

A tarot reading by Narayanee Singaram at The Moon Singapore involving multiple tarot decks.



PEOPLE SINGAPORE

As societies become increasingly open to and accepting of unorthodox “therapies”, tarot readings are quietly seeing a renaissance of sorts in Singapore.

By Sng Ler Jun Photographs by Tung Pham

WITH ROOTS THAT date back to the late-14th century, tarot cards were once used by aristocrats in an Italian card game, called “Tarocchi”, before evolving to become associated as tools of divination in the 18th century. It wasn’t until the 20th century that people started to link the tarot deck to Western esoteric traditions involving the occult and mysticisms, with the 1910-published Rider-Waite-Smith tarot deck becoming a hallmark appearance in pop culture and carnival booths.

Rife with mystery, the enigmatic tarot deck still sees relevance today albeit commonly used as a divination instrument that promotes self-care and spiritual healing. “We are living in a very divided age wherein more people are opening up, especially on social media. But the more opinionated we become and the more we open up, the more we want to introspect,” says Elaine Mok, the 21-year-old resident tarot reader (@tarotonthemoon) at indie bookstore The Moon

ALL IN THE CARDS

in Singapore. “Tarot, to me, is all about healing and it is an excellent tool for therapy. After all, the tarot is like a mirror, a looking-glass to help you reflect.”

Narayanee Singaram, a part-time tarot reader on Instagram (@mygrandmamasecret) and full-time aviculturist, elaborates that she has seen more customers of late seeking validation from a tarot reading. “We are living in a fast-paced world, people are worried about what to expect about the future,” says Singaram. “For many of my clients, a tarot reading helps them to centre and ground themselves. Perhaps to these people, a tarot reading provides them with an assurance of the future and the choices they can make. It’s a reminder that even in confusing times, they can be in control.”

The past decade has seen practices and products promoting self-care and wellness blossoming and mushrooming into a lucrative industry. According to the Global Wellness Institute, the wellness industry was valued at a staggering US\$4.5 trillion (approx. S\$6 trillion) in 2019, a jump from US\$4.2 trillion (approx. S\$5.6 trillion) in 2017. Unsurprisingly, alternative rituals or unorthodox metaphysical practices that

promote similar benefits, such as crystal therapy or tarot card reading, seem predestined to permeate into the mainstream.

With its eldritch illustrations of skulls and battered bodies on some cards as well as a plethora of interpretations, which are geared to tackle life’s ebbs and flows, the popularity of tarot is further magnified by modern technological advancements. For many young tarot readers today, Instagram is fast becoming an influential medium for them to market and promote their services. Crowdfunding platform Kickstarter has also seen a modest increase in the number of successful consumer-backed tarot projects, rising from 97 decks in 2018 to 140 decks in 2019, according to Kate Bernyk, the director of communications at Kickstarter.

Although seemingly difficult to understand, the way a tarot reading plays out is simple and straightforward. “It often involves a couple of specific questions, a spread of cards, and an interpretation based on the cards on the table,” says veteran tarot reader, Rowen Ong, 42, who has been practicing the craft for close to three decades. “For me, I also incorporate and draw on

“After all, something is alternative until researchers are able to measure and verify the benefits of the treatment.”

astrology, numerology, Kabbalah teachings (an esoteric school of thought based on Jewish mysticism), intuition, and my own life experiences to interpret.” In other words, the tarot’s pictorial enigma as well as the manner in which the cards, drawn from the deck, are positioned, along with the tarot reader’s intuition and life experiences, coalesce to pave the way for insightful explanations.

Illustrations and imagery can run the gamut from minacious drawings, such as a couple falling off a lightning-struck tower in “The Tower” or a skeletal knight in “The Death”, to jovial renderings, including a smiling baby perched atop of a white mare in a field of sunflowers in “The Sun”.

For the uninitiated, cards with ominous illustrations do not necessarily portend bad omens. “Rarely does ‘The Death’ card ever predict the demise of a person. If anything, it is all about change and things coming to an end. To me, ‘The



Death’ is about bouncing back and driving through ordeals with emotional intensity,” explains Casper Ong, 29, a part-time tarot reader on Instagram (@boydiviner) who sees between two and 10 clients from across the world in a month. “No matter how the situation turns out, what I have learnt as a tarot reader is to never be judgemental about anyone and to have an open mind.”

In a time when mental health and wellness are increasingly becoming central to public conversations, many are also turning to tarot

readers (and other alternative or non-mainstream therapy practitioners) for answers. According to the tarot readers who spoke to T Singapore, most agreed that tarot can reinforce modern medicinal therapy by fulfilling some facet of spiritual closure or a means of uplifting emotions.

For mental health professionals, non-mainstream practices, such as tarot readings, proffer some potential to harness and thus, much room to explore. “Many of my clients have struggled with symptoms that traditional treatments have failed to heal, so they have turned to alternative medicine,” says clinical psychologist Dr Charlynn Ruan, founder of Thrive Psychologist Group in Los Angeles. “I am cautious to dismiss something just because it is new or it isn’t regularly practiced by traditional Western doctors. After all, something is alternative until researchers are able to measure and verify the benefits of the treatment”

According to Dr Ruan, some patients may have had negative experiences with psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists in the past, which can make it difficult for them to trust again. Tarot or other alternative treatments thus become an appealing alternative.

“Another large factor why people seek alternative treatments over traditional doctors is the stigma of having a diagnosis of being seen as ‘sick’,” says Dr Ruan. However, she’s also quick to add that both tarot readers and medical practitioners ought to be cognisant of the boundaries of their craft. “Psychology has been moving away from the view that our goal is merely to alleviate pain, but rather to help individuals be at their peak and optimal functioning,” says Dr Ruan, who also occasionally sees referrals from a psychic. “Psychologists need to be educated on alternative treatments, while tarot readers need to be educated on trauma and other psychological issues. Otherwise, they have the potential to do great harm.”

These days, there are no specificities to how tarot can be read and to what extent a tarot reading can help a struggling individual. Empathy — as with mutual respect — should be the core idea upon which tarot readers need to turn to as guidelines, while those who seek answers from a tarot card reading should note that the cards provide a guide to, ultimately, help them make decisions for themselves. ▣



Clockwise from top: Ominous illustrations from the tarot cards do not necessarily portend bad omens; Casper Ong (@boydiviner), a part-time Instagram tarot reader; Elaine Mok (@tarotonthemoon), the resident tarot reader at The Moon Singapore; Rowen Ong, a veteran tarot reader with close to three decades of experience; Narayanee Singaram (@mygrandmamasecret), a part-time tarot reader who sees clients at her home or at The Moon Singapore.