

# YEAR OF THE OX

## CHINESE NEW YEAR



# The story of the New Year Race

Many thousands of years ago – in fact more thousands than you could possibly count – the Jade Emperor was arranging the world in an orderly fashion so that he could keep track of what was going on and keep everything neat and tidy.



He was particularly pleased with the way that time worked, but had an irritating feeling that maybe he had missed something. As he walked around the Heavenly Peach Orchard one day – well actually it was several hundred years, but that was just like a day to him – he realised that what was needed was a way of tracking the passing of the years. He was quite happy with the seconds, minutes, hours, days and months, but the years just didn't feel right yet. They needed names, he suddenly

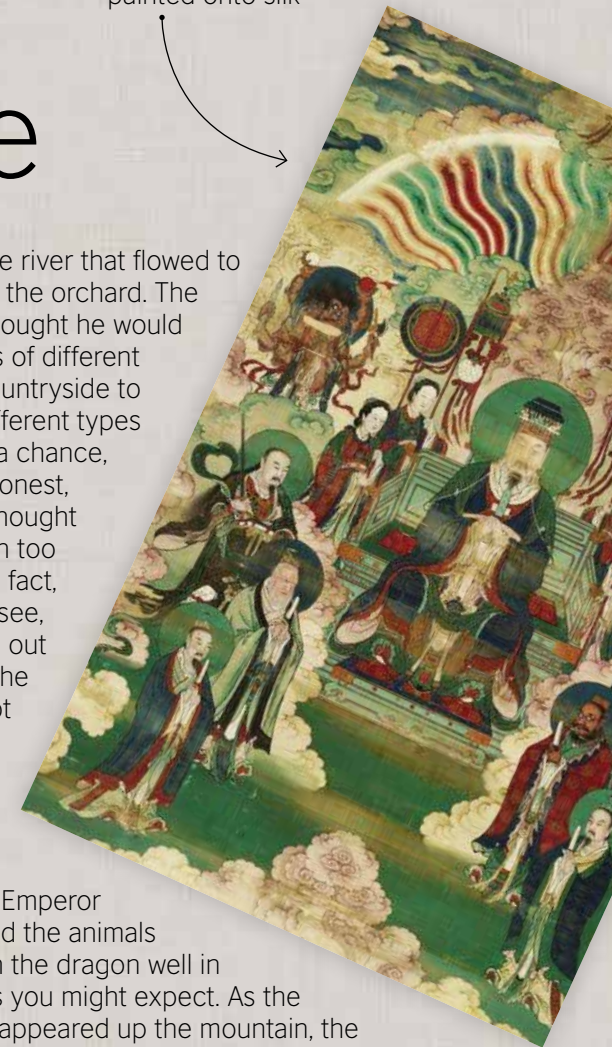
thought, not just numbers – that way they would be much easier to remember, and he could have a bit of fun making the names and what happened in those years fit together. But what to call them? As he thought about this, he watched two phoenixes playing in the sky above him, diving and swooping and chasing each other. "That's it", he thought, "I'll gather the animals and birds together and have a race. I can name the years after the order they finish. The first 12 I think, because that will make a nice number to remember."

Once he'd made this decision, he wasted no time in summoning all the birds and animals to take part in the Great Race; but when he saw the huge crowd that arrived, he realised that this might be a bit difficult and dangerous to arrange properly. He was a bit disappointed, because, being an Emperor, he liked things on a grand scale, but in the end decided that since he only wanted 12 winners he only needed 12 animals to decide which order the names should be in. Having decided this, he chose the animals that he thought humans were most familiar with – only when he came to count them, he realised he had been distracted by a particularly juicy peach he was munching on and had actually chosen 13! They were the Rooster, Dragon, Ox, Dog, Monkey, Rabbit, Tiger, Horse, Cat, Pig, Rat, Sheep and Snake. He lined them up at the gate of the Heavenly Peach Orchard, and described the course they had to race around. It started going up the mountain to the left of the orchard, made a big loop round and ended with them

crossing the river that flowed to the right of the orchard. The Emperor thought he would include lots of different types of countryside to give the different types of animals a chance, but to be honest, he hadn't thought this through too carefully. In fact, as you will see, it all turned out all right in the end, but not quite the way he imagined.

"*Yi, er, san, kaishi!*" the Emperor shouted and the animals set off, with the dragon well in the lead, as you might expect. As the animals disappeared up the mountain, the Emperor strolled across the river to wait for them. He took a large basket of peaches with him to keep him going, and just as he was finishing the 273rd he saw the Ox swimming across the river and hauling himself out onto the bank. "Well, well, well," he said to himself. "Who'd have thought it!" But imagine his surprise

A portrait of the Jade Emperor painted onto silk



# The story of the New Year Race

when, just as the Ox had got his front hooves onto the bank, out from behind his ears jumped the Rat, who landed neatly on solid ground, and with a small squeak of triumph, raced across the finishing line. The Ox lumbered up next, grumbling and mumbling about how the Rat had tricked him into giving him a lift. One by one the other animals emerged from the river and crossed the line. Third was the Tiger, then the Rabbit, followed by the Dragon, the Snake, the Horse, the Sheep, the Monkey, the Rooster, the Dog and the Pig.

