



# Remembering Joe Slovo's Third Visit to China

By Li Liqing

This year marks the 21st anniversary of Joe Slovo's death. In his lifetime, Slovo visited China three times, and I had the honour to accompany him during his third visit to China. Although I merely spent half a month with him, I was so impressed by his wisdom and charisma that even to date my memory of him still remains fresh.

## Arriving at Shenzhen Port

From August 6 to 20 in 1993, Joe Slovo, then chairperson of the South African Communist Party (SACP), came to China with his wife, Helena Dolny

for a visit and holiday at the invitation of the International Department of the Central Committee, Communist Party of China (IDCPC). This was his third trip to China. As a staff at the Bureau of African Affairs, I was chosen to accompany him during his whole journey in China.

Comrade Slovo was no stranger to people like me, who were dealing with African affairs. Known as a theorist and thinker in South Africa, he was also a long-time leader of the SACP, a leading member of the African National Congress (ANC), and a commander of the ANC's military wing in exile. After

returning South Africa, he was involved in the constitutional negotiations and played a key role in advancing South Africa's peace process. His first two trips to China in 1986 and 1989, at the invitation of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC), had already enhanced his popularity in China, but I hadn't met him by that time despite some knowledge about him from books and the press.

Madam Huan Guoying, then Deputy Minister of the IDCPC, and I received the couple on August 6 at Wen Jindu Checkpoint. Slovo, of medium stature and with grey hair, looked hale and hearty in spite of his cancer operation. He was articulate, slow-spoken but sharp-witted. His wife Helena, also white and 28 years younger than him, was an agricultural economist and had obtained her master's degree in the UK. Unlike other women in Africa, she dressed in a casual way, which was a bit of surprise for me.

We briefly greeted each other in the checkpoint's VIP lounge before Huan Guoxing welcomed the couple on behalf of the IDCPC and asked them about their specific requirements during the visit. He explained that due to his suffering of myeloma, coupled with a heavy workload at home, it wasn't convenient for him to head a delegation for an official visit, so the trip was arranged as a visit plus vacation. The purpose of his visit was to learn about China's reform and opening up, discuss issues like socialist theory and practice, meet Chinese leaders and convey a message from President Nelson Mandela. As to what the message was, however, he didn't disclose.

## Visits Outweighed Holiday

With our company, the couple travelled to cities like Shen Zhen, Shanghai, Wenzhou of Zhejiang Province and Suzhou of Jiangsu Province, where they visited villages, Pudong Development Zone and enterprises of different ownership, as well as tourist attractions such as Yuyuan Garden in Shanghai and Suzhou Gardens. Their last stop was Beijing, where they met Chinese leaders and held discussions with IDCPC and experts on issues of China's

economic system reform and other matters.

Both in and outside Beijing, I found that their interest was truly focused on China's political and economic systems, including the concept of the socialist path with Chinese characteristics, the process of economic reform, differences and definitions of diversified ownerships, reform in rural areas and policies and roles of the ruling party. They had also prepared many questions prior to each visit. I still remember that during his visit to a joint venture in Shenzhen, Slovo kept asking about the functions of the labour union, the relationship between the union, employer and employees as well as the relationship between the union and the ruling party. On their visit to an air-conditioner factory, their questions focused on exploring the meaning of shareholding system, collective ownership and public ownership. His wife had so many questions on a visit to rural areas about the details of rural economic reform that she still kept asking when the discussion was about to end. The interpreter of Wenzhou, a business city of east China's Zhejiang Province, asked me on the quiet whether the Slovos really came for a holiday. Unlike other foreign guests, they posed so many questions during the visit. I explained to her in detail the history of South Africa and its Communist Party as well as the real purpose of Slovo's visit to China.

