

East as Eden

By Yenni Kwok

The Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail doesn't hide her admiration for the wisdom of the east - not that of the Islamic Orient but that of the Chinese Orient. "I've been fascinated with the Oriental philosophy and legend," the 40-year-old writer says. "I've read books about Confucius, Zen philosophy, Buddhist teachings, and I also like the Daoist symbols."

Mikhail is one of the seven Muslim writers who attended the Hong Kong Baptist University's second International Writers' Workshop, which ended last week, on the theme "Understanding the Islamic World and its Writers".

News from Muslim countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia continues to dominate the headlines. And, as the late Palestinian-born scholar and author of *Orientalism*, Edward Said, lamented, the overall picture is "a depressing and misleading one", so skewed is the media in its portrayal of the Islamic world.

While Said directed his criticisms towards Europe and America, people in this part of the world shared the same one-dimensional view of their oriental cousins. "Most Hong Kong and Chinese people don't have in-depth knowledge about the Islamic world," says Chung Ling, Baptist University's Dean of Arts and director of the workshop. "From television and newspapers, we learn such places are dangerous and violent; women are repressed."

Professor Chung says the best way to debunk the stereotypes is "to have close contacts with the real people. Then, hopefully, we'd know the situation better".

The workshop, which ended on Tuesday, invited six writers from Arabic countries and one from Indonesia to live on campus for a month. They attended seminars and discussion groups, taught classes and, if inspiration came, pursued their creative endeavour.

Attending along with Mikhail were Egyptian novelist Ahmed Alaidy, Lebanese writer Hassan Daoud, Palestinian Mahmoud Shukair and

Jordanian Taghreed Najjar - both children's authors, Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan and Indonesian poet Sitok Srengenge.

The committee planned to invite Chinese Muslim writers but, unable to find suitable candidates, chose two writers whose works show social concern: Cao Naiqian from the mainland and Taiwan's Lan Po-chou.

Professor Chung says the choice of writers from the world's trouble spots was intentional. "The Middle East has been a place of conflict in the last 50 years, and we wanted the writers to talk about that," he says.

The authors are well aware of the expectations. "We try to introduce the Islamic world as it is, not the one according to the mass media," says Daoud, 55. "Unfortunately, our image is drawn by the fundamentalists, but this is not the modern Islamic world or modern Islamic society. Our opinion of the fundamentalists is close to that of Hong Kong people."

There's a distinction to be drawn between the Islamic religion and the culture of Islamic countries, says Zaqtan. "In Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, there's a mixed culture ... and layers of civilisation."

Still, the participants found engaging the local students and audiences in lively debate a challenging task. "Compared with Hong Kong people, Americans are much more curious about Iraq. They ask more questions and speak more," says Mikhail, who lives in the US. "I don't know whether people here are not interested, or hesitant to ask questions because they think it's too sensitive."

Launched last year, the International Writers' Workshop was inspired by the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa, which was set up 38 years ago. But Professor Chung insists the Hong Kong programme, only the second of its kind in the world, is different from Iowa's model.

The US programme is bigger, with more than 30 writers each year. And in Hong Kong, she says, there's a theme.

The inaugural programme last year, which chose the theme "Writers of Post-colonial English-speaking Countries", hosted nine writers from India, Africa, the Caribbean, Malaysia, Taiwan and the mainland. "We want to add

something to the cultural dynamics of Hong Kong," says Professor Chung. "This city is not as culturally barren as people tend to think."

By including Chinese writers, the programme also tries to foster a cultural exchange between China and the outside world. The nascent programme also succeeded in attracting high-profile figures to sit on its board of advisers.

Members include poet Christopher Merrill, the director of Iowa's programme; his predecessor, novelist Nie Hua-ling; Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gary Snyder; renowned sinologist Howard Goldblatt, who translates the work of Mo Yan and Su Tong into English; as well as Nobel Prize Committee member Goran Malmqvist, an important force behind the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Gao Xingjian in 2000.

Having attended the Iowa writing programme in 2001, Zaqtan praises the Hong Kong workshop as "very flexible, interesting and well organised".

"There were some activities but not too many, and it gave us time to do what we want to do," says Zaqtan.

There were also some surprises. Zaqtan met fellow writer Daoud in Beirut in the early 1980s, and they hadn't seen each other since. The workshop also reunited the 51-year-old Zaqtan with fellow Iowa alumnus Srengenge. The Arabic writers - most experiencing their first trip to the Far East - agree the workshop was worthwhile. "It paved the way for meeting and communicating in the future," Daoud says. "I understand some of the participants will meet again."

And, although language sometimes posed an obstacle to communication, especially between Muslim and Chinese writers, they found there were other ways to relate.

"Cao played his flute for us, and it reflected our good feeling without even talking," Daoud says. "We are very touched by the presence of our Chinese colleagues."

The Lebanese author also expected he would be bombarded with questions at home. "When a Lebanese visits a European country, it doesn't raise much curiosity. Places like Paris and Amsterdam are well-known for us. But I

know there will be many questions from everybody, wanting to know what it was like in Hong Kong and China," he said.

"I am going home with so many experiences to tell and to write about."

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