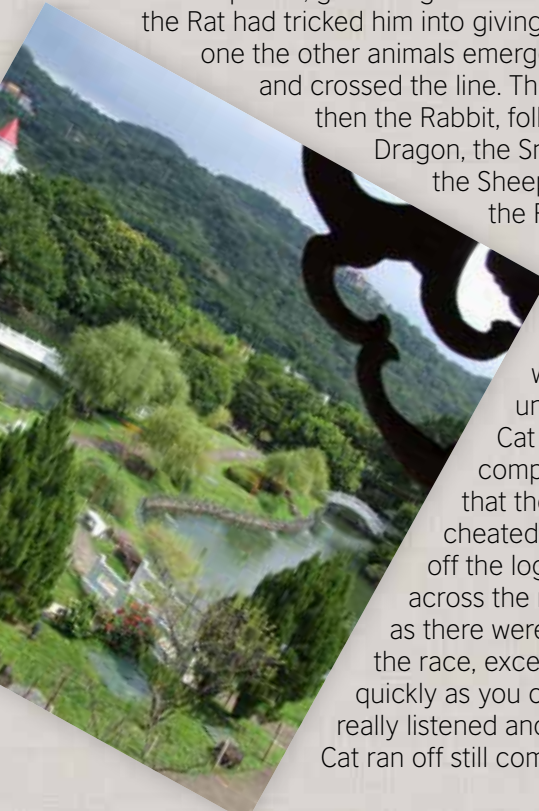
They all stood around for a while waiting, until at last the Cat appeared complaining bitterly that the Dog had cheated and pushed it off the log they floated across the river on. But as there were no rules for the race, except to finish as quickly as you could, no one really listened and eventually the Cat ran off still complaining and

promising to get even with the Dog. The Jade Emperor was very pleased with the result of the race, but was a bit puzzled by why some of the animals hadn't done as well as he had expected. When questioned, the Dragon, who could have won the race so easily, admitted that he had been distracted by several humans he had found in various sorts of trouble and had stopped to help them – that, after all, is what Chinese dragons do. The Dog said that the Cat had put up rather more of a fight than he had expected and he had stopped to lick all the scratches better, and eventually the Pig had to admit that he had stopped for several snacks and a light breakfast on the way.

All in all, however, the Jade Emperor said that they had each acted according to their nature, especially the tricky Rat and the greedy Pig, so he carefully recorded the result of the race. This was on a long yellow scroll which he hung at the gates of the Heavenly Peach Orchard. It is probably still there now. What is certain is that the Rat is still the first year of the Zodiac, the Pig the last and the Cat has still not forgiven the Dog.

Because this all happened so long ago, no one can be certain of the exact details of the race, and who did what to whom. All that we do know for sure is the order the animals finished in.

A Chinese dragon carving at a temple



A traditional Chinese garden

# Activity: sequencing the New Year Race story

Please photocopy this page. Then cut up the sentences and sequence them in the order of the Chinese New Year Race story.

Thirteen animals started the race. They were the Rooster, the Dragon, the Ox, the Dog, the Monkey, the Rabbit, the Tiger, the Horse, the Cat, the Rat, the Sheep and the Snake.

Many years ago, the Jade Emperor wanted to find a way to keep track of the passing years.

As the Ox reached the river bank, the Rat jumped off the top of the Ox's head and won the race.

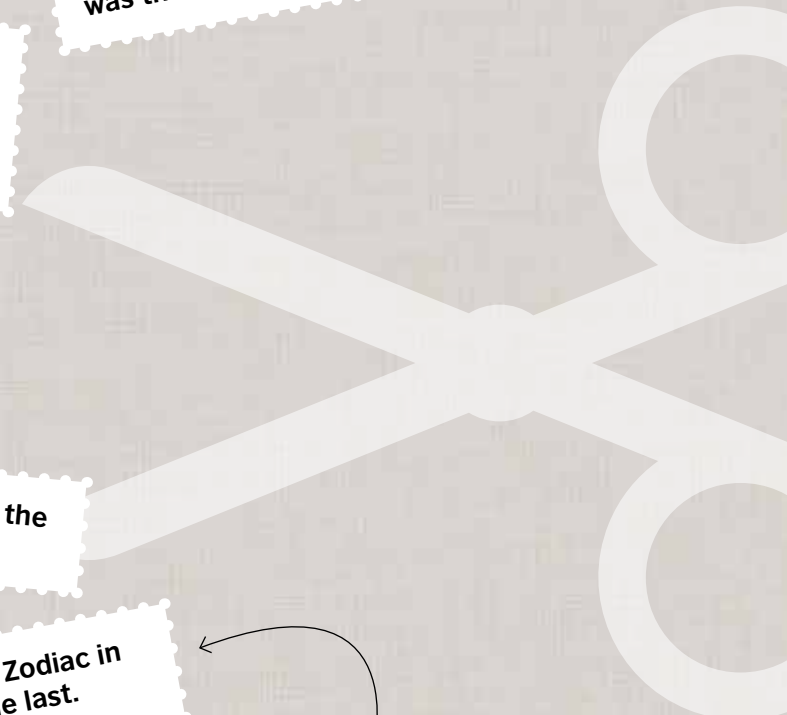
He decided to organise a race for the animals and whichever order the animals came in, would be the order of the years to come.

The Pig came in last and the Cat ran away.

The Jade Emperor recorded the result of the race on a scroll for all to see.

The Rat is still the first year of the Zodiac in the 12 year cycle and the Pig is the last.

The animals set off. At first the Dragon was in the lead, but as they crossed the river, it was the Ox that was winning the race.



Snip these out

# Lesson plan: Chinese New Year Race story and shadow puppets

## Preparation and resources

You will need: 'Activity sheet: make a Chinese shadow puppet', photocopies of puppet templates, card, masking tape, markers/crayons, scissors, hole punch/bradawl, hole reinforcers, brass paper fasteners, two sticks (you can use chopsticks, lolly sticks or garden canes), musical instruments, light source (a lamp with movable head), screen made from wax paper and a cardboard box (or cotton sheet).

