

# Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot

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## Lesson 18 : Regional tarots - Chinese

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Chinese tarots came much later to the scene than did the Japanese, but when they did in the late 1990's onwards, they exploded on the tarot scene in a riot of colour and new ideas.

'Chinese', to the Western mind, covers two distinct countries. While we may confuse Taiwan with China, no one in the Far East would. Taiwan is a distinct country, the island of Formosa about 100 miles from the Chinese mainland, that did not follow Mao Tse Tung into Communism after the Second World War. The present day Peoples' Republic of China still claims ownership over Taiwan. The Taiwanese developed an economy that was rooted in trade with the West and consequently tarot cards seem to have emerged in Taiwan primarily as part of commercial products, sometimes as promos for games or anime cartoon shows. Hong Kong, a small peninsula and islands, was a British Protectorate up till 1997, when it was handed back to the Peoples Republic of China, however, it still retains its distinct cosmopolitan identity. Many of the Chinese decks were created and produced in Hong Kong. The Peoples' Republic of China has changed remarkably over the past decade and we find there a cultural freedom that allows the emergence of such things as tarot cards. There are an increasing number of tarots now being created in mainland China.

It will be best perhaps to look at 'Chinese' tarot as two distinct groups, those from Taiwan and those emanating from China, though there is a definite convergence as both economies are now servicing the same audience. These tarots are often created for commercial reasons, and thus the tarot images reflect modern culture of games, TV shows, etc., rather than high art and aesthetics. While Japanese tarot, as we saw, has many fine art tarots, Taiwanese and Chinese tarots are perhaps more reflective of popular culture. This is not to say that they have no great artwork, but we can see it is rather different from the impulse of Japanese tarot.

There would seem to be no really early Chinese Tarots, and the first seem to appear in the late 1990's. I have in my collection over 90 'Chinese' decks about half of which are from Taiwan and half from China. It is extremely difficult researching these decks without any knowledge of the Chinese language and one finds that the names of decks are translated differently by different sellers, so it is easy to confuse items. It also makes it a hard task to identify the artists and even dates of publication. Let us first look at the Taiwanese Tarots.

## Taiwanese Tarot

Among the early tarots are the Cat's Tarot by Terry Tsai and the Accurate Prediction Tarot Text Game both from 1997. The Cat's Tarot which we looked at earlier in lesson 8 is a charming and appealing deck aimed at a younger audience. The Tarot Text game consist of large format cards presenting a traditional tarot of Marseilles majors but with the images simplified to rounded geometric forms in bright colours. These are probably designed for younger people. The faces are divided in two, almost Picasso-Cubist, showing profile and full face simultaneously. A later full 78 card deck, variously named as the Happy tarot or the Astprince tarot from 2004/5, also reduces the tarot images to simple forms, here more angular. Interestingly, each of the majors has a background net of a simple symbol reflecting the arcana. Thus the Magician has a net of little top hats, the Empress and Emperor have crowns, Lovers has hearts, Justice scales, and so on. The Minors reflect the emblematic imagery of the Rider Waite deck, but again reduced to simple forms. The Amorist or Lovers' Tarot of 2004, produced as a book with tear out cards at the back, is another quite conventional design, here drawn in thick and thin pen lines and coloured with watercolour. The figures are not depicted with Chinese features and unless one noticed the Chinese names on the cards, one could be excused for thinking this to be a Western tarot.



Tarot Text



Astprince



Amorist

There are many conventional tarots produced in Taiwan, some for an older audience such as the Empower Tarot of 2004 (which was reissued or copied as tear out cards in a book entitled the *Love of Tarot* of 2005). The designs for this deck are based on photographs or collaged parts of classical European paintings which have been graphically modified in a creative way, diffusing and dissolving the sharp forms, probably with a computer paint program to produce some rather fine images. The artwork is atmospheric with a subtle blending of colours. There is no attempt to locate the imagery within Taiwanese or Chinese culture and it remains firmly rooted in European tarot. The book, which accompanies the deck, helpfully reproduces the images in a larger size. The card backs have a wonderfully contoured image of a fractal set (a Julia set rather than a Mandelbrot, one suspects).



