Zodiac Puppet Theater

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Short summary

The Zodiac Stage is a **two-session shadow puppet workshop** designed for **mixed-age** learners in **informal settings** like museums and libraries. Grounded in the "Low Threshold, High Ceiling, Wide Walls" framework, the workshop invites children to become puppeteers and storytellers through the legendary "Great Race" of the Chinese Zodiac. By blending traditional jiǎnzhi (paper-cutting) aesthetics with modern performance art, the curriculum positions children as both inheritors and active creators of cultural heritage.

The primary learning objectives focus on fostering **creative agency** and **collaborative skills**. Participants personalize shadow puppets, engage in embodied learning through ad-libbed performances, and eventually author original scripts or storyboards. These activities are designed to be family-friendly, encouraging older siblings to mentor younger ones and parents to facilitate cultural exchange at home.

Related Work

Making And Makerspaces

Maker movement refers to the creative production of artifacts in everyday life, where individuals participate in physical and digital forums to share both their processes and outcomes with others (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014). Grounded in constructionism, maker education extends this perspective by emphasizing how learners engage in tinkering with materials that function as “object-to-think-with” (Papert, 1980). Within makerspaces, often conceptualized as communities of practice, this social and collaborative dimension further positions making as “objects-to-share-with,” highlighting how artifacts mediate communication, reflection, and collective meaning-making (Roque et al., 2012).

Building on this shift from individual cognition to socially situated making, scholars have increasingly examined how making becomes visible and meaningful beyond the immediate learning context. Storaniulo and Nichols (2018) connect making to the concept of publics, emphasizing the processes through which iterative production is rendered legible to external audiences. Drawing on civic culture as rooted in lived experience and oriented toward collective action (Livingston, 2005), this perspective reframes audiences not as passive recipients of student work but as publics that must be actively constructed. Such construction often involves forms of mobilization that challenge conventional educational infrastructures, particularly those privileging correctness and individual competency, and, in doing so, open up possibilities for new forms of literacy and participation.

In our design, the puppetry theatre positions learners and their families as both makers and audiences. Through collaboratively designing, making, and performing puppets, participants do not simply produce individual artifacts; they also create a public space to share children’s creative expressions with others.

Maker and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Making is closely connected to identities of participation, as learners come to see themselves not only as users of tools but also as designers, builders, and contributors (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014). However, a central question in maker education is who is recognized as a maker and whose forms of making are valued. Vossoughi et al. (2016) critique branded and culturally normative definitions of making and call for a more complex understanding of maker education that places culture and equity at the center. This perspective aligns with Kafai et al.'s (2014) research, which shows how making can empower students who have traditionally been excluded from technical domains.

In this sense, maker education should draw on the funds of knowledge approach to connect with and value learners' cultural backgrounds (Moll et al., 2005). Rather than viewing learners through a deficit lens, this approach recognizes and legitimizes the cultural resources that learners bring from their families and communities. More broadly, culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) also suggests the potential of connecting making with local cultures and learners' lived experiences. For example, Holbert's (2016) study engaged 9- and 10-year-old children in designing dream toys, moving beyond gendered assumptions about making and leveraging girls' "ways of knowing" to support greater diversity in maker activities.

In our design, we situate the activity within the context of traditional Chinese zodiac animal stories, which have deep cultural connections for many Chinese children and families. We use these stories as the starting point for maker education and provide learners with multiple options for creating their own animal puppets. Through this design, children can draw on cultural knowledge and personal imagination to support diverse forms of expression in the learning process.

Lesson Design

Contexts & Audience

Designing culturally relevant pedagogy requires recognizing children as both inheritors and creators of tradition. While we engage with the historical weight of fables and mythology, we also focus on the *artistry* of oral history. Because acting is inherently collaborative, it fosters a sense of agency and collective responsibility. By understanding performance as a tool for preservation, students gain the agency to carry their stories forward. This focus on mutual scaffolding is central to our design. Our lesson plans are intentionally family-friendly and flexible. This adaptability encourages older children to step into mentorship roles, strengthening cross-age collaboration and the cycle of intergenerational learning.

Made for informal learning environments and especially public spaces such as libraries and community centers, the facilitator lesson plan requires no prior knowledge or reading ability. While the workshop is based on the Chinese zodiac, we recognize that there is no uniform way of telling the story. This is the magic of oral storytelling: while the base story exists as a template, the details and specific lines are always remixed by the storyteller, which allows for personal interpretation and sense-making in the performance process. To highlight this special power that theater has, we also invite learners to invent their own zodiac animals at the end.

