

Culture Notes

Picking Tea with Baba

by Xu Bin

Illustrated by Yu Yin

Translated by Shan Chen

Charlesbridge, 2025

Fiction, set in China

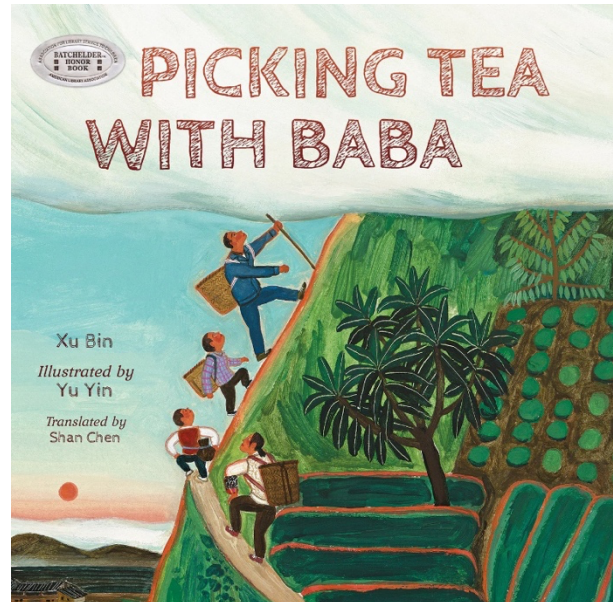
2025 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

"Working in a Chinese tea garden is hard work... It is also joyful, especially when I do it with my family."

—from *Picking Tea with Baba*

1. Family Working Together

Picking Tea with Baba is about a young boy and his brother who travel with their parents up the mountainside to their tea garden for a day of work. They are happy with the animals they see while picking tea leaves. After taking a lunch break, they experience an unexpected rainstorm. At the end of the day, they go down the mountain to sell the tea leaves before going home.



This picture book introduces readers to rural life on a Chinese tea farm through the eyes of a child who helps family members with the work of picking tea leaves. While the story celebrates family working together in nature, it also serves as an excellent introduction to one of China's oldest cultural traditions, which is tea culture.

2. Tea in Chinese Culture

Chinese tradition credits a divine farmer named Shen Nong with introducing agricultural practices and herbal medicine to the people of China more than 5,000 years ago. The legend recounts that when Shen Nong drank water boiled with tea leaves that had fallen into his cup, he noticed that it refreshed him. Originally valued as a medicinal herb, tea eventually became one of China's Seven Necessities of Daily Life and continues to symbolize hospitality and community.

The earliest scientific evidence of tea use in China was discovered in 2016 in the second century BCE mausoleum of Emperor Jing (d. 141 BCE) of the Han dynasty in Xi'an. Researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences announced the discovery of the oldest known tea leaves.



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Over the centuries, China innovated and mastered the production of six tea categories (white, yellow, green, oolong, black, and pu'er), and tea's cultural significance expanded. The Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) marked the birth of formal tea culture. The scholar Lu Yu, revered as the Sage of Tea, wrote *The Classic of Tea* between 760 and 762 CE. This foundational text elevated tea drinking to a highly refined cultural and spiritual art form.

Chinese tea culture is deeply intertwined with Daoist and Buddhist philosophies. Preparation of tea embodies the Five Elements: Wood in the plant, Fire/Metal in firing, Water for brewing, Earth in the ceramics. Tea consumption evolved into an art form and cultural pillar, shaping East Asian traditions, spirituality, and trade.

3. About the Author, Illustrator and Reviews

Author Xu Bin is a Chinese author, editor, farmer, and reading educator whose work draws on rural life and agricultural traditions. His firsthand knowledge gives the story authenticity and warmth. Illustrator Yu Yin, a graduate of the China Academy of Art, creates richly textured artwork inspired by Chinese landscapes and nature. Her illustrations immerse readers in the mountain tea gardens through changing weather, native plants, insects, and family life.

Reviewers praise the book for its authentic portrayal of rural Chinese life, vivid sensory writing, and beautiful illustrations. The story provides an engaging window into contemporary Chinese culture, while emphasizing universal themes of family and perseverance. The book is a beautiful story about a family working together and being proud of the work.

Unlike many books that discuss tea only as a beverage, *Picking Tea with Baba* emphasizes the people behind every cup of tea. Students witness the careful labor of tea harvesting while gaining insight into Chinese family life, agriculture, environmental stewardship, and cultural heritage. The book supports inquiry across geography, science, social studies, art, economics, environmental studies, and language arts with intercultural understanding.



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4. Connection to Classroom

"Delicious tea leaves come from the tea garden."

"Delicious tea is made from the tea leaves." —from *Picking Tea with Baba*

Picking Tea with Baba provides natural connections to social studies, geography, science, art, environmental studies, and language arts. Students can investigate tea agriculture, Chinese geography, plant biology, processing methods, cultural traditions, and global trade while developing cross-cultural understanding. Students learn that every cup of tea represents careful work performed by families over generations. They will learn respect for labor, cultural heritage, and gratitude for everyday products.

Tea as Agriculture

The story highlights the labor behind tea production. All traditional teas come from tea gardens. Different types of tea—green, black, oolong, white, yellow, and pu'er teas—go through different processing and fermentation. Tea cultivation depends on mountain environments, particularly rainfall, and the timing and methods of picking, reflecting generations of agricultural knowledge.

From Tea Garden to Teacup

Picking tea leaves is only the beginning of production. Green, black, and oolong teas undergo different combinations of withering, rolling, oxidation, firing, roasting, and drying. These processes provide excellent connections to science lessons on physical and chemical change.

Chinese Tea Ceremony

Traditional tea ceremonies such as the Tie Guanyin ceremony emphasize mindfulness, hospitality, respect, and appreciation of nature. Warming the tea set, measuring the tea leaves, brewing the tea with care, enjoying the aroma, tasting slowly, and sharing tea with others reinforce values of patience and community. In modern times, tea lovers continue to celebrate China's vibrant influence on global tea culture.

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