Japanese manga and anime, which had developed commercially in the mid 1990's, had a considerable influence on Taiwanese (and Chinese) tarot designs. The image of the doe-eyed young women seems to have particularly resonated with many of the graphics artists working in Taiwan and we have a whole slew of tarot decks bearing such images.

An early example is from the team of four Japanese manga comic artists who work collectively under the name 'Clamp'. Their manga comics were published in Taiwan and the tarot deck based on their graphics were used for the Clamp X Tarot (or X-wars Tarot). Their artwork is wonderfully creative often dealing with themes of innocence and sophistication, love and aggression, the polarization of forms and emotions.



Here we see the innocent doe-eyed young woman, the seductive vamp (almost a goth), the sophisticated young man, and the brooding male figure. Their card images incorporate symbolism from Western magic, as we clearly see in the Page of Pentacles with imagery taken from a book of the late 19th century French occultists, Eliphas Levi. Their Ace of Wands depicts a long limbed woman in tight rubber or black vinyl jump suit bearing the words 'Beast 666'. The X manga series of comic books (later made into a anime film) elaborates a complex tale of apocalyptic cosmic battles (a Japanese 'Lord of the Rings' or Wagnerian cycle). The tarot spun off from this is remarkably informed and surely must stand as one of the major modern reworkings of tarot. Regrettably many other manga based tarots are empty vessels when held up against the powerful symbolism and artistry of the mysterious Clamp graphics team.

Leaving this adult world of the X-wars behind, the doe-eyed lolita woman makes a major appearance in the Fantasy Alice deck from 2006. We have seen this deck before in our lesson on tarot based on books. This is a fine Rider Waite clone with full emblematic pips and the artist has tried to incorporate as many elements as possible from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The artwork is tightly drawn, then subtly and softly coloured, and so well finished that it would not look out of place in Lo Scarabeo's series.



Many Taiwanese tarot decks are obviously oriented towards a younger readership. Another Rider Waite clone, issued by the same Taiwanese publisher as the Fantasy Alice, is the popular Elf of Heaven tarot by Cola King (whose real name is Chan Chen-hsing). The images of this deck seem to be primarily directed to female children, reflecting their transition from childhood into adolescence. Thus we have the child like Fool and the more grown up and confident Priestess. The pip cards are fully emblematic and follow the Rider Waite.

So much tarot material has emanated from Taiwan over the past decade, I have over 40 Taiwanese decks, that it is very difficult to give an appraisal in a few pages. We will have to pass over and merely mention the delightful Elota tarot of the A Chu family from 2005, the Fairy tarot by Yo Su-Lan, (issued as a promo for Taiwan Telecom and reissued a number of times as the 'Ideal Tarot', or the 'Love Will Find the Way Tarot') and Leo Tang's Tarot of the Magical Forest, whose images of large eyed animals in the Magical Forest has delighted and engaged many people with its charming forms.

We will just leave our all too short survey of Taiwanese tarot by looking at two high art tarots. Firstly, we can look at set of 22 Major arcana printed in a limited art book *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 2002. The 22 images are finely printed on heavy stock paper on facing pages with the reverse page having the title of the card and a short poem. This work seems to be inspired by the mid-nineteenth century French romantic poet Charles Baudelaire, who wrote a famous collection of short poems entitled *Fleurs du mal* ('flowers of evil') during the 1850's and 60's. Baudelaire's poetry often uses intense heightened description to evoke ideas and emotions. The artist who created this tarot (whom unfortunately I have been unable to identify) seems to have been inspired by this approach of Baudelaire and has translated this into their tarot. Here we have a powerfully detailed depiction used to evoke the tarot archetype, rather than the use of standard symbolism. The artwork shows the figures in classical Chinese court costume, though the faces with their triangular shapes and characteristic eyes are perhaps more drawn from contemporary manga. It is a delightful merging of ancient and modern styles. If you are very