Lesson Outline

The Zodiac Puppet Theater workshop consists of two 45-minute sessions (see Appendix 1). In the first part (see Table 1), **“Create, Rehearse & Perform,”** children transition from curious makers to active performers. Participants begin by personalizing shadow puppets inspired by Chinese paper-cut (jiǎnzhi) aesthetics. To accommodate diverse age groups, we provide a "low threshold" for younger children through non-jointed puppets, while offering a "high ceiling" for older learners to digitally design and laser-cut their own articulated characters. This session culminates in an embodied learning experience where children use their puppets to participate in a facilitated “Great Race” performance. By practicing movement and vocal improvisation (ad-libbing) without the pressure of thorough preparation, children build creative confidence in a supportive environment.

Table 1

Outline of the First Part of the Workshop

Time	Activity	Key Focus
0–5 min	Opening Tech Circle	Welcome, context & engagement
5–20 min	Making a Shadow Puppet	Hands-on creation & decoration
20–40 min	Rehearsal & Performance	Play, embodied learning & performance
40–45 min	Closing Tech Circle	Reflection & celebration

In the second part (see Table 2), **“Storytelling & Script Writing,”** the focus shifts from performance to authorship. We utilize a “Character Hot-Seat” activity to encourage children to interview different animals, deepening their understanding of the characters’ unique personalities and symbolic traits. Through this, children learn that character design is not merely about making a story interesting; it is a form of ethics. Deciding what a character believes in—such as the Dragon choosing to help others or the Pig valuing honesty over speed—allows learners to explore their own values. Students eventually compose original scripts or storyboards, reimagining the race to exercise creative agency over the narrative. The workshop concludes with a take-home invitation for children to perform these new stories for their families, ensuring the tradition remains a living, evolving practice within their own homes.

Table 2

Outline of the Second Part of the Workshop

Time	Activity	Key Focus
0–5 min	Opening Tech Circle	Recall & re-engage
5–15 min	Chinese Zodiacs	Cultural knowledge & character building
15–35 min	Script Writing	Narrative thinking & creative authorship
35–45 min	Closing Tech Circle	Share, celebrate & reflect

The lesson plan is sequenced in a way that builds learners' confidence by moving from individual puppet creation to collaborative performance and storytelling: making a puppet, writing a script, making a theater, and performing together. By establishing physical ownership, then exploring narrative ethics, learners evolve from makers into cultural stewards who keep oral histories alive.

Script (see Appendix 2)

Appendix 2 contains a detailed performance script, adapted from various traditional iterations of "The Great Race," the legend of the Jade Emperor organizing a river crossing to establish the Chinese Zodiac and a system for tracking time. To facilitate a truly collaborative environment, we have included a pre-recorded narration and tutorial video to accompany the live performance. This multimedia approach ensures that children who do not yet read can participate fully through verbal and visual cues. Furthermore, the script utilizes rhythmic structures that mirror the cadence of traditional Chinese poetry, reinforcing the art form's cultural roots while assisting with memorization and flow.

Design Rationale

Learning Objective

Rooted in embodied learning, this design positions learners as active participants rather than passive observers. The theatrical format requires no prior knowledge or advanced reading ability, making the activity accessible to diverse family groups. The Zodiac Theater transforms cultural literacy into something felt, lived, and performed, inviting young learners to encounter the zodiac animals as characters with distinctive personalities and stories worth telling. Through this activity, children not only create personalized shadow puppets in different ways but also perform collaboratively with their friends and families.

Design Principles *(see Figure 1)*

Figure 1

Four Design Principles of the Project



Low Floor, High Ceiling, Wide Walls.

Following the design principle of "low floor, high ceiling, wide walls" (Resnick & Silverman, 2005), we designed this puppet-making activity for Chinese families in an informal learning setting. Because the activity welcomes children of different ages, skill levels, and personal interests, learners can choose different pathways to create their own puppets. Table 3 shows how our design scaffolds learners of different ages.

Table 3

Puppet Recommendations for Different Age Groups

Age	Materials	Puppet	Key Focus
5–6	• Coloring markers to personalize the puppet • Glue gun • Tape • Craft sticks or bamboo skewers • Sewing kit - put the separate parts of the puppet together	• Non-jointed pre-cut shadow puppet (laser-cut, jiǎnzhǐ-inspired design)	Focus purely on decoration and naming the animal. Skip backstory.
7–10		• Template of a jointed shadow puppet to be cut out	Encourage children to think about their animal's personality: "Is your rat brave or sneaky? Is your dragon loud or shy?"
11–13		• Create digital designs in Adobe Illustrator and laser-cut them	How can your animal's personality be expressed through movement? How can this be achieved with both a non-jointed puppet and a jointed puppet?

Ready-made puppet templates provide a **Low Floor**, offering an immediate entry point for participation (see Figure 2). To support younger children in particular, we provide laser-cut puppet templates that they can decorate directly. Learners can also use cardboard to create simple puppets, allowing them to begin making without requiring advanced technical skills.