The Slovos were all ears to the inputs by the Chinese side. Both made notes and sorted them out immediately after returning to the hotel. Helena didn't join our visit one afternoon, as she said she would stay at the hotel sorting out her notes, which decision her husband respected. When she sometimes didn't quite catch the meaning of some jargon with Chinese characteristics, Joe was always ready to explain to her on the side, as he had been to China twice and was more familiar with China. Knowing his wife was interested in Chinese culture he made the best of his time to take his wife to the Great Canal, Suzhou Gardens, a Silk Factory and the Yuyuan Garden in Shanghai. They argued peacefully when they held different views on things about China, but mostly when agreement couldn't

be reached, it is Mr Slovo who first stopped arguing, which fully showed his tolerance and open-mindedness.

As a political leader, he was amiable and approachable, and he never put on airs. On top of his patience with my questions, he was also candid about his experience, family and his ex-wife Ruth First. He made no extra requirements about his reception by the IDCPC except stating that he didn't eat meat due to his physical condition. He kept swimming every day, his only way of exercise according to him, without which his health situation would be hard to tell. I was simply awestruck by his words. As an aged man with cancer who should have stayed at home for recovery, instead of the planned trip for vacation, he still went abroad for the sake of his party, spending most of his time working, discussing, meeting and making time for exercise. What great qualities of sacrifice and perseverance this man showed!

#### Theorist

During the trip, I was convinced that Slovo was a theorist, who was always pondering, talking little. In Beijing he discussed with the economist, Dong Fureng, questions such as what is socialism and public ownership. In the view of the interpreter Shuzhan, Dong argued that the international community held different views about socialism and people should rethink about socialism through practice so as to get a new understanding of it. Karl Marx's ideas may have been right in his time but some were outdated in ours, and some even never right at all. People's knowledge is in progress and Marxism and Leninism can't be expected to predict the future and provide all the answers without learning from practice. This approach may not have been consistent with Marxism and Dialectics. However, he told me that he had an agreeable talk with Mr. Dong, whose ideas were inspiring and thought-provoking.

I asked him about his opinion of the former Soviet Union, as I knew that he had once written an article entitled *Has Socialism Failed?*. He told me that he made several trips to the Soviet Union and the east European countries before 1989 and that socialism was

cold-shouldered after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and east European countries. He still didn't regard it as the failure of socialism though. With the cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union on his mind, he learned about theories and practices of socialism in various countries and compared socialist practices between socialist countries, especially between China and the Soviet Union, so as to find out regular problems in their socialist practice.

The problems he had in his mind were actually problems facing socialism in South Africa, for South Africa's tripartite alliance led by the ANC had a very good chance of winning the election in 1994. And the SACP was a member of the alliance.

Then what was his opinion of China's socialist model? I had no clue as to his ideas until he made a speech when meeting Chinese leaders in Beijing. He recognised China's efforts in exploring its socialist path and applauded the outcomes and significance of China's reform and opening up, while he was candid about the problems about to emerge in China. This was also a feature that separated him from other African leaders I had met.

He said that the visit enabled them to have a deeper understanding of the development path China has chosen and its relevant policies. They noted the abundance of commodities in China's markets, the improvement of people's lives, the happy go lucky people and the peaceful society, which was without doubt attributed to China's reform.

He elaborated that only two pages explain the definition of socialism in the classics of Marxism and Leninism, and actually there is no ready experience to follow in building socialism. Therefore, each socialist country must develop socialism in accordance with its historical and current conditions. It is now too difficult to give an absolute definition of socialism. No other theories are more important than the one that people in socialist countries should be provided with abundant commodities. Amid the many problems in China, one thing is clear, however, that China is providing more and more commodities to its people. He insisted

that China's future lies in the reforms led by the CPC, which will also have a fundamental impact on the whole world. The success of China's socialism is not only the success of its people, but it will also contribute to the socialist movements of the world.

He concluded by saying that he appreciated the Chinese leaders' rethinking of socialist theory and held it that China's policy to develop an economy of varied ownership is correct, while he also suggested that China should be clear-minded in dealing with capitalism and vigilant against corruption. In addition, he expressed his hope that China would pay attention to its political reform, indicating that the cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union and eastern European countries was the lack of political democracy within the communist party.