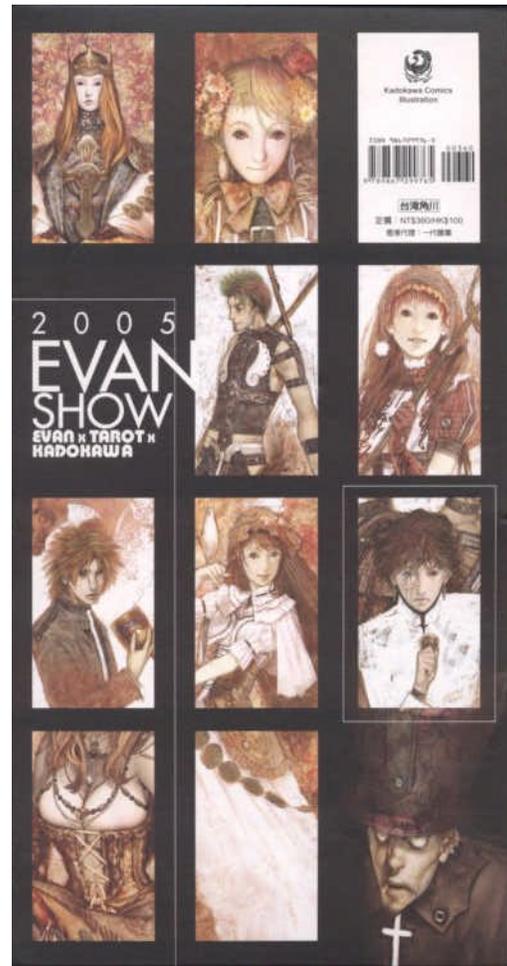
careful you can cut off the spine of the paperback book so that you can have the individual images in the form of large cards. The book is difficult to find and somewhat expensive. Here is the Temperance image in reasonable size so as to display the exquisite detail of the watercolour paintings. Each image bears flowers.



Our final Taiwanese tarot is the totally delightful, contemporary, in-your-face, gothic, neo-symbolist, Lunatic Tarot of Evan Yi Feng. Though born in Hong Kong, Evan has now based himself in Taiwan and has worked on many art projects. He is not only an accomplished expressive painter but also an illustrator and sculptor. His Lunatic Tarot was published like a stack of postcards glued together along the top edge. It is very easy to part the 'pages', which are printed on thick stock, from the glue, so that one has a set of rather large tarot cards (10 by 5 inches - 250 by 130mm). Like *Le Fleurs du Mal* the image is printed on the front side (here it is varnished) while the card title is on the back (here with a line drawn version of the familiar Rider Waite). This has now been issued in standard deck format, though the large format 'book' is best for those primarily interested in tarot as art.

Evan's artwork has been favourably compared to Klimt, and although one sees some influences from there, his reach is much wider. He has obviously studied the symbolist and decadent painters of the late 19th century, and though he does not copy their style, in some way he seems to be working out of this aesthetic. His tarot, apart from a handful of cards, expresses its ideas through a human figure. This figure is usually sharply drawn and painted, while the backgrounds in many cases are just blocked in with washes of colour and texture, often over graphically collaged flowers. In places he has inserted what, to a first glance, seem to be sketched construction lines for his figures, however, as these are on top of the painted surface it is just a neat device to make the photorealism of the paintings appear more spontaneous and lively. He is a true master of his medium being willing to incorporate tricks like this. He uses a small group of models (a young woman and two men) who thus appear on many of the cards

and this integrates the imagery and ties the whole concept neatly together. It is likely that he worked by initially taking precisely posed and well lit photographs as the basis for the paintings. The figures are often depicted in BDSM sheik, with leather straps and rivets, some having facial piercings. The Queen and King card of each suit are in a more classic symbolist fin-de-siècle style, rather than the modern bondage fashionware. These are sumptuous images, and though some of the images seem disturbing on an initial glance, this is not a dark gothic deck, but merely one glorifying a style, underneath the outer surface of which lies rather conventional tarot imagery. The Minor arcana closely echo the familiar emblematic material of the Rider Waite deck.



