

# THE WAITING ROOM

## 等候室

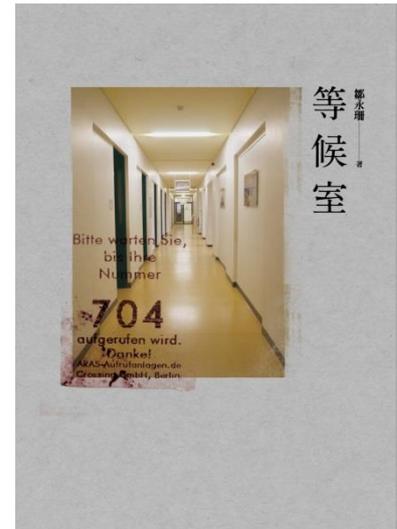
Hsu Ming-Chang followed his wife to Germany and now she's left him, so here he sits, waiting to get a piece of paper that will allow him to stay. They met in college, she was popular and charismatic, he quiet and always buried in books. No one else understood their relationship, but he let things slide, didn't notice that things were changing, until one day she just said she was leaving. Now he waits to hand his documents to Ms Meyer, who will decide if he can stay.

To Ms Meyer, who has worked for twenty years in this office, checking documents and verifying information, these people are not people. They are files. She is weary from the endless stream of weary faces which greet her day after weary day. Ming-Chang's landlady, Mrs Nesmeyanova, has come to Berlin from Belarus. Mr Nesmeyanova wants Berlin to be their home, wants his wife to learn German. But she can't feel at home in her new home. Turkish-German artist Christine creates 'Aufzeichnungen' (notes, documents, files).

Tsou's novel plays with repetition, banality and waiting, recalling the classics of existentialism such as Patrick Süskind's *The Pigeon* or Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*. Economical, clean and gentle, *The Waiting Room* recalls the gestural simplicity and power of a Chinese ink painting, being Chinese more in mood rather than content.

## Tsou Yung-Shan 鄒永珊

Tsou Yung-Shan graduated from National Taiwan University before moving to Germany in 2001 to pursue a graduate degree in art, where she now lives and works as an artist. Her work is characterized by the dialogue between image and language, between content and the process of writing. She has also drawn inspiration from the gulf between the German language and her mother tongue, using its more precise grammar to stretch the subtleties of Chinese.



- Category: Literary Fiction
- Publisher: Muses
- Date: 1/2013
- Contact:  
Gray Tan (The Grayhawk Agency)  
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- Pages: 216pp
- Length: 73,000 characters (approx. 47,000 words in English)
- Rights sold: France (Piranha Editions)

# THE WAITING ROOM

By Tsou Yung-Shan. Translated by Michelle Wu.

00

It was 7:30 in the morning. He sat in the waiting room of the Ausländerbehörde—The Foreigners' Registration Office—with his head bent. He didn't read anything to kill time, nor did he bother to look around. Now and then people speaking different languages chitchatted around him, but he didn't know what they were talking about most of the time. Once in a while, the sound of Chinese drifted down the corridor. In the past, he used to lift his head to follow the voices, but not any more.

People waiting in the waiting room rarely conversed. Only those who came together talked to each other and they would talk about their common worries. Those who came alone usually sat alone with their own thoughts. Even though they were gathered in this room for the same purpose, they were all too tired to tell the strangers beside them anything about themselves. As the scattered conversations subsided, some closed their eyes for a brief moment of repose.

The sky was still dark when he was waiting in line outside the Ausländerbehörde. The quota for reservations had already been filled and those who had failed to make one in advance had to huddle up in a queue outside, in the dark, in minus ten degrees cold, until the guards opened the gate at 6:30. He had been there since 4:30 that morning and was lucky to have gotten a number. Those who had arrived thirty minutes after him were asked to leave because all the tags had been given out.