## Background information

Shadow puppets in China are said to have originated over 2,000 years ago, although the first historical evidence dates to the Song Dynasty from AD 960–1279. They were one of the most popular and widespread folk arts in China, telling stories through puppets projected on a screen and accompanied by music. The puppets were first made of paper and then from the hides of donkeys or oxen giving them their Chinese name – 皮影 (*pí yǐng*), meaning shadows of hides. These beautiful puppets can be works of art in their own right, but really come to life when a light shines on them and a performance begins. In fact, the Chinese for a movie is 电影 (*diàn yǐng*) which means 'electric shadows'.

## Introduction and starter activity

After the assembly, ask your pupils to recount the main events of the story to each other from memory. You could also use 'Activity sheet: sequencing the New Year Race story'.

Choose either the character of the Rat, Ox, Cat, Pig or Dragon and improvise what they might say to explain their part in the story. Record these on devices such as Easi-Speaks or iPads with appropriate voices and share with the rest of the class.

## Main activity

Discuss the origins of Chinese shadow puppets and explain that there are various versions of the traditional story.

Divide the class into groups of six. Give each member of each group one of the templates of animal characters from the Chinese New Year Race story. Talk through the instructions in 'Activity sheet: make a Chinese shadow puppet' to explain how to make a simple moving shadow puppet. Make sure if the children are using a bradawl to make holes, that they

can use it safely. You could also show the films on the excellent Chinese Puppetry website at: <http://tinyurl.com/ng2xxzb> which also demonstrates how to make moving shadow puppets.

When the puppets are complete, set up a screen using a lamp projected on a light coloured cloth or a wax paper screen. Alternatively you can create a small theatre by cutting out the side of a box, sticking wax paper or cellophane over the empty side and decorating the front.



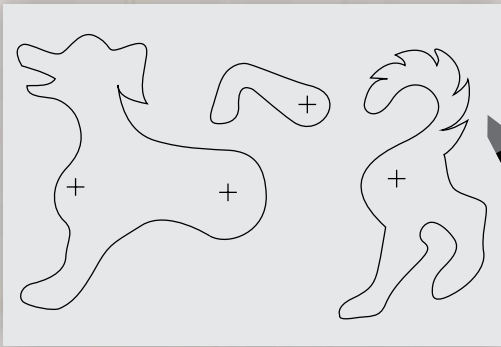
# Activity: make a Chinese shadow puppet

## You will need:

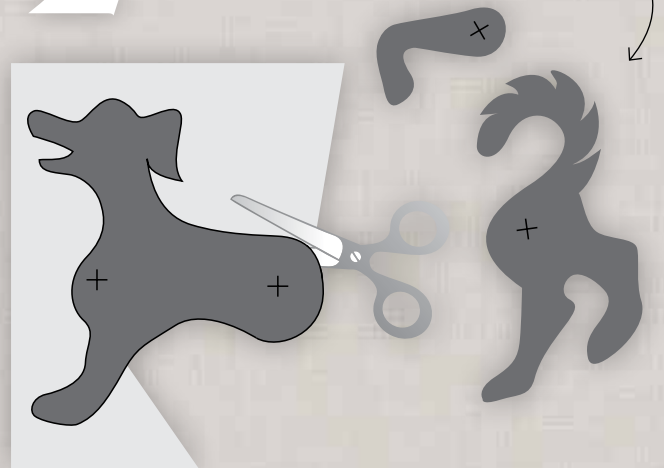
- light coloured card
- masking tape
- pens/pencils/crayons
- scissors
- bradawl
- paper hole reinforcers
- brass paper fasteners
- sticks (chopsticks, lolly sticks or garden canes).



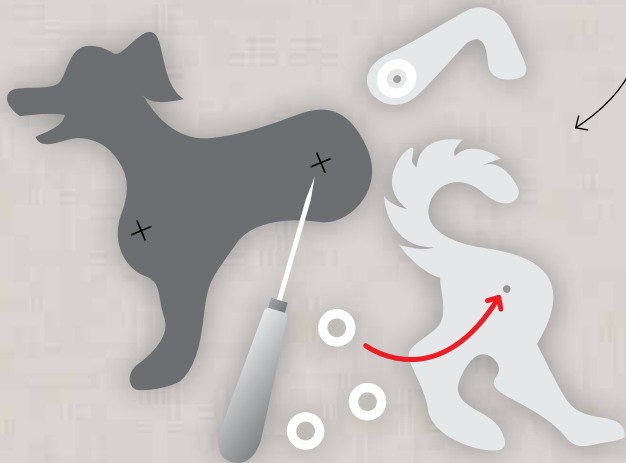
**1** Choosing one of the templates provided, copy the outlines onto a sheet of light coloured card. Colour in the puppet with pens, pencils or crayons if you wish.



**2** Go over the outlines with a marker and cut out the pieces carefully.



**3** Carefully make a hole at the points marked with an 'X' with a bradawl and strengthen each hole on the back with an adhesive paper hole reinforcer to prevent them from tearing.



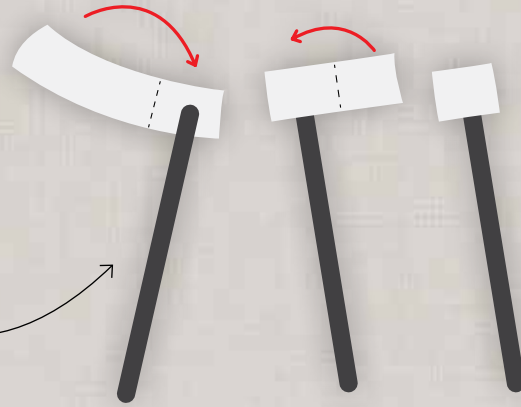
**4** Attach the moving parts to the main puppet using brass paper fasteners pushed through the reinforced holes from the front and opened out at the back.



Now make the hinged attachments to fix the sticks to the puppets. These will allow the sticks to be held at an angle to the puppets, so that the sticks and puppeteers' hands will not show on the screen.

