

# The Magnolia Sword

written by Sherry Thomas

## About the Book

**Genre:** Historical Fiction

**Format:** Hardcover, \$19.95  
352 pages, 5 ½" x 8 ¼"

**ISBN:** 9781620148044

**Reading Level:** Grade 8

**Interest Level:** Grades 7–12

**Guided Reading Level:** Y

**Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:**  
N/A

**Lexile™ Measure:** N/A

\*Reading level based on the ATOS Readability Formula

**Themes:** Breaking Gender Barriers, Race, Adversity, Conflict Resolution, Overcoming Obstacles, Disability, Pride, Respect, Persistence and Grit, Consequences, Courage, Justice, Dreams and Aspirations, Women's History, Empathy and Compassion, Kindness and Caring, Vengeance, Heroism, Freedom, Survival, Grief, Community, Dreams, Martial Arts, Action and Adventure, Romance, Historical Fiction, China, Conflict Resolution, Sacrifice, Identity and Self Esteem, Confidence, Responsibility, Family, Forgiveness, Asian/Asian American Interest

### Resources on the web:

[leeandlow.com/the-magnolia-sword](http://leeandlow.com/the-magnolia-sword)

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

## SYNOPSIS

### CHINA, 484 A.D.

#### A Warrior in Disguise

All her life, Mulan has trained for one purpose: to win the duel that every generation in her family must fight. If she prevails, she can reunite a pair of priceless heirloom swords separated decades earlier, and avenge her father, who was paralyzed in his own duel.

Then a messenger from the Emperor arrives, demanding that all families send one soldier to fight the Rouran invaders in the north. Mulan's father cannot go. Her brother is just a child. So she ties up her hair, takes up her sword, and joins the army as a man.

#### A War for a Dynasty

Thanks to her martial arts skills, Mulan is chosen for an elite team under the command of the princeling—the royal duke's son, who is also the handsomest man she's ever seen. But the princeling has secrets of his own, which explode into Mulan's life and shake up everything she knows. As they cross the Great Wall to face the enemy beyond, Mulan and the princeling must find a way to unwind their past, unmask a traitor, and uncover the plans for the Rouran invasion... before it's too late.

Inspired by wuxia martial-arts dramas as well as the centuries-old ballad of Mulan, *The Magnolia Sword* is a thrilling, romantic, and sharp-edged novel that lives up to its beloved heroine. Bestselling author Sherry Thomas weaves an enthralling #ownvoices retelling of a story that has thrilled readers for centuries: the ballad of Mulan.

## BACKGROUND

### Adapted from the Author's Note and Notes on Language and Historical Miscellany

The Mulan story has been told and retold in China since the sixth century. The original ballad tells the very simple story of a girl leaving home in her father's stead to go to war and then coming back. Author Sherry Thomas chose to infuse the original ballad with elements of wuxia, a uniquely Chinese literary genre that explores themes of honor, sacrifice, vengeance, and forgiveness through the adventures of almost mythically adept martial artists.

After the fall of the Han Dynasty in 220 AD, and until it was unified again under the Sui Dynasty in 581 AD (approximately a hundred years after the setting of this book), China was in a state of almost constant reconfiguration. The Three Kingdoms, Six Dynasties, Sixteen Kingdoms, Northern and Southern Dynasties—those are just some of the names used to describe various periods within this generally tumultuous era. Northern Wei, the dynastic time and place where the ballad of Mulan is typically assumed to have occurred, was one of these Northern and Southern Dynasties. It was founded by the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei tribe, one of the nomadic peoples who had settled in northern China centuries earlier.

Because Chinese people come from a wide range of geographic and genetic backgrounds, as this book reveals, the cultural debate concerning Sinicization in this book is real. What is Sinicization? Think of it as the Chinese counterpart to Americanization, where peoples from many backgrounds converge into a single national identity. For example, the policy of giving Xianbei families Han Chinese names was later actually implemented, and the founder of the Tang Dynasty, often considered the pinnacle of Chinese civilization, was himself half-Xianbei. What could be taken as a monolithic Chinese identity is actually forged of the collision and melding of many cultures and many peoples.