Figure 2

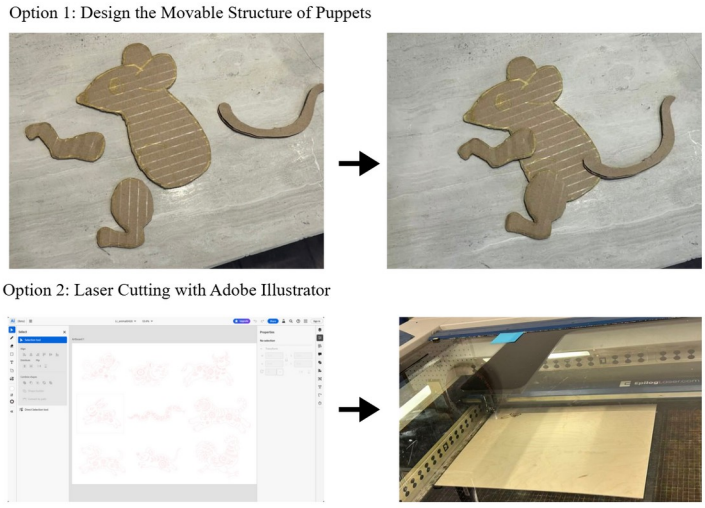
Twelve Zodiac Animal Templates



The activity also provides opportunities for more advanced making, creating a **High Ceiling** for learners who want to explore more complex forms of design (see Figure 3). First, the movable structure of puppets invites learners to think more deeply about how different body parts can be connected organically and moved naturally. Second, older children can design their own puppet patterns on the computer, particularly using Adobe Illustrator, and then experience the laser-cutting process firsthand. These options allow learners to move from basic decoration and assembly toward more complex design, engineering, and fabrication practices.

Figure 3

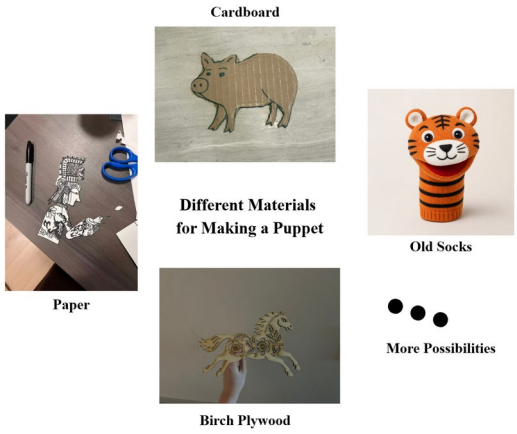
Two Options to Make Advanced Puppets



Finally, since many everyday objects have the potential to become puppets, learners are encouraged not to limit themselves to the provided materials, supporting **Wide Walls** in the making process. Instead, they are invited to brainstorm how different everyday objects, such as paper, cardboard, fabric, or recycled materials, can be transformed into puppets (see Figure 4). This wide range of construction possibilities allows learners to connect the making activity with their personal experiences, cultural knowledge, and creative imagination.

Figure 4

Different Materials to Make Puppets



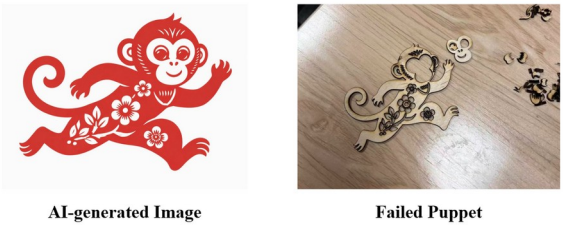
Use of AI in the process.

To better support creative inquiry in puppet making, we also incorporated AI into the image-generation process. For laser cutting, it can be difficult to design a dynamic, running-like puppet image from scratch, especially for learners without a design background. Drawing on Kafai and Morales-Navarro's (2024) example of bringing AI into puppet making, we recognized that AI could help facilitate this process. By finding relevant animal references and providing them to the AI, we prompted it to generate paper-cutting-style images suitable for laser cutting.

However, after our first laser-cutting attempt, we also recognized several challenges in using AI-generated images. When the image was translated into a physical laser-cut object, one limitation became clear: the AI-generated design did not always ensure that all cut-out parts remained connected. For example, when we cut the monkey puppet, the face was separated from the rest of the body in the generated image (see Figure 5). As a result, the final product lost the facial details. Through this process, we came to see the value of traditional paper-cutting principles, where visual details must be designed in relation to structural connectivity. This also led us to reflect on how we could write better prompts for AI, asking it to generate designs with connected cut lines and intact internal details to avoid similar problems in future iterations.