After a while, the sky slowly lit up. It was a gray and brittle winter morning. The skinny tree branches silhouetted against the window resembled pencil sketches on coarse, grayish paper. The little holes that punctured it were bird nests perching on branches. Further down the street huge sheets of translucent ice floated on the dark waters of the canal, resembling chunks of white paint showing through under the pencil markings. The cracks and fissures screeched and a lone goose perched on the ice flapped its wings and took flight.

The flashing red number on the screen beeped and the person seated beside him accidentally brushed his elbow when he stood up. The person apologized and he said not to worry. This was his first interaction with another human being in the waiting room. He shifted, cupping his chin with his hand, and tilted his head to count the nests in the tree. A bird had flown into the wrong nest. Finding that it was too small, it flew away. He followed the bird with his gaze, watching it fly over the canal and disappear into the buildings across the water. Inexplicably, his mood dampened.

It had been many years since he left Taiwan, that damp and rainy island. The climate in continental Europe was relatively dry and it didn't rain non-stop like it did over there. When feeling blue, he often remembered the bone-chilling dampness that he experienced back home during the winters. He bowed his head to prevent the rain in his heart from welling up in his eyes. He bent his head low, so low that the pungent smell of the moist earth entered his nostrils, so low that the worms that had hibernated in the ground all winter could crawl up onto his hair. He was

waiting and there would be no end to it.

He dared not imagine an end to it. He looked down. He seemed to be staring at the number tag between his thumb and index finger, but really he wasn't looking at anything at all.

Having bowed his head for so long, he felt a strain in his neck. So he looked up and stared straight ahead. Language schools had posted advertisements on the wall. 'Come learn German' was written in many different tongues. He stared. Finally the number that flashed on the screen was the same as the number in his hand.

He dragged his feet along the corridor flanked by offices. A map of the world was posted on the wall between doors. Colorful paper cutouts Willkommen in Deutschland had been pasted on to the world map. He passed by the slogan, paused before the door of the office, knocked and went in.

## 01

The unexpected brightness in the little office made him squint. The window took up the entire wall and framed the cold, glaring sunlight. It was so bright that no additional lighting was necessary. All the furniture in the room was steely gray and under the cold glare, the gray appeared even steelier. A long table dissected the tiny room, separating him from the person who had been waiting for him. His interviewer was a stocky woman in her fifties who looked very tired. He can no longer recall her name. The woman asked him to take a seat. He pulled out a chair from his side of the table and sat down. Beneath the woman's hand, he saw his application papers and passport. The woman flipped open his passport and he caught a glimpse of his name in Chinese. The three characters felt unfamiliar to him.

'Herr Hsu.'

Germans tended to pronounce his last name with a heavy accent. When he first arrived in Germany he would try to correct them, but now he didn't bother anymore. He would simply respond when his name was uttered, regardless of how it was said. The woman's face was expressionless and her voice was void of emotions. The coarseness gave it an even more detached quality, 'You resided in Munich before, as a dependent. You came to Berlin alone?'

Hsu Ming-Chang nodded and the woman continued her questioning in an unemotional tone, 'What are you doing here in Berlin?'

The woman didn't speak very fast and was friendly enough. Yet her voice felt heavy, like her body. He looked at her, trying to figure out how to compose his sentences.

'I came to work,' Ming-Chang responded simply in German.

The woman's vision cut across her narrow spectacles to rest on his face. Seconds later, she bent her head to read the files in her hand. When she came across some photocopied documents, he continued to explain without waiting for her to speak, 'I am an editor and I also write about cultural and literary events.' He didn't know how to say all of this in German, so he switched to English. The woman glanced at him. He could sense some impatience.

'So you are applying for a freelance visa,' the woman arrived at her own conclusion.

She clicked on the mouse with her right hand, obtained the files that she needed and read the provisions on the monitor. After a while she said, 'You don't have anything to prove that you have income from the work that you

have just described, you also lack work plans and spreadsheets.’ She singled out a document from his papers and asked, ‘What is this?’

Ming-Chang took a look and responded, ‘This is an application for KSK. I just submitted an application.’

‘What is KSK?’