The Huns—a nomadic people of Central Asia—have entered the Western imagination as barbarian invaders, thanks in part to their attacks on the Roman Empire a few decades before the start of this book. There have been scholarly arguments but no definitive evidence that the Xiongnu and the Huns are one and the same, or that they even belonged to the same loose confederation of nomadic tribes. The author, Sherry Thomas, elects to refer to the Xiongnu once as the “the Huns” so that readers will have a better understanding of what, culturally, the Xiongnu symbolized to the Han Chinese.

The age-old story of Mulan has many possible beginnings and endings, but it always offers a timely exploration of whose voices are heard and whose stories are told.

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

- **Class Discussion:** Mulan has become a popular global phenomenon because of several major movie adaptations. Invite students to share their impressions of Mulan, based on seeing Mulan in other media or having heard about the story. What are the representations of Mulan they have encountered? Why do they think the story was turned into an animated movie? What do they think it will be like to read a book about Mulan, as opposed to watching a movie?
- **Break students into groups:** Each group will be assigned a specific historical topic (i.e. China in the fifth century AD, Rouran invaders, Chinese Martial Arts, the Great Wall, etc.). After reading the book jacket summary, students will analyze and gather Internet resources that include information related to their topic. Present this information in the form of a poster-size graphic organizer and share with the class.
- **What does the word “sacrifice” mean?** What does sacrifice mean to you? What is the relationship, if any, between sacrifice and honor?
- **Create a character list:** Have students flip through the book to see what names appear the most frequently and have them create a running list of characters.

### Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- **Talk about the title of the book.** Ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What is a ballad? What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?
- **Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book:** front and back covers, title page, author's note, notes on language and historical miscellany.
- **Point out that this book uses Chinese words, sometimes without translation.** Ask students why a book might be written this way. Why does it matter what language an author uses? How does a language change how a story is told or who hears it?

## Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- about the life of Mulan
- how Mulan risked her life for her family
- about China in the fifth century
- the code of honor that exists among cultures
- the intersections of race, gender, and class
- the difficulties of dealing with family legacies

Encourage students to consider why the author, Sherry Thomas, would want to share this story with young people today.

## VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### Content Specific

Lantern Festival, shrine, martial arts, scabbard, Qin Dynasty, nomads, Han Dynasty, din, millet, Yangtze River, Lake Tai, lotus, osmanthus, ornamental, horticulture, li, mutton, bride price, sinew, equine, fray, meanders, inebriated, deities, immortality, barracks, husbandry, ancestors, princeling, minions, encampment, braggart, morsel, carp, parry, stragglers, majordomo, sorghum, imperial, bumpkin, stupefaction, diplomatically, unsparing, rivulet, equestrian, swine, innards, verdant, plateau, forfeiture, intercept, projectiles, deploy, lotus, cleaver, emissary, aroma, toque, poultry, dwelling, brimming, stealth, calligraphy, dynasty, lair, deign, drivel, reunification, bandits, sojourn, matrimonial, martial arts, incense stick, conscripts, regiments, dexterity, kowtowing, yurts

### Academic

abrasive, spar, incursion, enclosure, boisterous, incarnation, euphoria, rigor, shallow, heirloom, enmity, stirrings, vaporous, deteriorated, swordsmanship, perspiration, interim, ceding, decrepit, incongruously, etiquette, decorum, gleam, aura, faint, surname, engrossment, sinews, agile, dexterity, opponent, befall, retreat, tactics, retaliates, dilapidated, cunning, unsalvageable, pivot, lull, vigilance, trepidation, luxuriously, perilous, illicit, superseded, succession, sheathe, erupt, regiments, martial artists, reneged, negligible, scathing, dire, reprimand, badgering, distorted, flanked, gallops,

