means ‘thank you, please stop.’ ”

“What would happen if he didn’t say that?”

“Then your mother would go on making tea. Forever.”

“I don’t know how much more of this stuff I could drink,” Karen says, and everyone laughs.

As my mother is cleaning up, we get ready to leave.

Out in the garden, Mr. Hamada tells me, “Your mother is washing the dishes now. In *chanoyu*, all tasks are equal, no task is humble.”

Karen and I talked about the ceremony later that day. Karen liked especially the way my mother moved.

I don't know what I liked best. It was so odd, seeing my mother like that, almost as if she were a stranger. At home, Mom is quiet, blending in to her surroundings. In *chanoyu* she was the center of attention.

Don't get me wrong—that tea ceremony didn't change my life or anything. But I think I understand my mother better now—the way she likes everything to be clean and neat and the way she insists that things be done a certain way.

Yes, some day, I'll go to another tea ceremony. Maybe someday soon.

ridiculous

Define: When something is **ridiculous**, it is very silly or foolish.

Example: I thought it was **ridiculous** to go to the opera because I did not understand it.

Ask: Is it **ridiculous** to throw money away or to read a book? Why?

complicated

Define: **Complicated** is when something is hard to understand or do.

Example: It took a lot of practice before I was finally able to remember the **complicated** dance steps.

Ask: What is something that you have found to be **complicated**?

barren

Define: When a place is **barren**, it means that there are very few trees and plants.

Example: While driving through the desert, John gazed out at the **barren** land.

Ask: Which place is **barren**—a rain forest or a parking lot? Why?

elaborate

Define: If something is done in an **elaborate** way, it is done with great care and detail.

Example: We admired the **elaborate** animal carvings on the wooden door.

Ask: Why would it be difficult to make an **elaborate** painting in two minutes?

translate

Define: Translate is to take the words from one language and change them into a different language.

Example: My teacher read a book that had been **translated** from Spanish to English.

Ask: Why do languages need to be **translated**?