Not expecting this question from the woman, Ming-Chang was taken aback and stammered, ‘KSK is Social Security for Artists and Writers. I am a writer, so I figured I would need KSK if I were to apply for a work permit...’

Without allowing him to finish, the woman interrupted him, almost rudely, ‘You already have proof of insurance, so that is not required.’ She returned the document to him. Her reaction rendered him momentarily speechless. She handed him a list with several check marks: ‘The documents you have provided are insufficient, so I cannot give you a long-term residence and work permit. I will, however, give you a temporary three-month visa. Prepare your documents and come back to me within three months. Take this card to the first floor to pay your fee, come back with the receipt and I will return your passport to you.’

The woman let him out. After leaving the room, Hsu Ming-Chang looked left and right, not knowing for a moment where to go. He located his position by examining a map on the wall. On the first floor he found the payment machine. It took him a while to figure out how to pay by inserting the card and cash. The machine printed out the receipt. ‘I just paid for three months of residence,’ he thought to himself, numbly.

His wife used to take care of all of this, preparing the necessary documents and dealing with government agencies. But now he was on his own. Even though he had double-checked the documents again and again, he still failed to get everything ready before the visa extension, especially the documents he had to reapply for due to the change in his marital status. Under the circumstances, it was no surprise that he had been denied a long-term visa.

He thought of his wife. She hadn’t crossed his mind in a long time now. And yet, he started to think about her as he stood before the machine, making his payment. She used to complain that he only thought of her when he needed her. Would she be angry if she knew that he was thinking about her at a moment like this? He took the receipt.

He went back to the clerk. The woman stuck a temporary visa into his passport and signed her name. She returned his passport and documents to him. With a perfunctory ‘good-bye,’ she sent him on his way.

Hsu Ming-Chang stepped out into the corridor. It was bright at both ends of the corridor. He had entered from one end and the other went on into the unknown. Rays of light bounced off the floor, but the painted walls didn’t reflect any light at all, dull and lifeless. There were interconnected openings on the walls, all blocked off by doors, but the doors did not lead anywhere in particular. They were all closed. He stood in this ambiguous space. He glanced down at the documents in his hand, his thoughts similarly hesitant, similarly ambiguous.

There were no seats in the corridor. Hsu Ming-Chang returned to the waiting room, sat down and examined his papers. The woman’s neon red pen had scrawled all over his work plan, spreadsheet, and income certificate, all of which he had printed on greenish-gray recycled paper. The edges of the letters were smudged and blurry. As Hsu Ming-Chang examined his KSK application form, scattered memories flashed across his mind’s eye.

Hsu Ming-Chang said nothing the day his wife told him that she was leaving him. He didn't lift his head from his novel, he avoided her gaze. She kept waiting, waiting for him to say something, but he said nothing. Obediently, he accepted. But they both knew it to be a gesture of resistance and denial. She knew she wouldn't get what she was waiting for. She placed the divorce papers on the table and left. When leaving, the look in her eyes contained an unabashed sadness.

Hsu Ming-Chang originally thought they could go their separate ways without signing papers. It was only when he had to reapply for documents due to the change of his marital status that he realized why she had insisted on the divorce agreement. They met at the lawyer's office.

They sat side-by-side before the lawyer's desk without looking at each other, listening quietly to the lawyer as he read them their rights. They didn't make the splitting up of property too complicated, nor did his ex-wife make any demands. He caught a glimpse of her profile, pale and exhausted, not happy; but once the papers were signed and they were no longer legally bound to each other, an expression of relief washed over her face and he felt a twinge in his stomach.

His signature may have been the last thing he could give her. Had he ever really given her anything?

Their friends all said that their relationship was some kind of role reversal, that deep down she was more like a man and he was more like a woman, or that she was the dominant one. She had made it all start.

