

**Title: Shared Cultural Experiences**

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:** The power of music around the world

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

**Overview:** Students will learn about the importance of folk music in both the American and Chinese cultures. Music has an international language that speaks to the soul and circumstance in each civilization. Studying the music of Wu Fei and Abigail Washburn will introduce students to the shared experiences that can cross cultures and bring humanity together.

**Suggested Grade level(s):** Community College

**Subject(s):** History (can be adapted to other Social Sciences/Humanities classes and for face-to-face or online classes)

**Corresponding National Standards:** this lesson address the following [historical thinking standards](#):

1. Historical Comprehension
2. Historical Analysis and Interpretation

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

1. Investigate the world
2. Recognize perspectives
3. Communicate ideas
4. Take action

**Essential Questions:**

1. What is the impact of folk music in each culture (American and Chinese)?
2. What cultural influences have impacted each musician’s music?
3. What historical influences are addressed by each musician’s music?

## Lesson Objectives:

1. To understand and interpret cultural influences in each song addressed in the lesson.
2. To understand and interpret historical influences in each song addressed in the lesson.
3. To better understand the cultural similarities in the two different folk music cultures.

## Materials:

- YouTube video: [Abigail Washburn TED Talk – Building US-China Relations by banjo](#)
- [Biography of Abigail Washburn](#)
- [Biography of Wu Fei](#)
- [What is a Guzheng?](#)
- [Lyrics to “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song”](#)
- [Lyrics to “Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls”](#)

## Background Information for Educators

### Featured song 1: “Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song”

- Access the song lyrics for [“Water is Wide/Wusuli Boat Song”](#) here.

Note: “Wula” means “river” in the Manchu language. This language is one of the most critically endangered ones within the Tungusic language group. The Hezhe language uses many words from Manchu and does not have a written form.

There are 56 different ethnic groups in China, with the Han ethnic group making up 92% of the total population of China. There are fewer than 5,000 Hezhe people in China today. They live along the Wusuli River, on the border between Russia and China. This folk song of China originates from one of the tiniest ethnic groups in China yet remains one of the most popular Chinese folk songs. The Hezhe live off the river and make their clothes from fish skin.

When Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei began to work on the album “Wu Fei and Abigail Washburn”, each had small children at the time and began to discuss what lullaby songs each sang to their children. They decided to combine the “Wusuli Boat Song” and the “Water is Wide,” popular folk songs in their respective cultures. The first two lines in the first verse come from the language of the Hezhe ethnic minority. The Hezhe lyrics are phonetically translated to Chinese characters, and roughly mean “the native” or “the locals.”

- [Info on the Hezhe ethnic group in China](#)
- [Info on the importance of fishing for the Hezhe people](#)
- YouTube video on the [“Mermaid Descendants”](#) feast of fish to mark the Spring Festival
- [Photos of the Wusuli River along the China-Russia Border](#)

“Water is Wide” is a cherished hymn that was sung in Scotland and Ireland at least as far back as the 1600s. Early versions focused on true lovers, but in time the focus shifted to the love of Christ.

- An early version was titled “Oh Waly, Waly, Gin Love Be Bonny” – Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez performed the song from the 1940’s to the 1970’s
  - [“The Water is Wide: History of a Folk Song”](#)
- [James Taylor and The Water is Wide](#)

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*This lesson plan was created by Dr. Rick Laws of Wilkes Community College as part of the 2019-2020 World View Global Music Fellows Program For more information about the program, please visit <http://worldview.unc.edu/>*

- [Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei performing the song.](#)

## Featured Song 2: “Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls”

“Banjo Picking Girl” was written and performed by Lily Mae Ledford (1917-1985) from Powell County, Kentucky. She performed the song with her all girl band the **Coon Creek Girls** in the 1930s. Ledford performed the song at the Renfro Valley barn dance and even performed the song for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

A lyric in the song speaks of going from North Carolina to China. In the version that Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei recorded, they have performed the song in America and in China.

- [Background information on Lily Mae Ledford](#)
- The original recording, sung by the Coon Creek Girls can be heard in this YouTube video, [“Banjo Pickin’ Girl.”](#)
- [Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei’s version](#)

## Student Learning Activities:

- Use the [PowerPoint slides](#) to explore the background and collaboration of Wu Fei and Abigail Washburn
  - (slides 1 and 2) This information includes the story of both artists and how they incorporated their love for different music styles from China and America
  - (slide 3) Explore the travels of Wu Fei and Abigail Washburn to America and China, performing together in both countries the last ten years
  - (slides 4-6) Explore background on the two songs featured in this lesson – first a look at the combination of the Chinese folk song “The Wusuli Boat Song” and the American folk song “The Water is Wide”
  - (slide 7) Explore the second song, “Banjo Guzheng Pickin’ Girls”
  - (slide 8) Conclusion – Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei combine their different music styles to help bring together different cultures in our shared experience
- Have students look at the different songs and how they both have shared experiences in how the music helps to bridge gaps between different cultures. Discuss the following question with the class?
  - How does music speak to the students in the environment they live in?
- Have the students answer questions like these listed below.
  - How have their shared experiences in American and Chinese cultures influenced each artist’s view of the world?
  - List and discuss two takeaways you have after learning about these two musical cultures and worlds coming together? How have their experiences helped to bring different cultures together?
  - How has the exposure to Abigail Washburn and Wu Fei’s music influenced their approach to understanding different world cultures?
- **Additional Discussion Questions**
  - Listen to each song and discuss the instrumentation and style of folk music in America and China
  - What does the student hear in the songs?
  - What appears to be the themes of the songs?

- How does each song speak to you about each culture?

**Additional Student Activities** (One class/75 minutes)

- Students listen to the songs while learning about the culture of each location (America/China).
- Watch YouTube videos and links above on the background influences on each song.
- Write a paragraph on each song and discuss influences of each culture on the songs.
- Listen to a song from another genre (pop/country/rap) and analyze what themes are in this song to the songs addressed in class.
  - What cultural values/influences do you see in the music?
  - What historical influences do you see?

**Assessment**

- Students will write an essay on the influence of each culture on the music and how the music is used to try to bridge cultural exchange between the two cultures. Use the [Shared Cultural Experiences Assessment](#).

**Learning Extension:**

Attend a live musical performance and analyze what cultural and historical influences did you hear?

**Explore Further:**

**American Folk Music**

- [American Folk Music](#)
- [The History of American Folk Music](#)
- [Library of Congress Illustrated Guide to Folk Music and Song](#)

**Chinese Folk Music**

- [Chinese Folk Music](#)
- [Traditional/Folk Music of China](#)
- [Music of China](#)

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