

DISCUSSION  
GUIDE TO

ANDREA WANG

*the Many  
Meanings  
of  
Meilan*



# ABOUT the BOOK



**Meilan Hua's world is made up of a few key ingredients: her family's beloved matriarch, Nāinai; the bakery her parents, aunts, and uncles own and run in Boston's Chinatown; and her favorite Chinese fairy tales.**

After Nāinai passes, the family has a falling-out that sends Meilan, her parents, and her grieving grandfather on the road in search of a new home. They take a winding path across the country before landing in Redbud, Ohio. Everything in Redbud is the opposite of Chinatown, and Meilan's not quite sure who she is—being renamed at school only makes it worse. She decides she is many Meilans, each inspired by a different Chinese character with the same pronunciation as her name. Sometimes she is Mist, cooling and invisible; other times, she's Basket, carrying her parents' hopes and dreams and her guilt of not living up to them; and occasionally she is bright Blue, the way she feels around her new friend Logan. Meilan keeps her facets separate until an injustice at school shows her the power of bringing her many selves together.

Discussion questions prepared by Sarah Park Dahlen, PhD. Dr. Dahlen is an associate professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She cofounded and coedits Research on Diversity in Youth Literature and researches Asian American children's literature.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS and ACTIVITIES

1. Before reading the book: based on the title and cover, what do you think *The Many Meanings of Meilan* is about? What kind of person do you think the girl on the cover is?
2. Andrea Wang begins *The Many Meanings of Meilan* by saying, "There is meaning behind every name" (p. 1). As you read, keep a list of the ways that Meilan defines herself or is defined by those around her.
3. Some people have more than one name: they might have a name from their heritage language and an American name; they might have been adopted and have a birth name, an orphanage name, and an adoptive name; or they might have nicknames. Share your name(s), what they mean, and how you got them.
4. Make a map of Meilan's family travels from Boston, Massachusetts, to Redbud, Ohio. Where do they stop, and who or what do they see? If you traveled the same path, what would you have wanted to see along the journey?
5. Did you ever have an experience where someone mispronounced your name, or you mispronounced someone else's name? How did you handle the situation? If this hasn't happened to you, how would you like to handle it?
6. Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do, or have you read about it happening to someone else? How did you or how did they resolve the situation?
7. Meilan thinks a lot about Chinese dragons and phoenixes. Do some research on the meaning of these creatures. Why are they so special in Chinese culture and mythology? Write a letter to a friend about some of the cool things you learned.
8. Where are some other circumstances in Meilan's life where a bad thing became a good thing (pp. 138 - 139)? Share about a time this has happened in your own life. What can we learn from Meilan's story and from your story?
9. How does Meilan's perception of the power of a story change over time? What helps her to think differently about stories?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS and ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

10. Meilan and Liam talk about how their families came to live in the country currently known as the United States, with Liam asking Meilan “How did you get here?” (p. 115) and also saying that his “family’s always lived here” (p. 117). What do you think about how Meilan and Anita respond to Liam? How did your family come to the country currently known as the United States? Or, if you are a member of an Indigenous nation, share about your history and genealogy.
11. Flip through the book and think about some of the comments the characters make about war, veterans, peace, etc. What do they think is the purpose of war? What do you think is the purpose of war? How can nations, communities, and individuals build peace?
12. Gōnggong tells Meilan and Logan that he was drafted into military service in Taiwan. At various points in history, the United States has also had the draft. Should countries have a draft? Why or why not?
13. In *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “. . . all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (p. 4). What do you think Nguyen means by this and how does it apply to *The Many Meanings of Meilan*?
14. Do some research on the different reactions to the American War in Vietnam. Why did the United States get involved? What other countries were involved? Why did some people protest the war? What impact did the media have on shaping the American public’s thoughts about the war?
15. Meilan says she learned that the popular story of the first Thanksgiving was “invented by colonists to cover up a more gruesome history” (p. 345). Research the history of the real Thanksgiving. Write and draw a picture book of what you think young people should learn about it.

# PRAISE FOR the Many Meanings of Meilan

NEW YORK TIMES  
BEST CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF 2021

2021 NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY  
BEST BOOKS

2021 SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL  
BEST BOOKS

2021 CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF  
MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE  
BEST BOOKS

★ "Wang's resonant middle grade debut features stunning prose and a fierce protagonist . . . Meilan's journey to reclaiming her identity and finding her inner strength is remarkably compelling and relatable."

—BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW

★ "Wang's middle grade debut is a vibrant exploration of family and identity . . . Meilan's story should be on library shelves everywhere."

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL, STARRED REVIEW

"The little girl I was would have been thrilled to encounter Meilan and her many names in a book . . . and having found a character who embraces the complexity of being both Chinese and American, I would have been able to echo her words: 'I am not alone.' "

—NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW BY JEAN KWOK

"Meilan discovers the specific origins of her name—and, satisfyingly, the strength to proudly stand her ground."

—HORN BOOK MAGAZINE

## ABOUT the AUTHOR



Andrea Wang is an acclaimed author of children's books. Her book *Watercress* was awarded the Caldecott Medal, a Newbery Honor, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, a New England Book Award, and a Boston Globe–Horn Book Honor. Her other books, *The Many Meanings of Meilan*, *Magic Ramen*, and *The Nian Monster*, have also received awards and starred reviews. Her work explores culture, creative thinking, and identity. She is also the author of seven nonfiction titles for the library and school market. Andrea holds an MS in Environmental Science and an MFA in Creative Writing for Young People. She lives in Colorado with her family.