They had attended the College of Liberal Arts together. She was two years his senior. The moment he entered college Hsu Ming-Chang knew her as the popular girl who double-majored in literature and finance, head of the student council. She wasn't a typical beauty, but her outgoing and charismatic personality gave her a certain charm; he caught rumours about her despite rarely emerging from behind his books. Yet, he was never one to gossip nor did he take much stock in rumours. Quiet and withdrawn, he never thought he would be associated in any way with someone as popular as her. One day he lifted his head from his book and saw her sitting on the window ledge in the classroom where he often sat reading. She sat there quietly, without disturbing him. When she left she gave him a note.

The note was filled with trivial details about this and that. Hsu Ming-Chang read it many times over, pressing it into the pages of the novel he was reading. He wrote her a reply.

It wasn't until much later that their friends found out about them. They joked around, saying she was the one who had courted him, but what did they know? It was true that when he was with her, she was never the little woman nor did he act the alpha man. People placed bets, saying that their relationship would not last a semester, but they were still together when he had graduated from college and completed military service and she had completed her graduate studies in finance.

She was always outstanding, at school and at work. He was proud of her. Hsu Ming-Chang was sure of that. He was content working as an editor in a small publishing house. After work, he read. He stood by her, oblivious to change. Even though she was used to being the center of attention, when they were together she would sit quietly by his side as he read. She rarely spoke; instead, she scribbled notes trivial and fragmented in form as well as content.

He asked her many times whether she felt bored. She would laugh and say that she never felt bored when she was with him. His heart would fill with emotions, but he never told her.

They continued like this for several years, deeply connected yet seemingly detached. At work, she was promoted again and again and was eventually given an opportunity to work overseas. Germany was the natural choice, given that she studied German in college. She didn't tell him formally, she gave no real details. She didn't talk to him about how this new assignment would affect their relationship. She merely continued to accompany him as he read. That night, when she left, she left him a note in the pages of his book. He took out the note and read the words: I don't want to disrupt this smallness and triviality. I am humbled by it.

'I don't want to disturb this smallness and triviality. I am humbled by it.'

He repeated the words to himself. She was proud and sometimes arrogant, yet she felt humbled. This touched him. It was her wedding proposal and he said yes. He said yes to following her overseas.

They were happy but the decision didn't evoke the same feelings among their families.

Hers made it very clear to him that they regarded him as lacking in manly attributes and with dull prospects, not to mention the fact that he was younger than her. Put plainly, they wanted her to go to Germany without him. She was displeased by their reaction, especially at their prejudice with regards to the age gap. He, in contrast, felt no such resentment. He was younger, that was a fact. Always passive, he didn't really care about what her family thought of him. When they decided to get married, her family had a lot to say and still felt he wasn't the right man for her. When she recounted this to him he listened quietly, waiting for her reaction. Once she made up her mind about something, nothing could change it. Facing their imminent separation, she had no intention of breaking up and so they married in a whirl of arguments.

His family, in comparison, could only be described as indifferent: Hsu Ming-Chang had been raised by his mother after his father left at an early stage. His mother had no special love or expectations for her middle son. His elder and younger brothers had already started their own families and didn't bother to find out what was going on in his head. When he announced that he was getting married, they responded with apathy. His mother merely said, 'Finally, you are getting on track.' Hsu Ming-Chang looked at his mother, lost for words.

## 02

After leaving the Ausländerbehörde, Hsu Ming-Chang tucked his collar in and wound his long, scruffy scarf around his neck several times. He sighed, emitting a puff of white smoke. He stood waiting by the bus stop, still thinking about what had happened between him and his wife and the incomprehensible events that had left these gaping holes in his heart. Yet, there was no going back. The forlorn feelings drifting through the holes in his heart were more pernicious than Berlin's winters. No amount of heavy clothing could ward off the cold.

'Don't you have anything to say to me?' she asked, before leaving him. She had already made up her mind regarding everything else. Hsu Ming-Chang didn't see what there was left to discuss now. If this was how it was going to be, what more could he say?

In fact, he had a lot to say to her but none of it had anything to do with her decision or whether or not they had anything to negotiate. But he didn't know where to start, so he didn't say anything. This time, however, she didn't wait indefinitely. She didn't hang around, waiting. Before he knew what to do, she had left and he was left having

said nothing at all.