fertile, sensation, befall, spar, retreat, tactics, envious, parries, courteous, etched, admonishments, illustrious, assiduously, splintered, squabbling, ironic, barbarian, specimen, foreign, realm, unsuitability, sympathetic, tribute, tribes, hordes, wretched, gnashing, severity, cobbled, blacksmith, dinged, steed, dray, agility, sturdy, saddler, jasper, pendant, nestle, stout, imposing, paralysis, grueling, skiff, terrace, terser, exploit, obedience, manipulate, disproportionate, distress, venerable, missive, infelicitous, inevitable, auspicious, devout, reverence, alienated, pommel, antique, unmarred, awed, inscription, threshold, plaque, benevolent, forbidding, refrain, unyielding, belligerence, abase, nondescript, comrade, abode, leisurely, maneuver, sanitation, preying, obliged, reiterate, eternal, gratitude, personages, instantaneous, subordinate, acquire, calibrated, proprietor, infusion, enticing, incompetence, discreet, insipid, deign, drivel, reunification, enigma, wrath, amiable, opulent, basin, haggle, lackey, allude, oath, forbearance, inexorably, perfidious, pandemonium, omission, corrosive, cacophony, incapacitated, treachery, ledgers, remote, stowed, disconsolate, contemplation, enterprising, robust, commensurate, profusion, delicacy, stamina, alliances, vanquish, viscera, placating, oblivion, detour, despair, oppressive, tedious, accelerate, vacates, innate, disdain, opaque, nefarious, immaculate, indisputably, supplication, ineptitude, acquit, conjured, suffice, inherent, exacerbate, traipses, parapet, impending, incredulity, reverberate, vexed, turmoil, recede, dejected, solace, canny, fleeting, akin, self-effacement, imminent, unobtrusive, begrudge, fraught, envoy, antidote, prudent, imbibe, elicit, tepid, tremors, valor, contours, demeanor, surreptitious, rival, egregious

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.**

### Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

#### Chapters 1-10

1. In the opening chapter, what special day are Mulan and Yuan Kai preparing for?
2. How are readers introduced to Mulan's father?
3. Who are the members of Mulan's family? What roles do they each serve?
4. Why does Mulan have to dress like a man in the beginning of the book?
5. How does Mulan's mother's death impact her father?
6. Why did Mulan's family move from the South to the North? How does Mulan describe the North?
7. What is the history behind Heart Sea and Sky Blade?
8. What is the meaning and significance of Mulan's name?
9. What are the characteristics Mulan takes on to "look or act like a man" and who does she learn these traits from?
10. Why must Mulan be the one to represent her family in the conscription?
11. What promise does Mulan make to her brother Murong and Auntie Xia? How does she feel when making that promise?
12. What are Mulan's thoughts and feelings when she first reports at the north gate?
13. Why does Mulan want out of the encampment?
14. What are some of the first observations Mulan makes about the princeling?
15. What does Mulan discover about her father when she meets the princeling's aunt?
16. Which objects are not allowed in duels?
17. Why is the princeling not angry with Mulan and her family after the loss of his mother?
18. In Chapter 7, bandits attack Mulan and her companions. Describe Mulan's feelings during the attack and after.
19. How do Mulan's comrades help her overcome her fears after the first attack?
20. How does Mulan navigate her personal hygiene while being stationed with men?

### **Chapters 10-22**

21. Who betrays the Chinese in chapter 10 and why?
22. What is yiqi?
23. Why does Mulan choose to continue on with the princeling and his army?
24. What are some aspects of surviving in the wilderness Mulan has to learn and endure?
25. Why does the princeling's status of being half-Xianbei cause tension?
26. What is the princeling afraid of? Why?
27. Who is Captain Helou loyal to?
28. What is the princeling's real name?
29. How does Mulan's father's explanation of the duel differ from the princeling's aunt's interpretation of it?
30. What was the reason Mulan's father had her take on the identity of her brother?
31. What is the discourse on swordsmanship?
32. How does the friendship between Mulan and the princeling save them as they battle the Rouran? What other friendships emerge in the story?
33. How do characters react when they find out Mulan is a woman?
34. How did the princeling know Mulan was a woman?
35. Are Heart Sea and Sky Blade reunited?

### **Extension/Higher Level Thinking**

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. At several points throughout the novel Mulan doubts herself because she is a girl. She thinks to herself at one point, "I am useless. I am hopeless... I am not worthy of Heart Sea... Is it because I am a girl? Is it because of some innate weakness that despite all my training, I turned into a block of wood when I most needed to bring that training to bear?" (Ch. 8) Do you think gender impacts our abilities and the abilities of others? Why or why not? How do gender roles inform how we see ourselves and other people? What is the difference between the use of the word "girl" and the word "woman"?
2. How does this novel defy gender stereotypes? Cite specific examples from the text. What makes you think that? Why?
3. Mulan says of Dabao, Auntie Xia's son, "he is in his early thirties but still has the mind of a child." (Ch. 2). What is your interpretation of this statement? What do you think it means? How does this affect Dabao's ability to be conscripted?
4. What are the differences between the immediate danger Mulan faced when first attacked by bandits and the danger she faces training for the duel?
5. How is disability presented throughout the novel? Cite examples.