Figure 5

Failed Example of Translating an AI-Generated Design into a Real Laser-Cut Object



Utilizing Recyclable Materials in Everyday Life

In our design, we encourage learners to use everyday objects to make their own puppets and theatre, emphasizing that theatre can be accessible to everyone. This approach aligns with the Maker Movement Manifesto (Irie et al., 2019), which frames making as a process of creating,

supporting, tooling up, and changing. By incorporating recyclable materials from daily life, we aim to connect cultural literacy with lived experience and bring traditional storytelling into everyday creative practice.

In the puppet-making stage, learners can choose from a range of easily accessible materials, as mentioned earlier. Drawing on recent efforts to connect puppetry with new materialism (Foley, 2023) and ecology (Levine, 2025), this design highlights how materials are not merely tools for production, but also carriers of personal meaning, memory, and environmental awareness. When learners transform everyday objects into puppets, they may develop a deeper relationship with both the materials and the cultural stories they are performing.

In the theatre-making stage, learners are encouraged to use cardboard to construct their own shadow puppetry theatre (see Figure 6). Through this process, they can recognize that shadow puppetry is not distant or difficult to access; it can begin with something as simple as cardboard, paper, light, and imagination. We hope this activity can serve as a starting point for learners to continue creative expression in their everyday lives.

Figure 6

Images of a Cardboard Theatre-Making Process



Building Collaborative Performance

As an informal learning environment, this design uses making as a way to bring tools into a shared community space (Roque et al., 2012). During the activity, each family takes on the role of one zodiac animal. They therefore need to perform together, learning how to coordinate their movements, voices, and timing within the theatre.

Through the making process, learners create their own puppets, design their characters, and build the theatre collaboratively. The performance is not the work of a single maker; instead, it requires participants to collaborate in designing movements, coordinating roles, and bringing the story to life together. In our own making process, we invited classmates to record voices for different animals. As a result, the final puppetry piece became a shared public artifact that carried the voices and personalities of our classmates.

The final puppetry performance also becomes an “object-to-share-with”(Roque et al., 2012). Learners can invite friends, family members, and community members to watch their play, creating a third space where participants can reflect, celebrate, and experience cultural storytelling together.

Conclusion & Reflection

Individual reflections

Li

It is deeply meaningful for me to connect maker education with puppetry because this process changes how I understand both materials and artistic creation. Puppetry reminds me that materials are never merely functional. Everyday objects, such as cardboard, can carry stories and imagination. When learners transform these ordinary materials into puppets, they are not simply making an object; they are re-seeing the material world and giving new life to things that might otherwise be overlooked. In my previous theatre performance experiences, I often focused mainly on the final play. However, through this making and teaching plan, I came to see that arts education should not only value the final product, but also the process through all artworks made by themselves.

The concept of “objects-to-share-with”(Roque et al., 2012) helped me understand making as a social and relational practice. A puppet is not only an artifact created by an individual learner; it becomes a medium for communicating with others. Drawing on the idea of mobilizing publics (Storaniulo & Nichols, 2018), I also began to see audience invitation as more than a presentation strategy. Inviting others to watch a puppetry performance creates a temporary public space where people can gather, respond, and reflect together. For children and families, this opens up a third space between home, school, and community, where cultural stories can be reinterpreted and shared through everyday materials and collective imagination.

Cina

Having worked at an academic museum as an undergrad, I've enjoyed designing art-based learning experiences for all ages. Our Maker Studio class reinforced this interest by showing me how making creates opportunities for intergenerational learning that doesn't always occur in classrooms. This puppet theater project let me further explore how culturally relevant pedagogy can be woven into family-friendly activities.

Developing the lesson plan deepened my understanding of learning as an inherently collaborative process. How would parents work alongside their children? How might older children take on mentor roles? With these questions in mind, we created materials for learners at different levels: a written script for older children and a video recording to guide pre-readers.

Our final project was also deeply collaborative in practice. Since all three group members come from an art background, we understood early on that it takes a village to make a performance. We invited classmates and Dr. Kafai to serve as volunteer voice actors and asked the makerspace staff for help producing the laser-cut animal shadow puppets. I'm grateful for

everyone's willingness to participate, and glad the experience was enjoyable not just for our group, but for the whole class.

Susan:

This was my first experience working on a group project with two perfect teammates, and it felt very different from the individual exploration projects I had done in previous courses. For the first time, I experienced the real value of collaboration—the exchange and occasional clash of ideas, and the process of shaping them into something tangible together. That dynamic pushed me to think beyond my own perspective and respond to others' approaches with greater flexibility and openness.

We also applied a wide range of tools we had learned in class, including the laser cutter, glue gun, AI tools for generating the twelve animals, and video editing software. Integrating these tools into a single project helped me better understand how different forms of making can come together into a cohesive and meaningful workflow.

