

# Asian Reflections: Examining Asian Identity through Film

A Resource for Grade 7 – 12 Teachers



Image courtesy of former TCDSB student Stephen Vescio of Marshall McLuhan CSS

## Featured Film

**Tapestry**, Directed by Sharlene Bamboat, 2009, SAVAC

Who am I? The question has, no doubt, been uttered by millions of people through time and in every region of the world. The search of understanding the self is indeed a journey and much more so for adolescents as they search for identity and a sense of belonging. For many, the journey is confounded by issues of ethnicity, language, societal norms and Diaspora. One thing remains true, the search and the need for reflection continue.

*Asian Reflections: Examining Asian Identity through Film* will support the conversations around identity, belonging and self. It is a series of teaching and learning strategies written by teachers for teachers in the Toronto Catholic and Toronto District School Boards. Key to each set of teaching and learning strategy is a film that brings to light the very questions of identity, identification and representation.

*Tapestry*, Directed by Sharlene Bamboat (2009)

“Tapestry is a short experimental documentary depicting the fragmentation of identity in Parsi Culture” – [www.sharelenbamboat.com](http://www.sharelenbamboat.com)

*Western Eyes*, Directed by Ann Shin (2000)

“This documentary presents two Canadian women of Asian descent who are contemplating eyelid surgery. Maria and Sharon, of Filipino and Korean heritage respectively, believe their looks--specifically their eyes--get in the way of how people see them. Layering their stories with pop culture references to beauty icons and supermodels, filmmaker Ann Shin looks at the pain that lies deep behind the desire for plastic surgery.” – [www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca)

*Screen Test*, Directed by Linda Lee (2006)

“This short documentary portrays an actor's perspective on ethnocentrism and systemic racism in the entertainment industry. Made as part of the **Work for All** project in 2006, an NFB and HRSDC-Labour initiative to combat racism in the workplace.” – [www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca)

## **A Note from the Curriculum Committee**

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The Asian Heritage Curriculum Committee would like to thank the teachers from both school boards who gave of their time to view, debate and write these teaching and learning strategies. A special appreciation also goes to the South Asian Visual Arts Centre and the National Film Board, our community partners, for their support in identifying and providing these films for use.

No teaching and learning strategies are ever 'complete', rather they should always be in DRAFT because of the need to tweak pieces to reflect the needs and interests of the students in the class. The ideas and strategies presented here are but one interpretation and approach to bring to surface these questions of identity. Classroom teachers know their students best and should take these into consideration as they implement the ideas written here. The goal is provide a safe space to dialogue about notions of identity, identification and representation.

We welcome your comments, concerns and critique. Please forward them to Karlo Cabrera at [karlo.cabrera@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:karlo.cabrera@tdsb.on.ca).

## **Title: Customs and Traditions in the Asian Diaspora: A Critical Examination**

**Subject:** English, Media Studies, Geography

**Grade:** 7-8

### **Time Required:**

200 minutes

### **Overview:**

Students will engage in an interactive discussion that will develop their understanding of how customs are passed down the generations by families immigrating to another country. They will analyze the film “**Tapestry**” by engaging in critical reflection of how and why their individual family’s customs and traditions are passed to them, and what impact they have on their lives.

### **Purpose:**

Within the context of Citizenship and Heritage, the purpose for these lessons is for students to understand the role of customs in a society, how they evolve over time and place to adapt to change. To accomplish this, students will critically analyze the film titled “**Tapestry**”, compare and contrast the film with other media and examine the challenges faced by South Asian Canadians to keep their customs alive in a multicultural society like Canada.

### **Description:**

Since 1978, the month of May has been a time to honour Asian heritage. The purpose of these lessons is for students to examine familial customs and to engage in a discussion of its meanings, symbols and actions. Students will build on their understanding of the impact of Diaspora on lived experiences (e.g. the practice of specific customs) and will make authentic connections between the learned information and their everyday experiences. These lessons also build on their understanding of the importance of equity in the school community and the local community. To accomplish this, students will participate in various activities that encourage them to be empathetic and introspective to individuals of the Asian Diaspora.