6. In chapter 9, Master Yu is discussing the building of the Great Wall to protect against invasion and states, "it seemed an obvious solution. It made both the emperor and the people think something was being done. And we have all, at some point, confused doing something—anything—with actually solving the problem." What do you make of this quote? Can you make connections to real-world issues today? What is the difference between doing "anything" and actually solving a problem?
7. What role do different languages play throughout Mulan's journey? Why is this important?
8. Where does Mulan's prejudice against the Xianbei come from and how does it change throughout the novel?
9. Mulan states, "What is courage but strength in the face of fear?" (Ch. 15). Do you agree with the statement? Why or why not? Do courage and fear go hand in hand? Who are the courageous characters in this book?
10. Why is it important that Mulan gives herself no "resentments to carry"? (Ch. 22) What characters were motivated by resentment? Why?
11. If Mulan's mother were alive, how do you think that may have changed Mulan's life course? Why?
12. What reasons motivate Mulan's father to keep his affection from Mulan? Was he being selfish or selfless? What would you do if you were in his position?
13. Which chapter best represents foreshadowing? How do these events impact the plot later on?
14. The transitions between dynasties animate the battles throughout the book. Discuss how transitions of political power can often lead to war and turmoil.
15. Ideas of family obligation and sacrifice influence both Mulan and the princeling's understanding of themselves. Do you believe children are always obligated to their family? Do children always have to sacrifice for their family?
16. Name three to five themes you found in the novel and cite specific scenes from the text where you see those themes emerge.

### Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. **Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion.** You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. What do you think author Sherry Thomas's message to the reader is? Read the Author's Note and think about the possible motivations behind Thomas's intentions to write a book about Mulan. What do you think she wanted to tell her readers?
2. Have students make a text-to-self connection. What kind of connections did you make from this book to your own life? What interesting Chinese customs have you learned by reading this novel? Cite examples from the text. Can you find any similarities to your own cultural or family

customs? What do Mulan's experiences, thoughts, and feelings mean to you? Have you known anyone who has gone to war? What motivates you, if anything, to defend your family?

3. Have students make a text-to-text connection. Did you think of any other books or movies while you read *The Magnolia Sword*? Why did you make those connections?
4. Have students make a text-to-world connection. What kind of connections did you make from this book to what you have seen in the world or on the news? Why did *The Magnolia Sword* make you think of that?
5. How has reading *The Magnolia Sword* impacted your understanding of gender? What are some ways people define gender? How would you define gender? Educators and students can refer to online resources such as this article from Planned Parenthood (<https://www.planned-parenthood.org/learn/sexual-orientation-gender/gender-gender-identity>) to further unpack questions of gender.
6. In a persuasive essay, argue whether or not Mulan's actions throughout the novel should be considered heroic. Justify claims with evidence from the text.
7. What details would you use to support Mulan's father's reasons for not telling Mulan the truth about his duel? What details would you use to support the idea that the princeling always knew Mulan was a woman?
8. In the story, Mulan develops strategies to hide who she really is. Why do people often feel as though they cannot fully express who they are? What are the benefits and disadvantages of hiding who you are?

### ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)  
(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about why Mulan is a hero.
5. Have students create a family tree of the different characters in *The Magnolia Sword* and the titles used to address them (i.e. *di* is the term used for younger brother, so it could refer to Mulan's brother Murong).
6. Read the Notes on Language and Historical Miscellany at the end of the book and discuss similarities and differences students notice among their first language, English, and Chinese.