What I appreciate most is that we chose a theme rooted in personal culture. By incorporating elements of Chinese culture (the story of The Great Race and Chinese Shadow Play) into our design, we were expressing something meaningful while exploring how storytelling and theater can bridge personal experience and shared understanding. We also agreed to use recyclable materials, encouraging learners to transform everyday objects into puppets and theaters, making creativity accessible and grounded.

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Appendix 1

ZODIAC PUPPET THEATER

Shadow Puppet Workshop

Facilitator Lesson Plan

Age Group	Mixed ages
Setting	Museum / Library Workshop
Session Length	45 minutes per class
Total Classes	2
Materials	Shadow puppets, cardboard theatre, light source, script cards, colouring supplies

Designed around the legendary Great Race of the Chinese Zodiac, this two-session workshop invites children to become puppeteers, storytellers, and performers. No prior knowledge or reading ability is required.

Workshop Overview

Learning Objectives

- Children will create and personalise a shadow puppet inspired by Chinese paper-cutting (jiǎnzhǐ) traditions.
- Children will rehearse and perform a short puppet show for peers or family.
- Children will learn the story of the Great Race and the twelve Chinese Zodiac animals.
- Children will compose a short narrative script using spoken storytelling techniques.
- Children will collaborate in roles — performer, puppeteer, storyteller, narrator — building confidence through play.

Design Principles

This workshop is designed using Resnick & Silverman's (2005) Low Threshold, High Ceiling, Wide Walls framework:

Low Threshold	Ready-made laser-cut puppets and a simple theatre ensure immediate, confident entry — no experience needed.
High Ceiling	Children can invent new storylines, create original characters, and re-imagine the race in entirely new ways.
Wide Walls	Multiple roles (performer, puppeteer, decorator, narrator) accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities.

Class 1 — Create, Rehearse & Perform (45 min)

Children arrive as curious makers and leave as performers. This session introduces the shadow puppet theatre, guides children through personalising their puppet, then culminates in an informal performance for the group.

Time	Activity	Key Focus
0–5 min	Opening Tech Circle	Welcome, context & engagement
5–20 min	Making Shadow Puppet	Hands-on creation & decoration
20–40 min	Rehearsal & Performance	Play, embodied learning & performance
40–45 min	Closing Tech Circle	Reflection & celebration

Opening Tech Circle (5 minutes)

Purpose

Set the scene, activate curiosity, and introduce the Chinese Zodiac and shadow puppetry as a craft tradition. This is a warm, inclusive circle — children sit together with the facilitator.

Facilitator Script & Prompts

🌟 **Open with wonder:** "Has anyone ever seen a shadow on the wall and wondered who was making it? Today, YOU are going to be the one making the shadows!"

- Briefly show the shadow puppet theatre. Ask: "What do you think this is?" — accept all answers warmly. Hold up one puppet against the light source briefly to demonstrate a shadow.
- Introduce the Chinese Zodiac in one sentence: "In China, every year is named after an animal. There are twelve animals and they each have a special personality."
- Ask: "Does anyone know their Chinese Zodiac animal?" — have a simple visual reference card ready to help.
- Tease the story: "These twelve animals are here today because of one very important race. We're going to find out what happened..."
- Facilitators perform Scene 1 & Scene 2 of the script using voice recording.

Facilitation Notes

💡 **Tip:** Keep this segment energetic and brief. Children at this age have strong curiosity — use it before making. Avoid long explanations.

♿ **Inclusion:** Children who are shy or non-verbal can point to a zodiac card to share their animal. Ensure the circle arrangement is wheelchair accessible.

Making Shadow Puppet (15 minutes)

Purpose

Children personalise their laser-cut shadow puppet using provided materials. The puppet has been pre-cut so the threshold is low — children focus on ownership, not craft difficulty.

Step-by-Step Facilitation

1. Distribute puppets. Give every child their puppet and let them hold it for 30 seconds — no instructions yet. Let them explore.
2. Name your animal. Ask each child which zodiac animal they have (if pre-assigned) or let them choose. Say: "This is your animal. Give it a name if you like!"
3. Decorate freely. Encourage marking the puppet with colours or stickers: "Even though we see the shadow, YOU know what's on the other side. Make it yours."
4. Attach the stick. Assist children who need help attaching the craft stick. Make sure the puppet can be held comfortably.
5. Test the shadow. Invite children to hold their puppet against the theatre screen or a wall with the light source to see their shadow. Celebrate the moment!

Differentiated Scaffolding by Age

Age	Materials	Puppet	Key Focus
5–6	• Coloring markers to personalize the puppet • Glue gun • Tape • Craft sticks or bamboo skewers • Sewing kit - put the separate parts of the puppet together	• Non-jointed pre-cut shadow puppet (laser-cut, jiǎnzhǐ-inspired design)	Focus purely on decoration and naming the animal. Skip backstory.
7–10		• Template of a jointed shadow puppet to be cut out	Encourage children to think about their animal's personality: "Is your rat brave or sneaky? Is your dragon loud or shy?"
11–13		• Create digital designs in Adobe Illustrator and laser-cut them	How can your animal's personality be expressed through movement? How can this be achieved with both a non-jointed puppet and a jointed puppet?