## Chinese Tarot

Like the Taiwanese tarots some Chinese tarots, aimed at children, reduce the forms of the figure to simple geometric shapes. Thus the Mo Huan Ta Luo Pai or Magic Tarot of Mrs Liu, a 22 card deck issued in 2004, has obviously been created with a computer graphics drawing program and reduces the faces to ovals and with the various elements of the card design as simplified linear and curved forms and much use of gradient fills to give subtle modeling to these shapes. The colour palette has been carefully chosen to give a subtle balance to the imagery. It is a well known and rather fine tarot for children. The Coming Fantasy Valley tarot would also appear to be designed for children but it instead provides a more complex and intense imagery. Here the human forms often seem to break apart into spirals and interwoven shapes that can be difficult to read. The work was again designed with a computer graphics drawing program and is intensely coloured. The faces are depicted in a definite mask like style with the eyelashes strangely ending in little circles. The backgrounds are diffused and out of focus to heighten the sharpness of the foreground figure. I have not been able to uncover the meaning of 'Coming Fantasy Valley' and we can presume it to be some childrens' cartoon series in China. The artwork though enigmatic is rather intriguing and engaging. Another interesting deck aimed at children must be the promo deck given away with an issue of the Chinese National Geographical Magazine in 2005. This is a cosplay tarot, that is, it is made by photographing people dressed up in costumes reflecting the tarot archetypes. Cosplay - 'costume play' - perhaps began in Japan in the 1980's when young people gathered in public squares at weekends dressed as their favourite characters - with plenty of Elvis Presley impersonators. Later with the rise of manga characters, cosplay has become a significant part of the mainstream culture with cafes and various clubs and centres devoted to this activity. Needless to say this fashion hobby has spread to other South Asian countries. Perhaps a parallel in Western culture can be seen in the goth phenomenon, though this has more of a underlying lifestyle and philosophy, than mere dressing up. The National Geographic Cosplay tarot is very professionally undertaken and beautifully photographed. Each of the characters is posed, within an ornamental arch, against a background of a deep space photograph of stars and cosmic dust clouds.



Magic Tarot

Coming Fantasy Valley

National Geographic

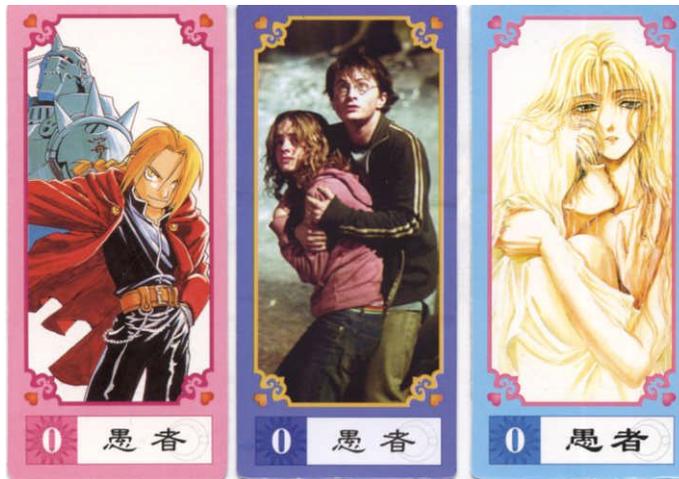
When Chinese publishers met up with manga and fantasy art in the early 2000's they came up with the idea of selling what became named 'collaborative' decks in big clunky boxes. When you buy one of these decks you also buy a massive box, with book and often a poster with the deck. The designs for these decks were obviously chosen by a committee, almost as a showcase for their stable of artists, and consequently different artistic styles sit uneasily together in the same tarot deck. A number of these were issued in 2002 to 2005, as the Tarot Style I, Tarot Style II, Tarot Style III and Tarot Style special edition (a reprint with different borders of the Style I). The format of the cards is somewhat elongated in the Style I and III and this may be an influence from traditional Chinese playing cards which were similarly elongated compared to European cards. The artwork jumps between manga cartoon style and photorealist fantasy art, and these decks consequently lack a coherence and overall concept.



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The IHS deck of 2003 shamelessly borrows artwork from various fantasy artists including H. R. Giger, Frank Frazetta among others, but produces a muddle of images rather than a coherent tarot. A number of Chinese tarots turned to fantasy art as the basis for their imagery, either reproducing the whole image or a cropped section from some artwork with the intention of reflecting the tarot imagery. Not all of these attempts were successful but this is understandable, considering the short tradition of Chinese tarot and its previous lack of penetration into the culture.

