

# Study Guide



## Mai's America

### MAI'S AMERICA (2003)

Feature Documentary  
USA, 72 minutes, Language: English  
Directed By Marlo Poras  
Target Audience: 12+

### Introduction to the Film

#### Synopsis

Fueled by the opportunity for a better education, a spunky Vietnamese teenager named Mai bravely leaves her country for the first time and travels to America for her senior year of high school. As she tries to fit in and overcome her culture shock, Mai confronts the myth of the "American Dream" and discovers that her long-held ideas about freedom, the US and even Vietnam no longer hold true. Mai's experiences as an exchange student will resonate with anyone who has ever felt like an outsider.

Mai confronts the legacy of the Vietnam War and its aftermath within both nations as she attempts to sort out the false images, realities, and possibilities of everyday life in this country over the course of three years. This excellent documentary surprises the viewer by revealing the United States to itself through Mai's personal relationships with a wide variety of Americans.

#### Key Themes

- Cultural identity
- School, peer and parental pressure
- Stereotypes
- Migration experience/immigration

#### Links to Curriculum Guidelines

- History
- Social Studies
- English Language Arts

#### Director's info/comments

Mai's America is Marlo Poras' first film. Herself a former exchange student and working alone, without a crew, she followed Mai for 2 1/2 years, filming over 150 hours of her remarkable journey in Mississippi, New Orleans, Detroit and Vietnam.

From the start, Marlo envisioned Mai's America as an intimate portrait film, with no interviewers or outside narrators. Wanting the audience to experience Mai's adventure close up, as Mai experiences it, Marlo kept radio microphones on Mai at all times. Armed with her unobtrusive but ever-present camera, Marlo captured the ordinary and sometimes extraordinary moments of Mai's everyday life.

"I didn't go to film school. I was a history major in college and had an epiphany near the end of school that I really wanted to get involved in film, specifically documentary film. So I moved to New York and ended up getting editing jobs, apprentice editing and assistant editing for feature film. And I really enjoyed it for a while and learned a ton, but then realized, I got into this for documentary film not feature film."

#### Researching the story of the film

Excerpts of an interview with Marlo Poras

"Before the students come to the States, they do a year-long intensive English and American studies class. And the first year I was there (in Hanoi), my friend was their teacher and we would have them over for pizza parties and we would just answer their questions about the States, and they were so interested in me, because they had your stereotypical awe of the states, and MTV, and Hollywood movies. They also knew that the value of an education here would mean so much to them. But what was really unique about them in that mixture is that they were all North Vietnamese, all their parents had fought for the North in the war. As Mai says in the film, they all grew up very proud that their country of poor rice farmers was able to win the war against the most powerful nation in the world. And that seemed like a very interesting starting point.

"I'd always been very fascinated by it (the

# Study Guide



## Mai's America

Vietnam War). I was born in an army base during the war, so it was always there. I had always wanted to go to Southeast Asia. When I got over there, something that was a very big issue for me was trying to figure out how people feel about us.

"I followed four girls around. One of them was placed with an Arabian woman in Washington State, another was placed with a religious Christian family in Illinois, and another was placed with a Caucasian family on a Hopi Indian reservation. It was very hard to narrow it down, because each had such uniquely American experiences and stories. But as you can see in the film Mai just has this enchanting mixture of wisdom and innocence and bravery and humor, and was so comfortable in front of the camera, and enjoyed the process so much, it was a very natural decision to narrow it down to her.

"I had no idea what I was going to make. That's what I love about this kind of documentary film: life is so much more unexpected than fiction could ever be.

"It was just me down there on location, people were very comfortable. It was this little camera, a couple of microphones, no light. And so it was un-intimidating and natural for many of them."

([http://www.indiewire.com/people/int\\_Poras\\_Marlor\\_020806.html](http://www.indiewire.com/people/int_Poras_Marlor_020806.html))

### BEFORE the Screening – Discussion Topics

#### GRADES 6-8

- What does it mean to live in a multicultural, multi-racial and multiethnic society?
- Do you have any friends from different cultural background than your own? If so, have you ever shared in their traditions or customs?
- How have these experiences influenced your understanding of people from different backgrounds?

#### GRADES 9-12

- Define "stereotype". Is it ever appropriate to stereotype a group different from your own? Do you believe that stereotypes lead to racist acts?
- Has your ethnic group ever been stereotyped?
- Are you or any of your family members immigrants to this country? If so, where are they from and what is their perspective on the Canadian experience?

([www.womenmakemovies.com](http://www.womenmakemovies.com))

### DURING The Screening: Things to Think About

#### The Documentary Genre

Some elements of a documentary include:

- interviews
- live-action scenes
- archival images: news-reel, photos, documents
- re-enactment scenes: when actors recreate an event, a memory
- narration: the director's voice, a host's voice, a character's voice,
- music and sound effects

The way these elements are used (or combined) will define a documentary's sub-genre. Some examples of documentary sub-genres include:

# Study Guide



## Mai's America

- Scientific documentary
- Historical documentary
- Biographical documentary
- Auto-Biographical documentary
- Advocate / Activist documentary
- Experimental/Art documentary
- Author's documentary: highly subjective point-of-view (POV)
- Vérité documentary: As little interruption from the filmmaker as possible. No narration and no re-enactments, only live action.