She left. He stayed. Staying was unbearable and he grew fearful that somehow staying meant she could leave him again, and again he would be unable to find the words. The next day she returned, looked at him as if he were a stranger, waited for him to sign the divorce papers, told him to meet her at the lawyer's office a few days later to straighten things out and then left. He allowed her to push him on and he barely remembered now what the lawyer had said to them. He then packed up his things, left the house that was leased in her name and boarded the night train to another city. His only moment of initiative. He chose Berlin.

Hsu Ming-Chang sat in a second-class carriage looking out the window with his chin propped in his hand. The train wasn't moving very fast and he could see the tall straight birches flanking the railroad. The wind blew over the murky tips of the trees and a crescent moon hung in the inky blue sky. The train came to a halt for a while at Dresden. The eerie fluorescent light on the platform banished the dark, but accentuated the loneliness. Time seemed to come to a standstill. The sinking stillness weighed him down and he fell into a fuzzy dreamlike state, the images started moving again but there was no sound.

He fell asleep and then woke up. Morning had broken and the glow of sunrise spread across the rolling fields in the distance, an expanse of crimson red glowing under the deep blue sky. The colors of the sky turned a lighter shade and it became misty. By the time the morning fog had lifted, the train had arrived in Berlin.

He got off at Berlin Ostbahnhof, walked into train station and looked around. The morning sunlight had a grayish hue, so the train station, with its muted color scheme, also seemed gray. He had arrived too early and the stores were not yet open. People were few and far between. A janitor pushing his cart filled with cleaning utensils passed by, leaving two wet wheel tracks on the charcoal floor. His first impression of Berlin.

He waited until the stores opened and bought a map of the city. He checked his present location and that of his meeting later that afternoon and planned his route. He had found a sub-let in the classifieds and was going to see the room that afternoon. The apartment was located in Charlottenburg in the western part of Berlin. Hsu Ming-Chang didn't want to drag his suitcase halfway across the city, so he left it in storage at the train station.

The S-Bahn was elevated so Hsu Ming-Chang could see buildings and scenery along the way. Berlin was much bigger than Munich, less refined and less orderly. His second impression of Berlin.

There had been a sudden downpour while he was on the train. Black storm clouds covered the sky. As the train entered the rainy zone, torrents of water splashed the windows and huge droplets moved in the opposite direction, leaving trails on the glass, blurring his view. By the time he reached the station, the rain had stopped and the sky was so blue that you would have no idea it had been pouring only a few minutes ago. The air after the rain was so refreshing that one gulp of it in your lungs made you feel as if you were made anew.

Charlottenburg houses resembled those of Munich. The atmosphere of the neighborhood also resembled the one he had left behind, and yet, there was an awkward feeling about the place that was difficult to describe. Hsu Ming-Chang stood on the ground floor with his bag looking for the name of the apartment's occupant and, after some difficulty, found 'Nesmeyanov.' Ming-Chang waited downstairs until the time of the appointment and then rang the bell.

The landlady came downstairs to meet him. She was a solemn and hefty middle-aged woman. She didn't look German. She showed him a room to the side of the apartment. The doors flanking the corridor were closed and the

lights turned off, making it quite dark. When the landlady opened the door of the available room, Ming-Chang was welcomed by a bright and spacious feeling: the space was big with a tall window and French doors. Sunlight flooded the room, lighting up the dark corridor behind him. The French doors led to a tiny balcony offering an expansive view, from which he could count the chimneys of the neighborhood buildings. Hsu Ming-Chang made up his mind to rent it right away. The landlady looked at him with a solemn expression but, without much hesitation, told him he was welcome to move in.

