

Title: *Folk Music Beyond Boundaries*

Integrating global music into classroom instruction provides a gateway to exploring and connecting across cultures. Music has always been a vital part of human expression. It has the power to engage, motivate and inspire students and builds bridges between both what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. The integration of music across the curriculum enables students to engage in rich textual analysis of diverse, interdisciplinary primary source materials, as well further develop global competency skills such as recognizing perspectives and communicating across cultures. This lesson integrates music from the album [Wu Fei and Abigail Washburn](#), available through Smithsonian Folkways.

Lesson Theme: Identifying similarities between musical cultures beyond sounds.

Featured Songs: “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” and “Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls”

Overview: Topics addressed will be analyzing possible similarities and differences in sounds, song topics, and performance styles of American and Chinese folk music. Students will first listen to the two featured songs and then be provided with Chinese (first with single character translations only) and English lyrics for them to analyze and translate. For the Chinese lyrics, students will be asked to use the single character translations to see what they think the lyrics translate to in English. Then they will be given the direct English translations to see how they did. After the translations, students will then be asked to compare and contrast the lyrical and musical structures of the Chinese and English portions of each song.

Suggested Grade levels: 9 - 12

Subjects: Chinese 1,2, 3, 4.

Corresponding National Standards:

For foreign language: <https://coerll.utexas.edu/methods/pdf/lt/language-teacher-national-standards.pdf>

The following standards will be addressed: 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1

Corresponding Global Competency Skills: ([Asia Society Global Competency Skills](#))

1. Investigate the World
2. Recognize Perspectives
3. Communicate Ideas
4. Take Action

Essential Question(s) (include 1-3): (what students will know)

1. What are the differences between spoken and lyrical Chinese?
2. How are folk songs similar across different cultures and languages?
3. Why do the lyrics of folk songs entail the subject matters that they do?

Lesson Objectives: Students will:

1. Learn and identify differences in structure between lyrical and spoken Chinese.
2. Recognize similarities and differences between Chinese and American folk tunes, not simply in the use of different instruments, but also in terms of subject(s) depicted by the songs and performance styles.
3. Translate English lyrics into lyrical Chinese based on their own interpretation.

Materials:

- [“Water is Wude/Wusuli Boat Song” lyrics](#)
- [“Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls” lyrics](#)
- [“Kangding Love Song”](#) (for assessment)
- [“Jasmine Flower”](#) (for assessment)

Background information for the educator

- Background info on Wu Fei and Abigail Washburn: <https://supchina.com/2016/12/07/wu-fei-abigail-washburn-background/>
- Abigail Washburn’s website: www.abigailwashburn.com
- Wu Fei’s website www.wufeimusic.com
- Information on the guzheng: www.chinesezither.net
- Information on the banjo: <https://bittersoutherner.com/history-of-the-banjo#.XhM5X0e6PIU>

Music analysis strategies

- Have students listen to the melodies and harmonies only, without any attention to the sung languages.
- Show different versions of the folk songs to provide different perspectives and to supplement the origins of the songs.

Discussion questions

- What do you think folk music from any region of the world entails?
- Do you find any commonalities on the subject(s) depicted by the songs? If so, why do you think so?
- Do you think the song(s) will uphold their original messages if the instrumentation was different?
- Why do you think the Chinese lyricists use those particular characters rather than others?
- Did you find difficulty translating to Chinese, given the limited nature of lyrical Chinese? Why or why not?
- Were you considering multiple possible characters for your translations? If so, why did you choose the current one(s) that you did?

Student activities

- Students will first listen to the two featured songs: “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” and “Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls”.
- Next, provide students with the Chinese (first with single character translations only) and English lyrics for [“Water is Wide/ Wusuli Boat Song”](#) to analyze and translate. For the Chinese lyrics, students will be asked to use the single character translations to see what they think the lyrics translate to in English. (30 minutes for students in levels 1 & 2, 20 minute students in levels 3 & 4)
- Then students will be given the direct English translations to see how they did. First have them discuss in a small group and after, with the class, led by the teacher. (10 minutes)

- Next, provide lyrics for [“Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls”](#) and have students do the translation for it as well. (30 minutes for students in levels 1 & 2, 20 minute students in levels 3 & 4)
- Provide the official English translations and have students see how they did. (10 minutes)
- After the translations, students will listen to “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” in small groups and write down the similarities and differences they hear in the Chinese and English portions of the song. (10 minutes).
- When analyzing the Chinese lyrics, note that because Chinese characters must meet a certain syllabic requirement, some adjectives and verbs may be omitted. This is because a single character can depict much deeper meanings when used in a lyrical way. Explain this to students and have them identify these instances in the Chinese portions of the music. (20 minutes for levels 1 & 2, 10-15 minutes for levels 3 & 4).
- After analyzing that Chinese lyrics this way, have students compare the messages (using the English translations provided) with the English portions of the songs. As folk songs, what similarities and differences do they have with one another? (10 minutes).

Assessment:

- A quiz featuring two famous Chinese folk songs will be used (Jasmine Flower and Kangding Love Song) [“Quiz for Assessment”](#)
- The quizzes will feature Chinese lyrics (with pinyin for every other character) and English translations (for characters only) of the chorus of the songs, divided into four sections.
- The teacher will play the choruses from the folk songs one at a time. Students, must attempt to write the correct song title above the given lyrics.
- After the matching exercise, students must give their own personal translation of the verses given, using the English word-for-word translations as assistance.

Learning Extension:

- Each student is to ask to look up a different Chinese folk song and American folk song/spiritual on their own and do translations, comparisons, contrasts, etc. like they did with “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” and “Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls”
- This [essay](#), written by famous modern Chinese composer Bright Sheng, describes how music from different nations was shared during the era of the Silk Road. As students are doing the learning extension, have them consider if the folk songs/spirituals they do research on may have had some influences from the sharing of cultures from the Silk Road era.
- Play modern Chinese pop songs and have students compare the lyrics and musical style to that depicted in “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song” and “Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls.”

Explore Further: Albums:

- Silk Road Ensemble (any album)
- Shanghai Restoration Project

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