Documentary sub-genre styles can be also be combined in film storytelling.

Q: What kind of documentary sub-genre (or combination of sub-genres) is Mai's America?

### Cities and Nations

- How are the locations represented?
- What is the feel of the cities where Mai lives?

### Questions / Discussion After Screening

#### What are the themes of this film?

- Can you think of scenes that reflect these themes?
- Who is the target audience?
- How would the target audience affect how the film was made?
- Have you ever moved or changed schools mid-year?
- If so, how did that impact your life? Was it difficult to adjust to a new environment, find friends and adjust to school? Can you relate to any of Mai's experiences?

### Stereotypes

- How does this film disprove stereotypes?
- What is the "American Dream"? Will young women like Mai ever be able to achieve this dream? If so, why or why not?
- Is it difficult for international students to adjust to Canadian schools?
- How is life for a migrant student different from your own?

### What is the most significant scene or your favorite scene in the film?

Describe it in detail, taking into account the setting, lighting, music, sound effects, characters (human and non-human), event or situation.

- Why did this scene make such an impression on you?
- Did you relate in some way to one of the characters or to the theme?

### Exercises / Activities

Conduct an "oral history" on your family's background and cultural traditions. Interview immediate and extended family members of all ages. Present these interviews in a report form or as an article that can be presented to the entire group or printed in a school publication.

- Make a list of all the different ethnic groups living in your community. If you don't know who they are, contact your local census office.
- Gather local newspapers and magazines. Notice whether the articles and ads reflect the true demographic makeup of your community.
- Whose perspectives are represented? Who writes them? Are these representations accurate or stereotypical?
- In class, discuss what these stereotypes mean and how they affect the community as a whole.

# Study Guide



## Mai's America

With your classmates, brainstorm ways to dispel these stereotypes.

- Contact a local community organisation working with a diverse constituency (such as the YMCA) and find out what they are doing to create dialogue and understanding between ethnic groups.

[http://www.wmm.com/girlsproject/module\\_uscultural-id.html](http://www.wmm.com/girlsproject/module_uscultural-id.html)

Using your discussion notes as a starting point, write an honest review of the film in 300 words.

### Future Research References



#### Small Group Exercise

Below are excerpts from an interview with the director, Marlo Poras. Choose one of the segments of the text below that is in *italic*, and explain to each other what you understand the meaning and context of Poras' comments to be.

#### **Did you envision a certain audience when you were making this film?**

Not really. But I've held screenings at local schools and universities with Vietnamese-American groups, and I've realized that's an audience I want to target the younger Vietnamese-Americans. Watching a film about a North Vietnamese was a completely new perspective for them, because most of their families are from South Vietnam and they grew up with very anti-communist South Vietnamese communities in the States. It was mind-bending for them to hear the story of Mai, a North Vietnamese, who was actually as open-minded as most of them are, even though she grew up with communist rhetoric while they grew up with anti-communist rhetoric. They responded really well to it.

There have also been a lot of college professors and teachers who have seen the film and have

thought of ways to use it for all different kinds of curriculum. While it presents a foreigner's view of the United States, it also presents American attitudes that are foreign to a lot of Americans.

#### **Tell me about Chris' decision to stop being a drag queen.**

When Chris "reconverts" towards the end of the film, Mai was so shocked and sad because she felt that Chris was sacrificing his own will for other people – that he was giving into pressure. And what was really exciting to me was afterwards realizing that Mai was succumbing to the same pressures to subsume her will for her parents'. The process of discovering those themes in the editing – and there are a lot of parallels, most obviously the shoeshine boys in the beginning with the last shots of the film – was the most rewarding experience for me.

#### **There's some mirroring in her Vietnamese friend in the United States as well.**

Yes. They have this thing where he was really afraid of going back to Vietnam and then he does and comes back and feels this overwhelming sense of joy of having gone and belonged for the first time somewhere. And then he takes Mai to the greater Vietnamese community and while she's so excited to go, and she's really getting along with her friend, she finds she felt such a deep cultural divide with these people trying to recapture their homeland in their adopted land.

#### **Was your inspiration for this project the urge to document the culture shock of foreigners abroad?**

In 1996 or '97, all the documentaries I had seen about Vietnam were either about vets going back or adventure travelers going there – but I knew that 40% of Vietnam is under the age of twenty-five. They were all born at the end of the war and given this very strong... I don't know if you'd want to call it propaganda, but a very strong education about America and the war – as much as we receive the

# Study Guide



## Mai's America

same here, I guess. But I knew I wanted to do something about a teen – a young person. In Hanoi all the people had parents who had fought against the United States and were taught to be very proud that this nation of rice farmers had defeated the most powerful country in the world. There was this cockiness there, but at the same time they were totally in awe of Hollywood and MTV, and that dichotomy was too compelling a starting point to ignore.

<http://www.marloporas.com/content/interviews/ifp.htm>