**5**

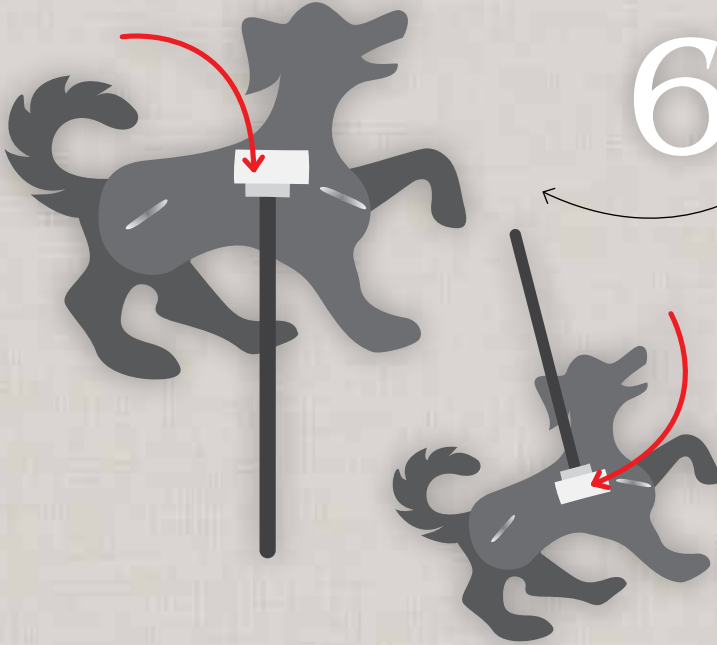
First stick a 10cm length of masking tape to the end of each stick, extending past the end and the sides, fold over a few times then flatten the tape to make a small spade-like end on the stick.



**6**

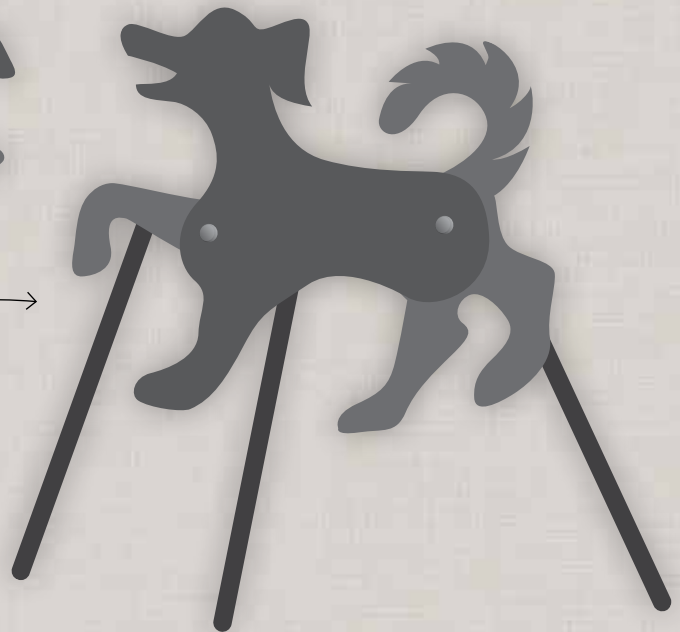
With a shorter piece of tape, stick the tape 'spade' (not the stick) to the back of the body of the puppet. Flip the stick upwards, and stick the underside of the 'spade' to the puppet as well. This creates a hinged handle.

Trim off any tape that shows from the front of the puppet.



**7**

Repeat the process for all the moving parts of the puppet, so each piece has its own hinged handle attached.