7. The book contains many content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. Mulan constantly doubts herself because of her gender. How do you respond to gender discrimination, both when you experience it yourself and/or when you see it happening to others?
2. Mulan is saddened when she has to leave her family. What are ways to deal with difficult emotions when you are leaving someone or something behind?
3. What kinds of things did Mulan sacrifice when she enlisted in the war? In what ways was she able to be resilient and rely on her community?
4. Which chapter/scene in *The Magnolia Sword* best shows an emotion? Explain which emotion you think it is. How does it portray that emotion?
5. Mulan holds her own prejudice against the Xianbei people, which changes over time. What do you do when you realize you might be discriminating against other people? How do you hold yourself accountable?
6. How did Mulan deal with facing danger for the first time? How did people in Mulan's life support her when she needed help? What did you learn about dealing with unexpected danger from Mulan's experience?
7. Choose an emotion that interests you: happiness, sadness, fear, anxiety, frustration, hope, perseverance and so on. Illustrate or act out what that emotion looks like in *The Magnolia Sword*.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

### English/Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Encourage students to read reviews for *The Magnolia Sword* and write their own review of the novel.** Afterwards, have students share reviews in partners, small groups, or with the whole class. Students can discuss their process for writing reviews and why they chose to include specific information. How are book reviews important? For ideas, check out this Book Review Template (<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/printouts/book-review-template-30200.html>) by ReadWriteThink.org.
- **Challenge students to explore the characters more deeply with writing tasks that require perspective-taking:**
  - Write a dialogue between Mulan and her father in which they discuss their feelings about the loss of Mulan's mother.
  - Write a letter in Mulan's voice to her twin brother Muiyang, who passed away when they were infants. Have Mulan explain taking on his identity.
  - Write diary entries from Mulan's perspective as she goes off to war. Have students discuss in small groups about how the diary entries change over time and reflect on Mulan's different experiences fighting in combat and not only in duels.
- **The rich, varied, and legal language used by author Sherry Thomas provides an opportunity for students to develop their vocabulary skills in authentic contexts.** Challenge students to learn and practice using the academic and content-specific words listed in this teacher's guide:
  - Before reading: Provide students with a list of the vocabulary words to sort into categories (e.g. very familiar, somewhat familiar, unfamiliar).
  - During reading: Have students make note of the vocabulary words as they encounter them in *The Magnolia Sword*. They can underline, highlight, or keep a log. Have students predict what the words mean based on context clues.
  - After reading: Have students work in pairs to look up the definitions of the "unfamiliar" words on their combined lists. Were their predictions correct? Post the new vocabulary words on your word wall.

- **Select a scene in which you disagree with how a character handled a situation, person, or event.** In the voice of that character, rewrite the scene as you think it should have happened. Students can share their pieces with a partner, small group, or with the whole class. Have students think about why they selected that character and scene: what stood out to them? What created their own instincts for how the situation should have gone?
- **Have students watch at least one film adaptation of *Mulan*.** In a graphic organizer with three columns, encourage students about the similarities, differences, and themes that emerged after reading *The Magnolia Sword* and watching the two films about *Mulan*. Afterwards, students can write a compare/contrast essay about the different portrayals of *Mulan* and how the creators' choices impact the reader/viewer.
- **Write a Twitter conversation (280 characters per tweet).** Group students in pairs to summarize a scene from the novel as a Twitter chat between any two characters. Be sure to use hashtags and emoji to reflect the characters' moods during the scene. Students can present their conversations on large chart paper to share their findings with the whole class. What was it like to write a Twitter chat? How were you able to condense your thoughts into few words?
- **Quote Analysis: Use quotes from the novel to analyze character traits and predict the plot.** Type select quotes from the novel (enough for each student in the class) and cut the quotes into individual paper strips. Using the graphic organizer located at the end of this Teacher's Guide, students should analyze their quote and then walk around the classroom and switch with a classmate until they have analyzed a minimum of five quotes. (Chart can be extended or shortened to meet classroom needs.)
- **Have students generate a list of *Mulan's* mistakes and how she learned from them in a T-chart.** *Mulan* learns throughout the book how to be part of a team. At the completion of the chart, have students reflect on what *Mulan's* mistakes say about her as a person. Is it okay to make mistakes and learn from them? Why?
- **Elaborate on Question #9 in the Extension/Higher Level Thinking section of this Guide:** *Mulan* states, "what is courage but strength in the face of fear?" (Ch. 15). Have students compare and contrast the different fears from three characters of their choice in the book (e.g. Kai, Hua *Mulan*, and Father) and how the characters react to those fears. Students can then connect a fear that they've had and describe how they dealt with that fear, and how it relates to the characters that they've written about.
- ***Mulan* states, "I am, I realize, proud of myself" (Ch. 22).** Have students write a reflective piece about how *Mulan* comes to this conclusion. How does her character change throughout the novel to come to this point? How is pride a recurrent theme in *The Magnolia Sword*? In the same essay, have students connect her statement to their own lives. When have they been proud of themselves? Why? What did it feel like, and what did they have to do in order to feel proud?
- **Have students analyze how *Mulan's* perception of her father changes from the beginning to the end of the book.** What events factor into how she viewed her father in the beginning of the story to his revelation about the duel at the end? Have students write an essay describing *Mulan* and her father's relationship and how different perspectives of the

same story can change depending on who tells it. How did other people's words and actions change her view of her father? How did that affect her, and what does she realize in the end?