💡 **Tip:** Play soft, ambient Chinese instrumental music during the making phase. This sets mood and reduces noise anxiety for sensitive children.

Rehearsal & Performance (20 minutes)

Purpose

Children rehearse basic puppet movement, then perform for the group. This is the heart of embodied learning — moving, voicing, and collaborating. There is no wrong answer in performance.

Phase 1: Warm-Up & Puppet Play (8 minutes)

- Gather children around or in front of the shadow puppet theatre.
- Demonstrate basic movements: walking, jumping, bowing. Ask children to copy with their puppet.
- Play "Puppet Says" (like Simon Says): "Puppet says, bow to your neighbour! Puppet says, run across the stage!"
- Encourage children to make their puppet's voice — silly voices welcomed and celebrated.

💡 **Tip:** This warm-up reduces performance anxiety. When children have already 'played' with the puppet, the formal performance feels natural rather than scary.

Phase 2: Facilitated Group Story (7 minutes)

Use the provided performance script (the Great Race) as a loose guide. The facilitator narrates while children bring their animals into the story at the right moment.

- Position children around the theatre. If space allows, have 2–3 children perform behind the screen at a time, rotating through.
- Narrate the beginning of the Great Race. Prompt each child's animal as it enters the story: "And then... the clever Rat appeared at the riverbank!" — child brings puppet to screen.
- Encourage ad-lib: "What does the Rat say as it crosses the river?" Let the child answer in any way they like.
- Keep the pace moving. It's fine to skip animals or condense the story if time is short.

Phase 3: Mini Performances (5 minutes)

If the group is small enough (under 8), invite 2–3 children to perform a short scene of their own choosing — their animal doing anything they like. If the group is larger, do a collective final bow together with all puppets at the screen.

🌟 **Celebration:** Always end with applause. Ask the audience to clap for each performer by name: "Let's hear it for... [child's name] and the Dragon!"

♿ **Inclusion:** Children who do not wish to perform individually can hold their puppet behind the screen as part of the group scene. Participation is never forced.

Closing Tech Circle (5 minutes)

Purpose

Slow down, reflect, and celebrate. This circle anchors the learning and creates a moment of shared achievement before children leave.

Facilitator Prompts

- "Show me your puppet and tell me one word about your animal." (Go around the circle quickly.)
- "What was your favourite part of today?"
- "Shadow puppetry has been used in China for over 2,000 years. You just did something that children have been doing for thousands of years!"
- Preview Class 2: "Next time, we're going to write our own story — YOUR version of the Great Race. Start thinking: what happens in YOUR story?"

📦 **Take-home:** Children take their puppet home. Suggest they perform the story for a family member before Class 2.

Class 2 — Storytelling & Script Writing (45 min)

Building on the performance experience of Class 1, children now become authors. They deepen their knowledge of the Chinese Zodiac animals and craft an original script for a new performance.

Time	Activity	Key Focus
0–5 min	Opening Tech Circle	Recall & re-engage
5–15 min	Chinese Zodiacs	Cultural knowledge & character building
15–35 min	Script Writing	Narrative thinking & creative authorship
35–45 min	Closing Tech Circle	Share, celebrate & reflect

Opening Tech Circle (5 minutes)

Purpose

Reconnect the group, recall Class 1, and set the creative ambition for today. Children arrive as experienced puppeteers — honour that.

Facilitator Script & Prompts

> 🌟 **Opener:** "Welcome back, puppeteers! Did anyone perform their puppet show at home? Who did you perform for?"

- Ask 2–3 children to share briefly. Celebrate any home performances warmly.
- Quick recap: "Last time we performed the Great Race — the story that decided the order of the Chinese Zodiac animals. Today, we're going to CHANGE that story. What if something different happened?"
- Plant the seed: "What if the Pig actually won? What if all the animals decided not to race at all? There are no wrong answers — it's YOUR story."

Chinese Zodiacs (10 minutes)

Purpose

Deepen children's relationship with the twelve zodiac animals as distinct characters with personalities, traits, and stories. This fuels richer, more specific scriptwriting.