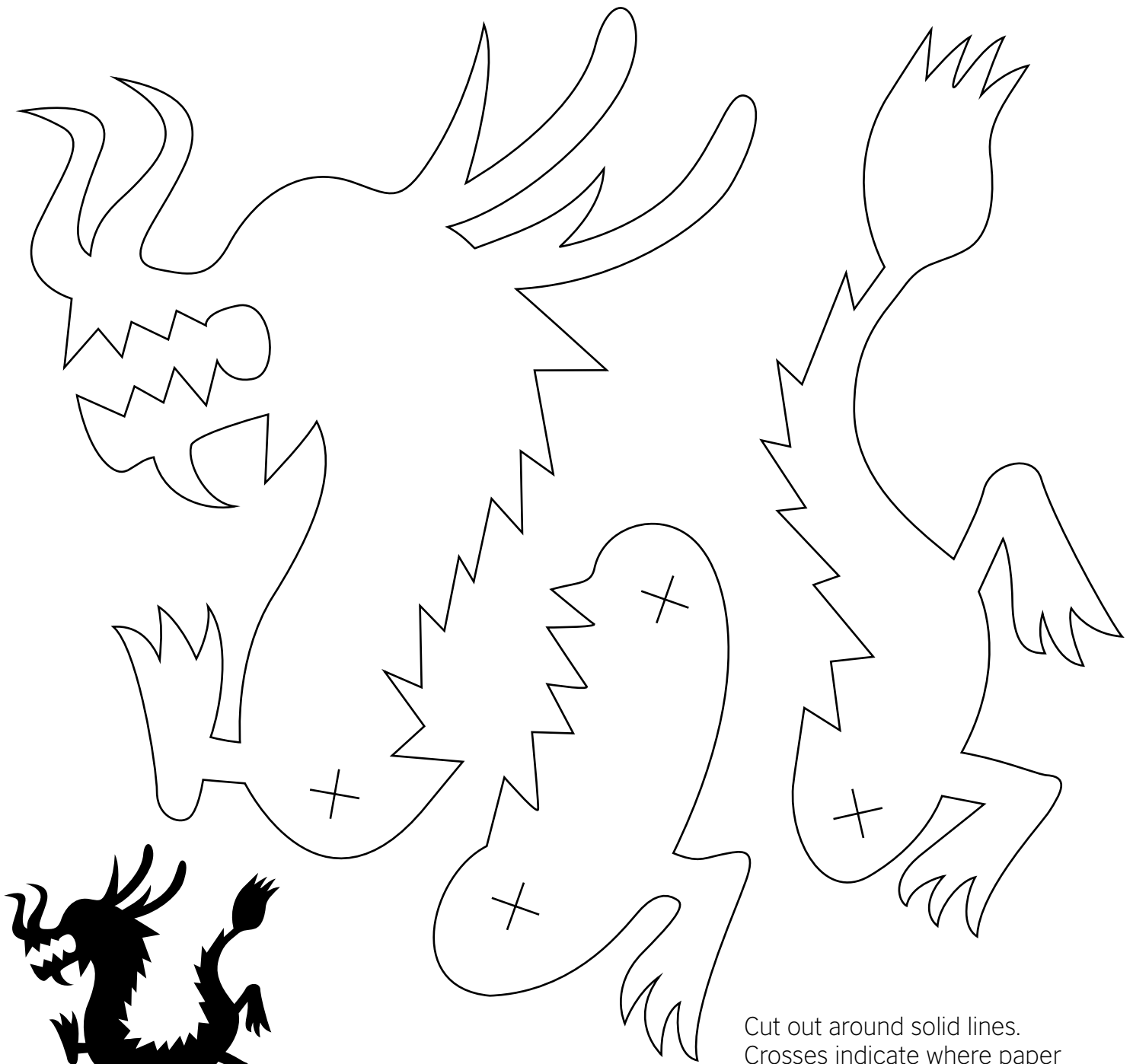


**8**

Use a lamp to shine on a light coloured cloth or wax paper screen.

Practise moving your puppets in front of the light to make the shadows move. Use the sticks to hold the puppets up close to the screen whilst your hands are further back. This will ensure they do not show up on the screen.



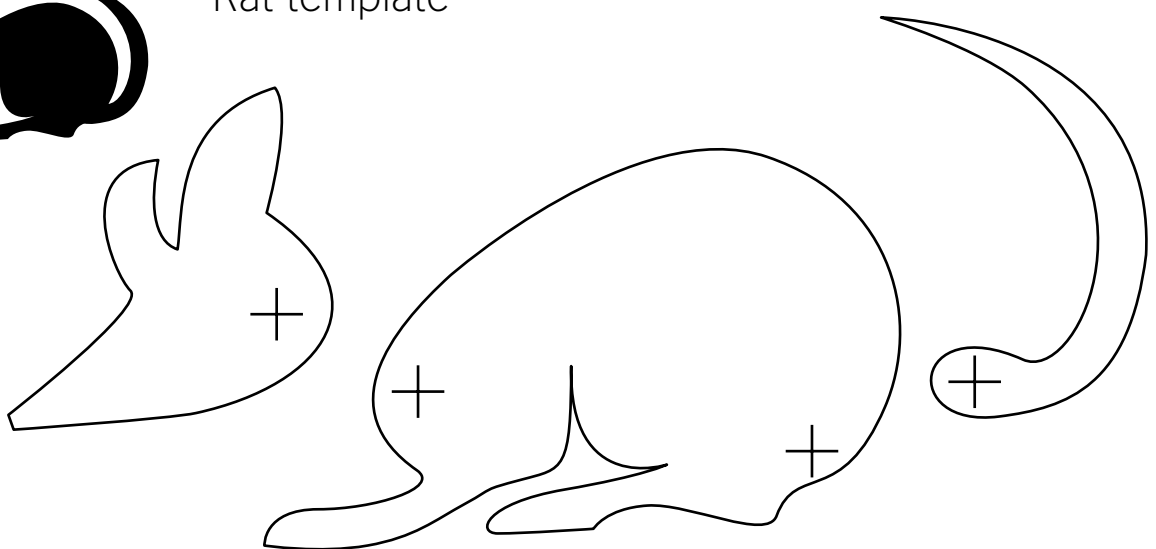


Dragon template

Cut out around solid lines.  
Crosses indicate where paper  
fasteners should be positioned.