As if these fantasy art *mélanges* were not bad enough, worse was to follow with the appearance of 'Tarot' associated with anime or computer video game characters. The Fullmetal Alchemist is typical of this style. This is based on a Japanese anime series. A number of Chinese publishers seem to have tried to cash in on the success of this series by issuing sets of tarot cards. It is safe to say that there is absolutely nothing of tarot in these cards, except that they have 78 cards with one group numbered 0 to 22 and the others in four suits of 14 cards. There is no discernable link to tarot symbolism but merely scenes from the anime are presented. Indeed different issues of the decks can have the character scenes placed on different cards. These publishers adopted the elongated format of the Tarot Style decks and the contrivance does not unfortunately end there, as someone has obviously created a standard border and card title format which was reused for a whole slew of similar 'tarots'.



FullMetal Alchemist      Harry Potter      Angel Sanctuary

There are dozens of such pseudo tarots. It is worth having one or two in a collection as this does indicate the limits of tarot. Here rampant commercialism merely uses the tarot as a format for selling cards to fans of television shows, films and computer games.



We might be forgiven for thinking that Chinese publishers have entirely let down tarot, but this is not true. In spite of these productions there are some wonderfully creative outpourings. We should look at the Lorland Chen Tarot. He is a very fine artist, a freelance illustrator and teacher at Chengdu Fine Art Academy in Northern China. You can see some of his art realised on Photoshop on his website

<http://lorlandchen.cgsociety.org/gallery>

His tarot was issued in 2005 and is in the best fantasy art style. It is quite a rarity and well worth collecting. This is in fantasy art style but we are back in familiar tarot territory as the imagery reflects the Major arcana. Chen loves to put elf-like ears on his characters. The tarot is nicely printed in soft colours on a matt finished card and is one of the real treasures of Chinese tarot.

A less professional but nevertheless wonderfully original tarot is the Rainbow Storybook tarot created by a Chinese student and apparently sold to subsidise the costs of his education. Decks were only made to order and are quite highly priced. The cards are signed with the initials A.M. This is a happy colourful child-oriented deck created in coloured pencil or crayon, with the delightful soft tones that this medium allows. Rainbows (or shapes coloured in the tones of the spectrum) turn up on most of the cards. The Magician holds a hat out of which pours a rainbow, the Hierophant's hair is in strands coloured with the spectrum. The Lovers each have their hair coloured with half a



rainbow. The theme of the rainbow and the effects realised in the art work are delightful. The cards are printed with a rather fine textured laminate in an elongated format. There are lots of little humorous touches - the flying pigs on the Star, and the clown fish swimming in the anemone like hair of the Moon. This is a little gem of a deck and one should try and get a copy before it disappears for ever.

An interesting attempt was made in 2003 to locate tarot in Buddhist iconography in Mr. Lee's Buddhism Tarot. Here photographs of Buddhist sculptures, of aspirant monks, Buddha, various gods and demons and some thangka or Buddhist religious paintings have been chosen to reflect the 22 Majors of the tarot. On the face of each card are also four small line drawn symbols, wand like forms, chains, pots or vessels, flowers, mirrors, bells and so on. These seem familiar Buddhist paraphernalia. All these symbolic correspondences appear to be explained in the accompanying book, which is, of course, in Chinese. This deck is interesting in that it takes a step backwards into an older tradition in China. Most Chinese tarot seem to reflect only the modern 21st cultural landscape of science fiction or fantasy, so Mr. Lee's is an interesting little tarot standing entirely on its own.



Chinese tarot has come a great distance in only a few years, not so much a 'Long March' but definitely some giant steps culturally. Tarot was never a part of the Chinese cultural tradition and yet as China emerged from its period of isolation from Western ideas, various artists and publishers have discovered tarot and tried in various ways to work and develop it within the Chinese context. In just the few years from about 2000 more than fifty tarots have been created. Though some are not particularly creative or individually inspired, there remains a strong core of Chinese decks that interest the collector. We can be certain that many fascinating tarots will emerge out of China in the years ahead. Watch this space !