The Twelve Animals — Quick Reference for Facilitators

Animal	Personality	In the Race...	Story Spark
🐀 Rat	Clever, resourceful	Rode on Ox's back, leapt to first	"Why do you think the Rat tricked the

		place	Ox?"
🐂 Ox	Hardworking, patient	Carried Rat across river, came 2nd	"Was the Ox angry? Should it have been?"
🐯 Tiger	Brave, competitive	Battled strong currents, came 3rd	"What kept Tiger going?"
🐇 Rabbit	Gentle, lucky	Hopped on stones and logs	"How did luck help Rabbit?"
🐉 Dragon	Powerful, generous	Could fly but stopped to help others, came 5th	"Why help others in a race?"
🐍 Snake	Wise, mysterious	Hid in Horse's hoof, came 6th	"Was Snake's trick fair?"
🐎 Horse	Free-spirited, energetic	Startled by Snake, came 7th	"What would Horse do differently?"
🐐 Goat	Calm, cooperative	Shared a raft with Rooster & Monkey	"What made Goat a good teammate?"
🐒 Monkey	Playful, inventive	Swung through trees, shared raft	"What would Monkey do for fun?"
🐓 Rooster	Confident, loyal	Found the raft, shared it	"How did Rooster lead?"
🐕 Dog	Loyal, playful	Splashed around, nearly missed!	"What distracted Dog?"
🐖 Pig	Honest, easygoing	Stopped for a snack, came last	"Is last place really losing?"

Activity: Character Hot-Seat (5 minutes within this section)

Pick 2–3 animals from the table. The facilitator 'becomes' that animal briefly, and children ask it questions.

> **Example:** "I am the Dragon. I could have flown to first place easily... but I saw that the crops below were dying, so I stopped to make it rain. Was I wrong to help?" — Invite children to debate!

- Children with puppets from Class 1 can hold them up as you introduce each animal.
- Ask: "Which animal is most like you? Which animal would YOU want to be in the race?"

Script Writing (20 minutes)

Purpose

Children compose an original short script for a puppet performance. The format is flexible — spoken words, action descriptions, or drawn storyboards — to accommodate all literacy levels and ages.

Materials Needed

- Script template cards (pre-printed, with sentence starters and blank panels)
- Pencils, crayons
- Animal character reference cards (zodiac animal images + trait words)
- Optional: blank storyboard sheets for visual learners / younger children

Differentiated Scaffolding by Age

Age Group	Format	Facilitator Support
5–6 years	Draw a 3-panel storyboard showing Beginning, Middle, End	Scribe for the child — ask 'What happens?' and write their words
7–10 years	Use the sentence-starter script card to fill in a 4–6 line script	Help sound out words; celebrate invented spelling
11–13 years	Write a full short script with character names, dialogue, and stage directions	Encourage 'show don't tell' — what does the character DO?

Script Template — Sentence Starters (for 7–8 year olds)

Template card: Once upon a time, [Animal Name] was getting ready for the Great Race. [Animal] felt _____ because _____. On the way, [Animal] met _____. They decided to _____. In the end, _____. The moral of the story is: _____.

Facilitation Flow

6. Introduce the task (2 min): "You are now the author. Your puppet is the main character. What story do THEY want to tell?"
7. Distribute materials and let children choose their format (drawing, writing, or telling aloud to a scribe).
8. Circulate and ask story questions (12 min): "What does your animal WANT? What gets in the way? What does your animal do about it?"
9. Quick share (6 min): Invite 3–4 children to read one line from their script or describe one scene. The group listens actively.

💡 **Tip:** If a child is stuck, ask about their zodiac animal's personality first. 'You said your Dragon is generous — what generous thing could the Dragon do in your story?' Personality unlocks plot.

💡 **Extension:** Pairs or small groups can collaborate on a shared script where two animals have a conversation or make a plan together.

Closing Tech Circle (10 minutes)

Purpose

Celebrate authorship, make the cultural connection explicit, and close the full workshop with a sense of shared achievement and cultural pride.

Facilitator Prompts

- "Hold up your script or storyboard. You are now an author AND a puppeteer — that is extraordinary."
- "Shadow puppetry in China has been used to tell stories for over 2,000 years. Emperors watched shadow puppet shows. Today, you made one."

- Ask: "If you could add one more animal to the Zodiac, what would it be and what would its personality be?"
- Optional closing ritual: each child gives their puppet a name and announces it to the group: "My puppet is [Name], the [Animal]."

📦 **Take-home:** Children keep their script and puppet. Encourage them to perform their original story for family. The theatre can be borrowed or a simple lamp-and-sheet alternative described on the activity card.

Appendix — Quick Reference for Facilitators

Troubleshooting

Challenge	Suggested Response
Child is reluctant to participate	Offer the role of 'Director' — they can tell others where to move the puppet without performing themselves.
Group is too large for individual turns	Split into two simultaneous theatres if space allows, or use the collective group-bow finale.
Younger children can't write the script	Use the storyboard format and scribe for them. Their oral story IS their script.
Child loses or damages their puppet	Always have 2–3 spare puppets. Frame it naturally: 'Let's get you a new one!'
The light source isn't creating clear shadows	Darken the room slightly if possible. Move the light source closer and ensure puppet is close to the screen.
A child is upset their animal 'lost' the race	Celebrate the Pig's story — 'last but loved', honest and content. The Pig is many people's favourite.