They signed a contract, putting both at ease. The landlady invited Hsu Ming-Chang to sit down for a little chat to get to know each other a bit. She could barely speak English and Hsu Ming-Chang's German wasn't exactly fluent, so they had to resort to gestures and body language. Fortunately they managed to get through to each other without too many obstacles. The landlady's name was Nesmeyanova and she had come to Berlin from Belarus with her husband. The couple had a son and the room for rent belonged to him. They found it difficult to pronounce each other's names, giving up after several attempts. Hsu Ming-Chang summarily explained his occupation and was relieved to find that Mrs Nesmeyanova felt no need to ask too many more questions.

## §

On the day that Hsu Ming-Chang moved into Mrs Nesmeyanova's home, he only brought one suitcase with him. Everything he owned was in that suitcase. Dragging it behind him, he walked into the middle of the room. A mattress, a closet, a chair. Mrs Nesmeyanova glanced at his luggage and said if he didn't mind, she would gladly provide him with a pillow and blanket. He accepted.

Having accepted the pillow and blanket, Hsu Ming-Chang went to put them on the mattress. It was then that he discovered he didn't like the mattress being directly placed on the wooden floor. It was very thin and definitely not comfortable to lie on. Furthermore, when Mrs Nesmeyanova showed him around his room, she had kept her shoes on. It occurred to him when he moved in that the floors might not be clean. He took off one sock and walked around and found a layer of dirt had stuck to the base of his foot. He set the pillow and blanket down on the chair and asked Mrs Nesmeyanova to give him a cloth. He got down on to his knees and wiped the floors twice, including the area under the mattress. When he lifted it, he could hear small pieces of grit rolling onto the floor.

He put the mattress back in position, made his bed and burrowed into the blanket for his first night in an unfamiliar room. The pillow had a strong smell of laundry detergent, keeping him wide awake even though he was exhausted; the silvery moonlight shone into his room, landing on his blanket. He looked out the window and could see wisps of smoke from the chimneys against the moonlit sky. Though he had wiped the floor, there was still some dust caught between planks and his nose itched. The unfamiliarity of it all gave him insomnia. The next day, he cleaned his room again.

He ran into Mrs Nesmeyanova on his way to the bathroom to fetch water in a bucket. Worried, she asked him if he was comfortable in his room. Ming-Chang meant to reply that all was well and that he was not uncomfortable, but he blurted out 'no'; in the German context, this meant that he was not comfortable and Mrs Nesmeyanova gave him an uneasy look before returning to the kitchen. She later kept quiet about his constant floor-wiping.

The floor no longer felt grainy when he walked barefoot. This made him feel much better. The days passed like falling sand. He wasn't in the mood to decorate his room. He didn't have a lot of possessions and settling in wouldn't have been any trouble, he just had a vague feeling that he could leave this place any time, so his clothes stayed in his suitcase without making their way into the closet. A new place to live, but this didn't necessarily translate into a new beginning. The room with one mattress, one closet, one chair, one suitcase, one pillow and one blanket that he couldn't really call his own; none of it gave him the feeling that he could easily start anew.

Apart from wiping the floor every other day, he engaged in no other regular activity. He only left his room to eat, drink and to go to the bathroom. He stayed in his room all day without communicating with anyone. He read the novels from his suitcase, one after another. There were no curtains, so the sun shone directly into the room, illuminating the dust motes that floated in the air; the sun shone on his feet, then his abdomen and chest, then his face and into his eyes. He moved his chair around the room to avoid it.

On the balcony ledge were pots of herbs that Mrs Nesmeyanova had planted in the spring. When he moved in Mrs Nesmeyanova stopped taking care of them, so he watered them from time to time and when winter came, he moved the plants into his room to prevent them from freezing. When Mrs Nesmeyanova found out that he was looking after her plants, she gave him a bouquet of dried lavender as a token of her appreciation. Taken by surprise, he hesitated for a moment before accepting the lavender, discovering as he did so that Mrs Nesmeyanova had delicate hands. As he thanked her, he noticed that Mrs Nesmeyanova's facial muscles, normally so tense, seemed relax a little.

He stroked the bouquet of dried lavender, releasing a heavy scent into the air. The room seemed to brighten up. He left half of the bouquet on the windowsill and tucked the other half into his suitcase.