## Subject, Strand and Expectations

	<b>Subject / Strand</b>	<b>Expectations</b>
1.3	Language – Oral Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrate an understanding of the information and ideas in increasingly complex oral texts in a variety of ways</li> </ul>
1.6	Language – Oral Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>extend understanding of oral texts, including increasingly complex texts, by connecting, comparing, and contrasting the ideas and information in them to their own knowledge, experience, and insights; to other texts, including print and visual texts; and to the world around them</li> </ul>

2.2	Language – Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>establish a distinctive voice in their writing appropriate to the subject and audience</li> </ul>
2.5	Language – Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identify their point of view and other possible points of view, evaluate other points of view, and find ways to acknowledge other points of view, if appropriate</li> </ul>

1.2	Language – Media Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>interpret increasingly complex or difficult media texts, using overt and implied messages as evidence for their interpretations</li> </ul>
1.4	Language – Media Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrate understanding that different media texts reflect different points of view</li> </ul>
3.4	Language – Media Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>produce a variety of media texts of some technical complexity for specific purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques</li> </ul>

Geography – Human Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>explain how the components of culture (e.g., language, social organization, educational systems, beliefs and customs) can be affected by migration;</li> </ul>
Geography – Human Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>describe the effects that migration has had on the development of Canada</li> </ul>
Geography – Human Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>formulate questions to guide and analyse research on migration and mobility</li> </ul>

## Discussion of Documentary Film

**Tapestry** is a *cinema verite* documentary. Like a fly on the wall, the filmmaker observes all the action, does not do sit-down interviews and does not comment with voice-over or narration (as in Michael Moore's documentaries.) Nothing is staged. This style aims to capture a moment as it unfolds in real time with minimal editing and soundtrack music to capture on film events as naturally as possible without the filmmaker intruding.

The first film was Robert Drew's *Primary* which covered the 1960 Democratic Primary campaign between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey. New lightweight cameras and sound equipment allowed filmmakers to follow their subjects virtually anywhere and Drew was the first to exploit this technology. Until then, filmmakers were burdened with heavy and noisy cameras. An interview with Drew and excerpts from his films are seen in Peter Wintonik's 1999 film, *Cinema Verite: Defining the Moment*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuiX9xBbwc0>

A few years later, American director, D.A. Pennebaker created his own camera to follow singer Bob Dylan around England in January 1965 in the acclaimed film, *Don't Look Back* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EROnWTAHh64>).

Canada has a long and respected history of *cinema verite* filmmaking. For over 30 years, Allan King was its leading proponent. One of his last films is *Dying At Grace* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQYx6NFi7RM>) about patients in a palliative care centre in Toronto.

In the U.S. Frederick Wiseman is regarded as the leading *verite filmmaker*: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TctXUT5\\_YtU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TctXUT5_YtU)

These days, the more popular documentary style is the POV (point-of-view) or personal documentary. The director usually speaks on the soundtrack or talk directly to the camera, performs sit-down interviews and uses editing and soundtrack techniques found in TV, like fast editing and on-screen graphics. The most famous director here is Michael Moore. A sample from *Sicko*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOZmvaFfjtk>

### Materials

1. View the film with the students without any major introduction of the genre (e.g. *cinema verite*). Don't be surprised if students giggle or are become confused. The genre is different from ones that they are accustomed to.
2. Discuss the students' initial impression of the film. *What did you think? Why did you think that? What do you think were the filmmaker's intentions?* Elicit as many different responses as possible.
3. Introduce the students to the film's genre, *cinema verite*. Project Appendix B for the purposes of a read aloud to explain the concept of *cinema verite*. Watching a small clip of Michal Moore's "Sicko" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOZmvaFfjtk>) will serve to differentiate between the two genres.
4. After having discussed a new genre, *cinema verite*, view the film a second time. This time, provide students with yellow post-it note pads to record their responses to the following prompt: *Having read a little about cinema verite, watch the film a second time and record what you learned, how you felt as you watched it and any further questions you may have. Be prepared to share it with the class.*
5. Allow students to share their notes in a think-pair-share. Students can stick their notes on a chart paper labeled "What I learned", "What I felt" and "Further Questions".
6. Allow an opportunity for a galley walk.

### Extension Question / Homework Journal

Could the filmmaker have made the film as a POV? What could the filmmaker have done (i.e. voice-over, on-camera interviews with the film's subjects, different editing style)? Would a change in genre affect how you viewed and understood the film? If so, why?

## Materials

1. Begin the session by sharing one of your family customs (e.g. a specific feast, wedding, rite of passage, etc.). Share some aspects of the custom (e.g. specific food items prepared / shared type of clothing, type of songs/music played, and specific actions taken by people). Also share the importance of that specific custom to you as an individual who practice and participate in that specific action.
2. Photocopy and hand out Appendix C. Students are asked to record one specific custom that they have witnessed or participated in with their family, faith or ethnic traditions. Provide similar characteristics as above.
3. Invite students to share their selected custom in a think-pair-share model with an opportunity to share in the larger class grouping. The teacher can record some of the ideas shared. It would be interesting if students who belong to the same faith or ethnic tradition perform a similar custom differently. If so, this is a great opportunity to ask the question, “Why do you think it is different?”  
  