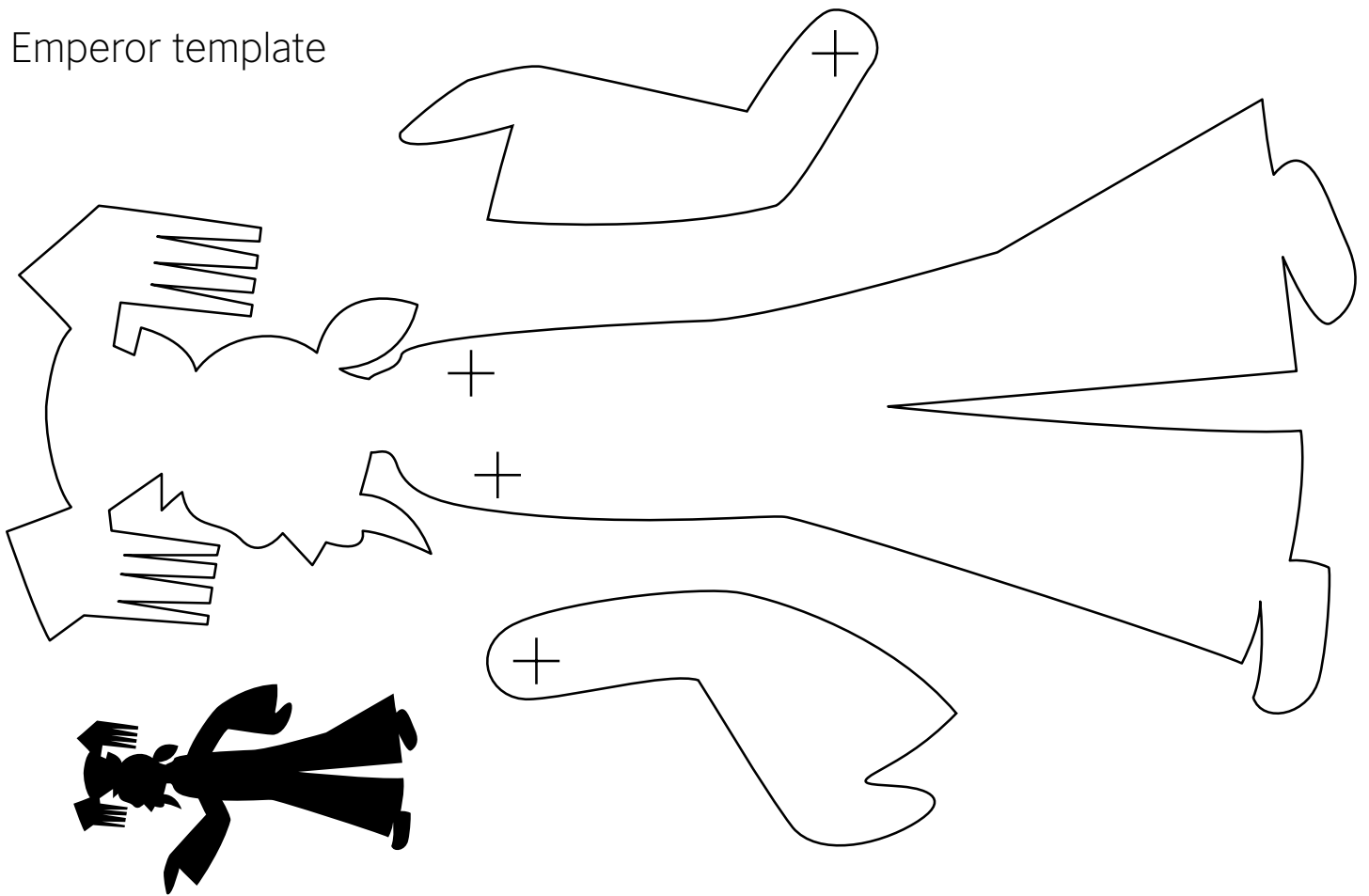


Rat template

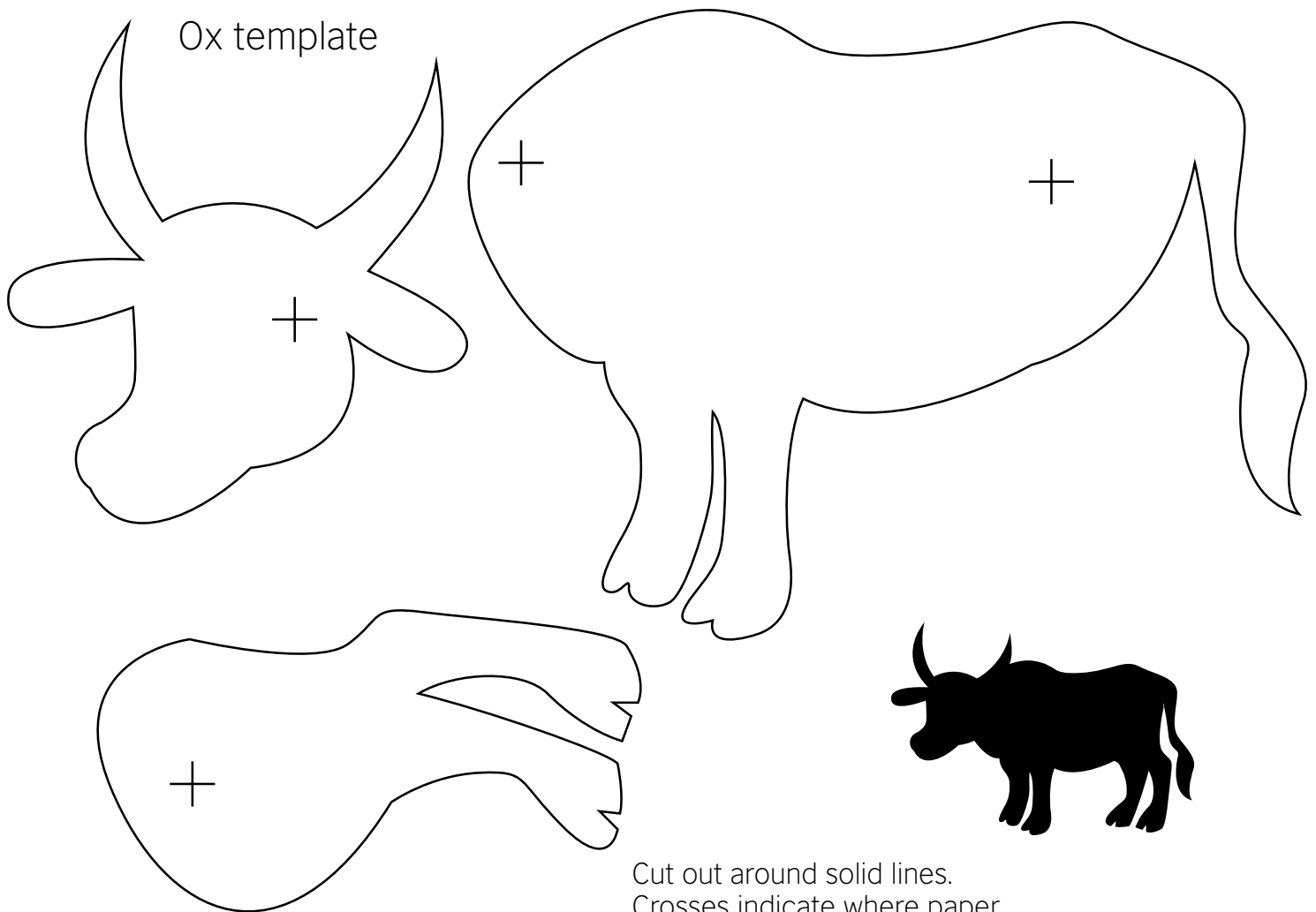




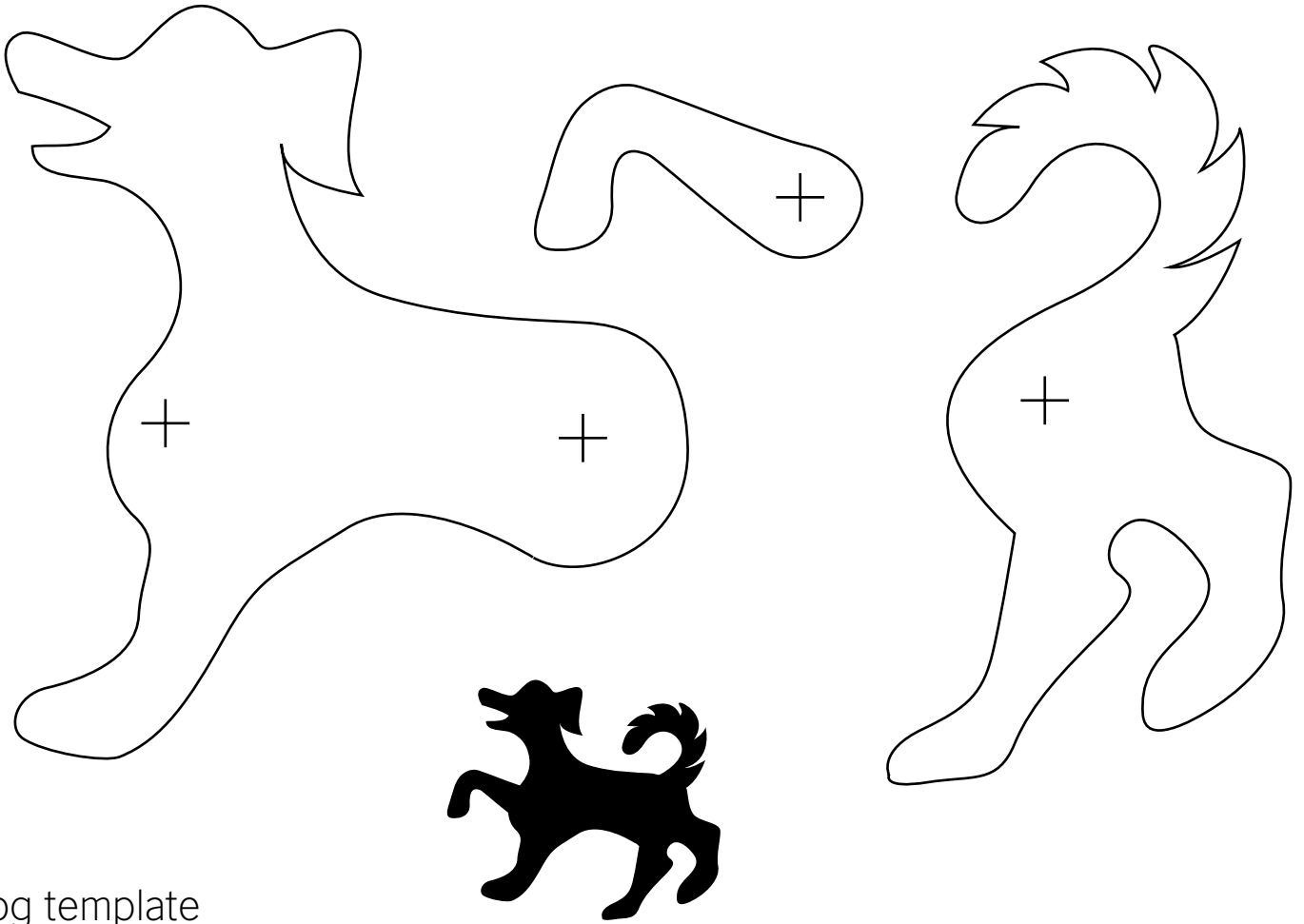
Emperor template



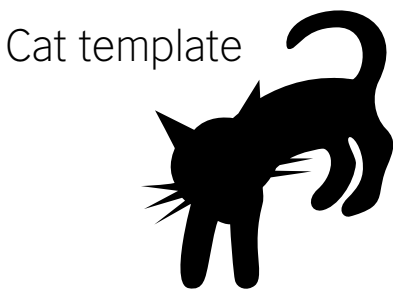
Ox template



Cut out around solid lines.  
Crosses indicate where paper  
fasteners should be positioned.