- **Envision a sequel to *The Magnolia Sword* and have students title the second book.** What do they think it would be called? What do they imagine happened to Mulan and Kai? How did they continue to use their sword skills? How does Mulan continue to support her family? Have students write one or more chapters of their sequel. Students can also create a cover for the book: for more details see question 1 in the Art/Media section of this guide.
- ***The Magnolia Sword* is an #ownvoices book written by an author who was born in China, Sherry Thomas.** Sherry Thomas is not writing about Mulan in a commercialized way, but conducted extensive research, taking back the story from corporate interests. Thomas made sure that *The Magnolia Sword* is accurate, representative, and reflective of her community's histories and perspectives. Students may find it powerful for them to reflect on: why bother doing this? Why is this important? What other commercial properties and stories from communities of color have been told without their voices and perspective? What stories would they like to see rewritten in a #ownvoices perspective?

### Social Studies/Civics

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Examine a map of China, focusing on the northern regions where Mulan spends most of her time in the book.** Using this information, go back to the text and make a travel diary of the places Mulan visited throughout the book. Consult different maps, such as the one from PBS's The Story of China series (<http://www.pbs.org/story-china/map/#/intro>).
- **What are the different Chinese dynasties?** Create a visual presentation detailing their history and legacy with partners or small groups, including a timeline. Refer to PBS Learning Media's Timeline for "The Story of China" ([http://www.pbs.org/story-china/timeline/#/\\*/](http://www.pbs.org/story-china/timeline/#/*/)) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's List of Rulers of China ([https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chem/hd\\_chem.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chem/hd_chem.htm)). Students should focus on each dynasty's Geography, Political Leaders, Cultural Influences, and Conflicts and report on details about those categories in their presentation. Students can present their presentations in front of the whole class and create a display afterwards for other students to use.
- ***The Magnolia Sword* touches upon the issue of women in armed forces. Conduct research about women in the U.S. military.** (Be sure to include trans women as well: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/05/05/meet-the-fort-meade-trans-women-fighting-the-militarys-ban/>) Consulting online and text resources, create a timeline that outlines dates and policies regarding the inclusion of women in the military and their experiences (<https://www.womensmemorial.org/timeline>), (<https://www.history.com/news/women-fought-armed-forces-war-service>), ([https://www.history.org/history/teaching/newsletter/volume7/images/nov/women\\_military\\_timeline.pdf](https://www.history.org/history/teaching/newsletter/volume7/images/nov/women_military_timeline.pdf)).
- **The Author's Note as well as *The Magnolia Sword* brings the diversity of Chinese**

**culture to the forefront.** In groups, students can research the different ethnicities in China and report back to the entire class from different reputable sources (<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-ethnic-groups-in-china.html>). Have students think about how the geographical and cultural differences within China affected Mulan and her interactions with different people throughout the novel.

- **The Magnolia Sword deals with conscription.** Research conscription and the war draft in the United States and why it was abolished. Students can debate whether they believe conscription is necessary during times of war. Resources for more information include PBS' Timeline of Conscription (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/app/uploads/2014/03/Time-line-of-of-conscription.pdf>) and History.com's "Conscription" (<https://www.history.com/topics/us-government/conscription>).
- **Conduct a research study on different historical women who dressed up as men to accomplish their goals** (<https://www.ranker.com/list/women-disguised-as-men-in-history/katiefustich>). In partners or small groups, students can choose one woman and find out why this woman had to dress as a man. What impact did she have, and why is she an important historical figure today? Afterwards, students can compare and contrast her experience with Mulan's in *The Magnolia Sword*. How are these women similar? How are they different? What kinds of things did they have to sacrifice in order to achieve their objectives and make a difference?