Similarities across family, faith or ethnic traditions should also be highlighted especially when discussing a similar custom (e.g. wedding, death, rite of passage, etc.)
4. Prompt the students: *Did you parents perform the same customs when they were your age? Do you think there have been differences from how they performed it then versus how they perform it today?*
5. Invite the students to take their sheet of paper home to a family member and to discuss differences or similarities in how the specific custom was practiced then and now. If there have been changes to the practice, students should focus inquiry into understanding forces that could have caused the change (e.g. weather, access to specific resources, etc.)



## Materials

1. Invite students to share their homework. Focus further questioning in understanding forces that may have caused change in how a specific custom is practiced.

View the film again. This time invite the students to pay special attention to the actions undertaken by the people being recorded. Ask, *what is happening? What is the filmmaker attempting to show through the film? What are the big ideas that the filmmaker is raising through the documentary?*

2. Provide an opportunity for discussion.
3. Write the word ‘Diaspora’ on the board. Invite students to search for its meaning online or through a dictionary. Begin to discuss the concept of ‘Asian Diaspora’. As a resource, you can use draw attention to the diverse ethnic backgrounds of students in the classroom or in the school. You can draw attention to the migration of the Chinese and Indians to the Caribbean Islands (through the Coolie trade or indentured servitude – for more information visit the Asian Heritage Online Calendar <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/equity/ahm>).

4. Display the following note from the filmmaker.

*“Tapestry is the first film where I have engaged in all the major roles - directing, camera op. & editing, so it was quite a challenge technically for me, but definitely a great learning experience. With this video, I didn't have any preconceived notions in mind. I was at a cousin's wedding ceremony in Pakistan and decided to film it, in the hopes that I could document part of the tradition. A few months later, when I watched the footage, I realised that all these themes of displacement and Diaspora, and 'not knowing' one's traditions were so prevalent that it fed into larger themes of my work. It also throws into question notions of tradition, which all cultures tend to hold onto. These may or may not have any practical purposes in the 21st century, but are just built into our histories.”*

5. Ask the students, *as people migrate what might happen to traditions and celebrations? Are there any that get lost or translated differently? Why do you think this is so? Are there any traditions or customs in which you participate that you don't necessarily understand?*
6. At this point students can be introduced to the culminating task or as an extension proceed to the next point.

## Possible Extension

1. View the film one more time. This time invite the students to close their eyes as the film is played. *Note to teacher: There are two voices singing the background song. Pay attention to the how the two voices sing the song. There is a stark difference. The first sings the song 'well' in that it is continuous without hesitation*

*or stopping. The second singer pauses, hums, strings inaudible words together yet sings the refrain forcefully.*

2. After the viewing invite students to share what they heard with a special focus on the filmmaker's message. *Why did the filmmaker use two singers? How does the use of two singers extend the filmmaker's key message about customs and the changes due to Diaspora? Would there have been a difference in how the film was received by an audience if there was no change in singer?*

*or*

*How was the change in singers a good metaphor for the filmmaker's key message? Would the key message have been misunderstood if there was only one singer?*

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## **Materials**

1. Display the filmmaker's notes to the class again.

*“Tapestry is the first film where I have engaged in all the major roles - directing, camera op. & editing, so it was quite a challenge technically for me, but definitely a great learning experience. With this video, I didn't have any preconceived notions in mind. I was at a cousin's wedding ceremony in Pakistan and decided to film it, in the hopes that I could document part of the tradition. A few months later, when I watched the footage, I realised that all these themes of displacement and Diaspora, and 'not knowing' one's traditions were so prevalent that it fed into larger themes of my work. It also throws into question notions of tradition, which all cultures tend to hold onto. These may or may not have any practical purposes in the 21st century, but are just built into our histories.”*

2. Place special attention to: *A few months later, when I watched the footage, I realised that all these themes of displacement and Diaspora, and 'not knowing' one's traditions were so prevalent that it fed into larger themes of my work. It also throws into question notions of tradition, which all cultures tend to hold onto.*
3. Introduce the Culminating Task (See Appendix D)

## Accommodations for All Students

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1. Specific accommodations as identified in a student's Individual Education Plan should be provided as identified. Provide opportunities for students to examine and explore key vocabulary: Diaspora, immigration, custom and tradition.
2. Students may need prompting prior to lesson with vocabulary development e.g. semantic webs.
3. Students may require multiple viewing of the text prior to engagement with discussions.
4. Students may connect with an adult or a teacher in the school as the subject of the interview (found in Lesson 2).
5. Students may rehearse their oral answers with a partner prior to sharing with the large group.
6. Assessment for Learning will assist teachers in identifying when extra assistance is required.