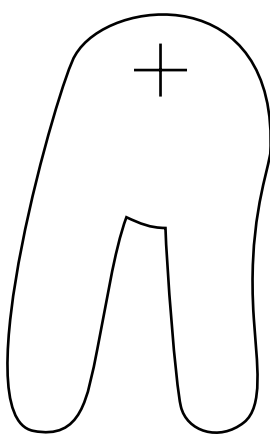


Dog template

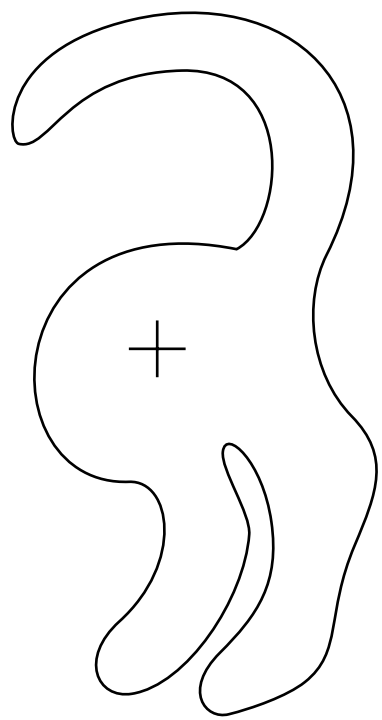
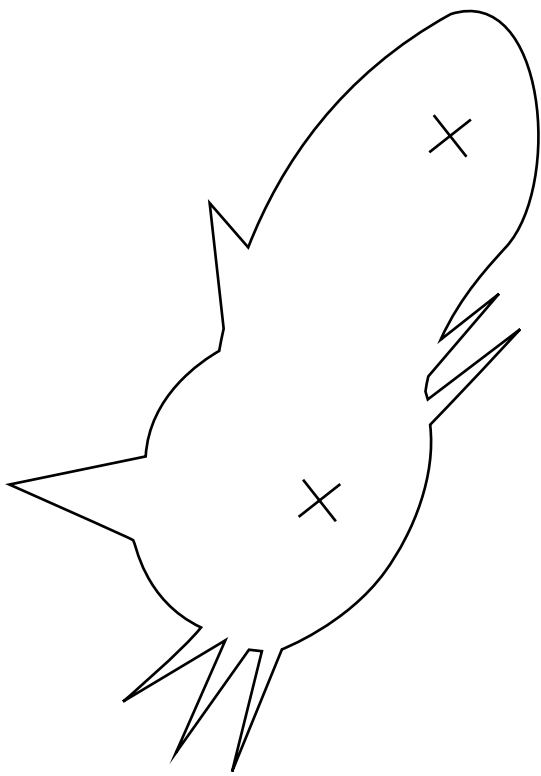


Cat template

Cut out around solid lines.  
Crosses indicate where paper  
fasteners should be positioned.



Attach front legs  
behind head piece



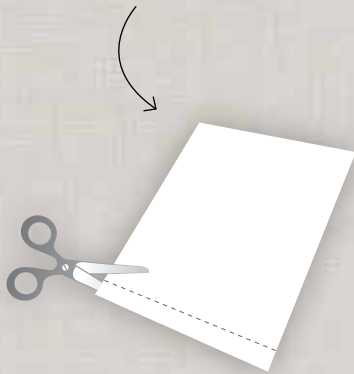
# Activity: make a Chinese lantern

## You will need:

- a sheet of A4 coloured card
- scissors
- a stapler or sticky tape.

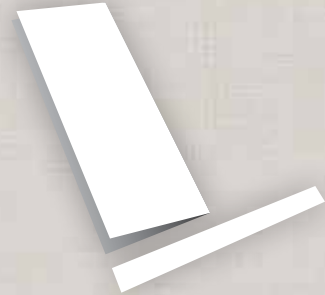
1

Cut a strip about 3cm wide from the short side of the card. This will be used to make the handle.



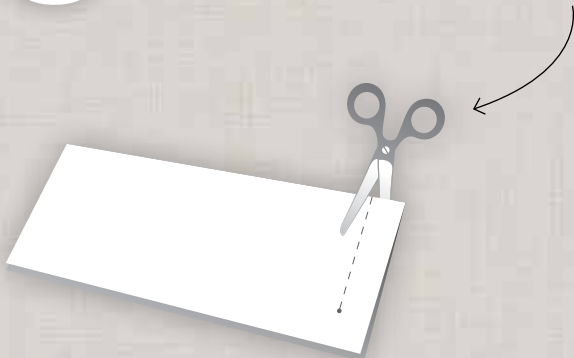
2

Fold the rest of the sheet of card in half length-ways.



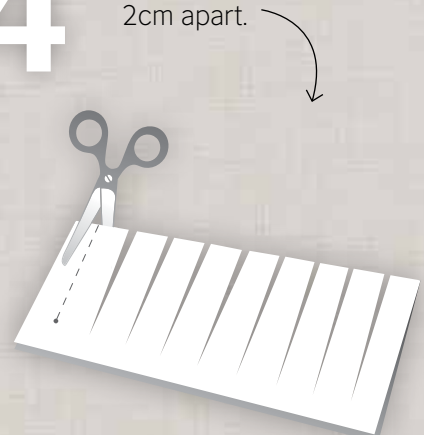
3

Cut a straight line across the fold of the card, about 2cm in from the side, stopping about 3cm from the unfolded edge. Don't cut all the way across!



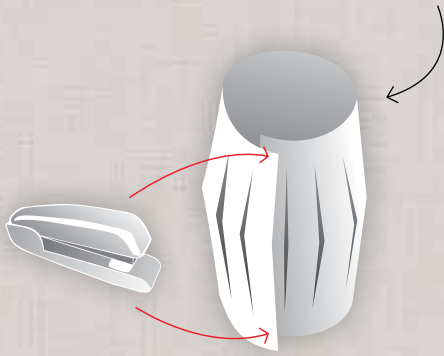
4

Repeat Step 3 across the card, with the cuts about 2cm apart.



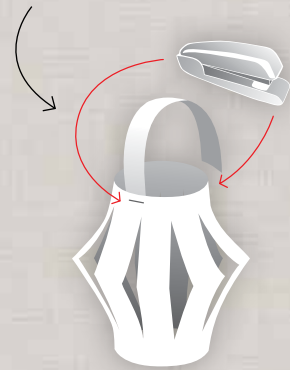
5

Unfold the card, curve it round so the two short sides are just overlapping, and staple together at the top and bottom (or stick together with tape).



6

Squash the lantern down a little so that the middle pushes outwards. Staple the handle strip to either side of the top of the lantern.



You can decorate your lantern any way you like, and hang up a row of different coloured lanterns along a string from the ceiling.

7