### Arts/Performing Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

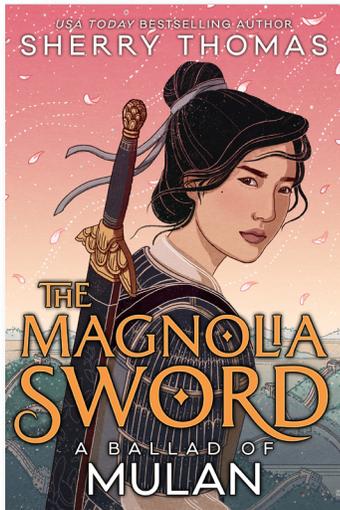
- **The Chinese language has many different dialects (Mandarin, Cantonese, and more).** Research the dialects and the various words/phrases mentioned both in the novel and from online resources, including the following from the Asia Society (<https://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/many-dialects-china>). Students can present their findings in a visual format of their choosing, and share with a partner, small group, or the whole class.
- **Write, recite, and film a live news segment that reports on Mulan's identity being revealed.** Discuss all the details of the event. Be sure to include key details leading up to the reveal. Interview important characters who can speak to the character of Mulan. Encourage students to think about how they would want Mulan to be covered in the media and think about biases that are present in news reporting.
- **Select a theme portrayed in *The Magnolia Sword*.** Then, citing textual evidence, create a visual representation of the theme to reflect how it is developed over the text. Students can create a series of drawings, paintings, or poems to showcase their work.
- **Mulan discusses the meaning of yiqi, the code of honor and brotherhood, in chapter 11.** Have students create their own code of honor and present it to the class through a visual presentation of their choosing. Why are honor codes important for any type of community?

- **For question #10 in the English/Language Arts section, have students draw a cover image for their follow-up to *The Magnolia Sword*.** What kind of materials do they want to use for the cover? Encourage students to think about what they think will happen in the second book, and how that should be reflected in the artwork for the cover. How can they use the current cover to inspire their work?

### Home-School Connection

((Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10) (Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

- **Ask students to create portraits of people who are their personal role models through drawing, collage, or photographs.** In writing, students should describe what actions and qualities they admire about this person. Students can write in prose or submit a poem or song.
- **Have students interview a parent, guardian, or adult mentor about their experiences with fighting for something they believe in.** How did this person react to and handle the situation when they were faced with obstacles? What advice do they have for someone trying to take up a cause and stand up for what they believe in?



## Ordering Information

### 🌐 General Order Information:

[leeandlow.com/contact/ordering](http://leeandlow.com/contact/ordering)

### 🔒 Secure Online Ordering:

[leeandlow.com/books/the-magnolia-sword](http://leeandlow.com/books/the-magnolia-sword)

📞 **By Phone:** 212-779-4400 ext. 25

📠 **By Fax:** 212-683-1894

### ✉️ **By Mail:**

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue,  
New York, NY 10016

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sherry Thomas** is the author of nineteen novels across multiple genres, including the acclaimed Lady Sherlock mystery series, a YA fantasy trilogy that began with *The Burning Sky*, and more than a dozen romance novels, which have twice won her the Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA® Award. Born in China, she learned English as a second language, and now lives and writes in Austin, Texas. Please visit her website at [www.sherrythomas.com](http://www.sherrythomas.com) and follow her on Twitter at @sherrythomas and on Instagram as @writersherrythomas.

## REVIEWS

"It is Mulan's story, however—her rocky introduction to combat and her growth in valor, plus the growing attraction between her and the princeling— that makes this revisioning of the ancient Chinese legend (that also inspired the animated Disney feature, scheduled for an upcoming live-action treatment) such a captivating tale." —*The Horn Book*

"Scaffolded by detailed research, the story is based on actual historic conflicts and artifacts. A refreshing new take that pays homage to a legendary character." —*Kirkus Reviews*

## ABOUT LEE & LOW BOOKS

**LEE & LOW BOOKS** is the largest children's book publisher specializing in diversity and multiculturalism. Our motto, "about everyone, for everyone," is as urgent today as it was when we started in 1991. It is the company's goal to meet the need for stories that children of color can identify with and that all children can enjoy. The right book can foster empathy, dispel stereotypes, prompt discussion about race and ethnicity, and inspire children to imagine not only a world that includes them, but also a world where they are the heroes of their own stories. Discover more at [leeandlow.com](http://leeandlow.com).