## Ordering a FREE copy of Tapestry

To get your free copy of **Tapestry**, other films and resources, please contact:

### Allan Tong

Education Officer, SAVAC

allan@savac.net

ph: 647.200.9146

<http://www.savac.net/>



## About SAVAC

Since 1993, **SAVAC** (South Asian Visual Arts Centre) has been dedicated to the presentation and promotion of contemporary visual art by South Asian artists. **SAVAC** presents innovative programming, which critically explores issues and ideas shaping South Asian identities and experiences. **SAVAC** operates without a gallery space, but collaborates with various organizations locally, nationally and internationally, to produce exhibitions, screenings, online projects and artistic interventions.

***Cinema Verite***  
**By Allan Tong**

There are various styles of documentary. These days, the more popular documentary style is the POV (point of view) or personal documentary. The director usually speaks on the soundtrack or talk directly to the camera, performs sit-down interviews and uses editing and soundtrack techniques found in TV, like fast editing and on-screen graphics.

Tapestry is shot in an entirely different style *called cinema verite* documentary. Like a fly on the wall, the filmmaker observes all the action, does not do sit-down interviews and does not comment with voice-over or narration (as in Michael Moore's documentaries.) Nothing is staged. This style aims to capture a moment as it unfolds in real time with minimal editing and soundtrack music to capture on film events as naturally as possible without the filmmaker intruding.

**Possible Extending Questions**

1. Which of the two genres (POV or *cinema verite*) would you consider to be a more powerful medium for the purposes of a documentary? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
2. Is there a value for having both types of genre available to the public? If so, what is the value?

**Student Reflections**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Custom / Tradition: \_\_\_\_\_

Family  Faith Tradition  Ethnic Tradition

Other (please specify)

In the space below share how the specific custom / tradition is practiced.

Interview a family or a community member who practices the same custom as you have written above. Determine if there were differences as to how the custom / tradition were practiced before and now. Use any graphic organizer to help your thinking (e.g. Venn diagram, T Chart, etc.)

### **Culminating Task**

**Objective:** To critically analyse a family, faith or ethnic custom / tradition and to share it with students in the class.

Attention should be given to understanding the meanings of symbols and actions and their importance to the custom and the student themselves.

**Format:** Students can showcase their thinking and learning in a variety of forms:

- Photo / written essay
- video footage
- an interview of a family member
- a media presentation (MS PowerPoint)
- Re-enactment of a specific custom / tradition

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## Achievement Chart for the Culminating Task

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
<b>Knowledge of content</b> <i>(e.g., forms of text; strategies associated with speaking, and listening; elements of style; terminology; conventions)</i>	demonstrates limited knowledge of content	demonstrates some knowledge of content	demonstrates considerable knowledge of content	demonstrates thorough knowledge of content
<b>Use of critical/creative thinking processes</b> <i>(e.g., oral discourse, research, critical/creative analysis, critical literacy, metacognition, invention)</i>	uses critical/creative thinking processes with limited effectiveness	uses critical/creative thinking processes with some effectiveness	uses critical/creative thinking processes with considerable effectiveness	uses critical/creative thinking processes with a high degree of effectiveness
<b>Expression and organization of ideas and information</b> <i>(e.g., clear expression, logical organization)</i> <b>in oral, visual, and written forms, including media forms</b>	expresses and organizes ideas and information with limited effectiveness	expresses and organizes ideas and information with some effectiveness	expresses and organizes ideas and information with considerable effectiveness	expresses and organizes ideas and information with a high degree of effectiveness
<b>Making connections within and between various contexts</b> <i>(e.g., between the text and personal knowledge or experience, other texts, and the world outside the school; between disciplines)</i>	makes connections within and between various contexts with limited effectiveness	makes connections within and between various contexts with some effectiveness	makes connections within and between various contexts with considerable effectiveness	makes connections within and between various contexts with a high degree of effectiveness

## Credits

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### **Unit Writers**

Karlo Cabrera (TDSB)  
Jill Eason (TCDSB)  
Jodelyn Huang (TCDSB)  
Joy Martyr-Andre (TDSB)  
Marisa Mellilo Spitznagel (TCDSB)  
Allan Tong (SAVAC)  
Ariel Vente (TDSB)

### **Contributors**

Louise Azzarello (TDSB)  
Cheryl Boi-Doku (TDSB)  
Marissa Largo (TCDSB)

### **Community Partners**

Haema Sivanesan, South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC)  
Allan Tong, South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC)  
Lindsay Write, National Film Board (NFB)