For my part, his opinions of Chinese socialism are consistent with the facts, without either exaggeration or diminishment. His vision and wide knowledge in theory surfaced when he addressed the problems facing China on its way of exploring socialism, which proved to be predictive.

#### Conveying a Message

Another purpose for Joe Slovo's vacation visit was to pass a message of which the content is unknown even to us. Later we worked out that the message must relate to Sino-South Africa relations because of the fact that the two countries had not established diplomatic ties at that moment. Furthermore, it was a message from Nelson Mandela, the ANC's President, to the Chinese leader, just after his latest visit to Taiwan. However, Slovo remained tight-lipped about the content of the message and it was not disclosed until he met Hu Jintao, Standing Member of CPC Politburo then, later to become President.

On August 17th Hu Jintao received them in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. After a short briefing of his impression of this trip, Slovo disclosed that, prior to his departure to China, the ANC President Mandela entrusted him to pass a message to the Chinese Communist Party and the Government. Then, he carefully produced a manuscript and read it

loudly: "President Mandela asked me to transfer his clear-cut stance to the People's Republic of China after his recent visit to Taiwan. He stressed that we will never abandon our old friend. We would not forget that, it is the PRC that had paid a huge price in fulfilling the international obligation on isolating apartheid and supporting our people's struggle. Nor would we forget that, it is Taiwan that had given continuous assistance to racism and apartheid in South Africa. When the new democratic system is established in the coming year, it is our policy which is clear and unchanged that the historical relationship between our people and the Chinese and the principles adopted by the PRC with respects to Taiwan will be respected. In a word, the new South Africa will correct the historical unfair treatment of the PRC caused by the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan by the apartheid regime. There will be no doubt that the

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new South Africa will diplomatically recognise PRC as the sole and only representative of the whole of China. To put it another way, for us, there is only one China all along, one China which is solely represented by the PRC. We will proceed according to this policy. Therefore, whatever impression cast on his Taiwan visit, Mandela hopes that the above viewpoints could be understood as our clear-cut stance.

Hu Jintao gave his thanks to Slovo for that and expressed his appreciation for Mandela's message on further deepening and developing good relationships with China and of his declaration that the new South Africa will recognise People's Republic of China and stick to the One China Policy. He was confident that President Mandela and his people will proceed from our friendship forged in the

long-term struggle, and further enhance and develop the friendship between the two countries and peoples.

After the meeting, Slovo once again asked to make public Mandela's statement, claiming that it was requested by Mandela himself. We handed the script to our interpreter to put it into Chinese, and finally, the Chinese version of the statement was seen in the *People's Daily* the next day, which was encouraging to China. Later we saw that the democratic government didn't sever their diplomatic relationship with Chinese Taiwan immediately after coming into power.

Nevertheless, China and South Africa established formal diplomatic relationships on January 1, 1998, though it was a great pity that Joe Slovo passed away in January 1995, failing to witness the important moment. His efforts in promoting the normalisation of our bilateral relationship, and the message he conveyed in particular, will always be remembered by both countries and peoples.

Two months after Slovo's China trip, I was assigned to the Chinese Embassy in Botswana in October 1993. My routine work was to learn about the political and economic development trends in South Africa through TV and newspapers, which enabled me to take a closer look at the country's first democratic elections, the success of its tripartite alliance, the birth of a new South Africa and, of course, Slovo as the Minister of Housing. I was thinking at that time that South Africa and the ANC finally had their dreams come true, which deserved applause from all corners of the world.

I had planned to visit the couple in South Africa and extend my congratulations personally, but who could expect his departure from the world in January 1995. I was shocked at the sad news, for he still looked in the pink a year earlier on his visit to China. His efforts in promoting the relationship between China and South Africa as well as between the South African Communist Party and the CPC will always be remembered by the Chinese, and his thoughts and research on the socialist movement in the world will be passed on to future generations as valuable treasures. ■