Cultural Sensitivity Notes

- The Chinese Zodiac is a living cultural tradition, not a costume or theme. Treat it with the same respect you would any cultural heritage.
- If children of Chinese heritage are in the group, invite (never require) them to share their own family's relationship to the zodiac.
- Avoid stereotyping zodiac personalities — they are story springboards, not predictions or fixed identities.
- The jiǎnzhǐ (paper-cutting) tradition the puppets draw from is recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. Mention this briefly to older children.

Vocabulary Reference

Term	Definition
Shadow puppetry	A form of storytelling using flat figures held between a light source and a translucent screen.
Jiǎnzhǐ (剪纸)	Traditional Chinese paper-cutting art; the visual tradition the puppet designs draw from.
Chinese Zodiac	A 12-year cycle in which each year is associated with a specific animal, originating in ancient China.
The Great Race	The legendary story explaining the order of the twelve zodiac animals, involving a

	race across a river.
Embodied learning	Learning through physical action and movement — doing and feeling rather than watching and listening.

Appendix 2

THE ZODIAC RACE

Creative Shadow Play Version

Facilitator Performance Script

Length	~10 minutes
Setting	Museum / Library Workshop
Style	Rhyming, simple vocabulary, open ending
Minimum participant	3
Materials	Shadow puppets, cardboard theatre, light source, script cards

Scene 1 - Opening

Narrator:
Long, long ago, in the sky so bright,
The Jade Emperor had a big idea one night.
"Twelve animals," he said with cheer,
"Will guard each and every year!"

"Come to a race, don't be late,
The first twelve winners will be great!"

Scene 2 — Animals Arrive

(Animals appear one by one)

Rat:
I am small, but smart and quick,
Watch me jump and do a trick!

Ox:
I am strong and big and slow,
But step by step, I always go.

Tiger:
I run fast, hear my roar!
I'll be first — maybe more!

Rabbit:
Hop hop hop, I jump so high,
Watch me bounce up to the sky!

Dragon:
I can fly above the ground,
Who can beat me? Look around!

Snake:
I slide softly, long and thin,
You might not know where I've been.

Horse:
Clip clop clip, I run all day,
I'll gallop fast along the way!

Sheep:
We are gentle, calm and kind,
We help each other, you'll find.

Monkey:
I can climb and swing with ease,
Jumping high from tree to trees!

Rooster:
Cock-a-doodle-doo! I cry,
I wake the sun up in the sky!

Dog:
I am loyal, brave, and true,
I'll run the race with all of you!

Pig:
Wait for me! I need a snack,
Then I'll run — no turning back!

Scene 3 — The River

Narrator:
Soon they reached a river wide,
Water flowing side to side.

Ox:
Hop on my back, hold on tight,
I'll help you cross with all my might.

Rat (quietly):
Thank you, Ox, you big kind friend…
But I might jump off at the end!

(They reach the shore)

Rat:
Jump! I'm first! I win the race!

Ox:
Oh! You beat me to this place!

Scene 4 — Others Cross

Tiger:
Splash splash splash, I swim so strong!
This river isn't very long!

Rabbit:
Step on stones, hop hop hop,
I made it here — I didn’t stop!

Dragon:
I flew across — but stopped midway,
To help some people on the way.

Snake:
Surprise! I'm here behind the horse!
I slid along a hidden course!

Horse:
You scared me! That’s not fair!
But I still ran with speedy care!

Sheep, Monkey, Rooster (together):
We worked together, three as one,
Sharing a raft — that was fun!

Dog:
I love to swim, I played a bit,
Then I remembered — "Race! That's it!"

Pig:
I ate, I slept, then ran with cheer,
And somehow I still made it here!

Scene 5 — The Decision

Narrator:
All the animals lined in place,
Each one smiling after the race.

Jade Emperor:
You all did well, I must say,
Each in your own special way.

"But only twelve can join the show…
Who comes first? I do not know!"

Interactive / Creative Closing

Narrator (to audience):
Should Rat stay first? Or maybe Ox?
Should Rabbit jump ahead in hops?

Should Dragon lead? Should Pig be fast?
Should someone new be added last?

Maybe Cat should join the game?
Or Panda too — with gentle fame?

(Children can shout ideas)

Open-Ending

Ending — New Animals

Jade Emperor:
Let’s add more friends, let’s make it new,
More animals can join us too!

All:
A brand new zodiac — what fun!
Our story’s just begun!

🎭 Performance Tips

- Each line = 1 shadow movement
- Animals can share roles
- Use simple gestures:
    - Jump (rabbit)
    - Fly (dragon)
    - Swim (tiger)
    - Eat (pig)