

# A FILIPINO CORRESPONDENT IN BEIJING: UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH CNN'S JAIME FLORCRUZ

## ABSTRACT

CNN's Jaime FlorCruz generously shared his life and the life in China, from the time of Marxist equality amid poverty, to when China first opened its doors to its neighbors, and to the present. He discussed media's changing role. He concluded by noting the price of China's prosperity: the issues of central control and Chinese values. He posed the question: Can China be porous and at the same time retain its distinct quality as Chinese?

**Keywords:** *Media's role in China, China news coverage*

**J**aime FlorCruz was born in the Philippines on April 5, 1951. He took up advertising in the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) where he was also a vocal anti-Marcos activist. It was through his activism that he was invited to go to the People's Republic of China by the China Friendship Association.

Together with 14 others, FlorCruz went on a trip to China on August 21, 1971. Being an activist, the idea of the then closed-door

socialist China piqued his interest. His stay in China, originally intended for only three weeks, was extended because of the series of unfortunate events at the time. On the date of his departure for China, the Plaza Miranda bombing happened, and this led to the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. A year later, martial law was declared in the Philippines. In sum, therefore, the 20-year old Jaime FlorCruz, who was scheduled to stay for only a three-week tour, was exiled in China for 12 years.

According to FlorCruz, the China at the time and the China of today are very different.

China went through a cultural revolution. The remnants of the revolution and class struggle were still felt then. As FlorCruz recalled, there were barely any cars in China except for the chauffeur-driven vehicles of public officials. He also recalled seeing the Red Army marching in the iconic Tiananmen Square.

FlorCruz observed how disciplined the citizens of China seemed to be. The discipline they demonstrated was noteworthy. He witnessed how, with the first snowfall, people went out of their houses with their spades and shovels to help clear the snow that had fallen. He was struck by the sight of these people cleaning up on their own even without any order from government. China seemed to be a socialist utopia.

But FlorCruz knew that amidst all the romanticism, this socialist society was far from perfect. Poverty was still rampant in China. Quoting the late Chairman Mao Zedong, “China then was poor and blank.” He believed that people at the time had different ideologies. On the one hand were the dying ways of old; and on the other, the new Marxist ideologies.

As the weeks passed, FlorCruz's romanticized perception of China started to wane. He longed for home. After around three or four weeks in China, their group of fifteen was reduced to five. Ten of their companions found ways to go back home to the Philippines. Those who were left behind wanted to either continue their studies or go to the countryside.

China Friendship Association representatives told FlorCruz and company to be patient and wait for the time they could go home. Despite being treated well in their hotel, these five individuals, including FlorCruz, started suffering from cabin fever. FlorCruz recalled quarrelling with his friends over trivial matters.

Knowing that quarrelling would not get them anywhere, the group decided that they had to keep themselves occupied. Thus, they chose to move to the countryside to find work.

Work in the countryside in China at the time meant work in the fields. FlorCruz shared how the government propaganda of romanticizing labor with the slogan "remold our outlook through labor" actually worked for a good three months. It was during his farming days that FlorCruz realized the difficulties of farming. "*Magtanim ay 'di biro pala talaga, masakit sa balakang.*"

After two years working in a state farm, the group heard of an opening at the Beijing Foreign Language Institute. There they began their intensive study of the Chinese Language (Mandarin). FlorCruz devoted another four years in Peking University to earn a degree in Chinese history. Lessons taught in the universities had, perceivably, a Marxist slant.

For FlorCruz, the best lessons he learned were not in class discussions but in the debates he had engaged in with four classmates

who were also foreigners. He felt honored to be in the presence of those older and more experienced foreigners, who discussed with him national issues, social reform, and solutions. It was during these years of labor and education in China that FlorCruz's eyes were opened to the reality of Chinese society.

As he was about to graduate from Peking University, foreign news organizations also started to open bureaus in the Mainland. FlorCruz took this opportunity to work as a reporter for Newsweek magazine. His first big project for Newsweek was reporting about the "Gang of Four".

At the time FlorCruz was also an English teacher in another school within the region where one of his students was the son of a presiding member of the Supreme Court in the trial of the Gang of Four. Perhaps out of sheer luck, his student trusted him enough to tell him over-the-table discussions about the trial his student's father shared at home. Because of this, Jaime FlorCruz was able to deliver credible, detailed news.

FlorCruz joined TIME magazine's Beijing bureau in 1982 and eventually served as bureau chief from 1990 to 2000. He fondly recalled his memorable encounters with then Mayor of Shanghai Jiang Zemin who called him as his *xiao didi*, or little brother.

Not long after his meeting with Jiang, the first Communist Party Congress was opened to foreign media. The experience and connection FlorCruz gained illustrates the importance of having field journalists when covering news in China.

According to FlorCruz, media is important in the representation of the People's Republic of China as a whole.

During the time China opened up to the world, it was mostly the European journalists who took interest in what was happening in the country. Because of this, most of what the world knew about China then was from a European perspective. Most of literature on China was done by diplomats and refugees who fled to Hong Kong. Sadly, a number of these gave the world a negative view of China.

Good publicity was mainly given to the alleged ‘allies’ of the country where the article was written. Generally the news described the Chinese as tricky, sneaky, and unreliable. After Nixon visited China, the country was romanticized. China was shown to be adopting Western influences. By 1989, however, the negative image of China resurfaced; it was depicted as a repressive and power-hungry government.

Clearly, media held the power, and consequently, the responsibility in the truthful portrayal of China. The problem at times, however, was that media tended to choose a single side, without showing the complete image.

FlorCruz saw the tremendous changes in China in his 12 years of stay in the country. The ideologies of old were fast declining. The highly romanticized thought of communal poverty became inapplicable. With China’s rise as a global economic power, the ideals of a poverty-stricken nation underwent a radical change.

Now, the flourishing philosophy in China is the importance of personal or individual economic growth. This particular shift in ideology greatly affects the behavior of China and its people today.

The economic growth spurt of China can be attributed to this new ideology. This new ideal on growth could have been brought about by the opening up of China to different areas of development such as information dissemination, media, tourism, and diplomacy.

According to him, one of the biggest phenomena to ever hit China is Weibo, the Chinese counterpart of Facebook and Twitter. Similar to any social media, citizens of Weibo are able to post pictures and shoutouts that can be vital for personal and societal use. In this light, the usually secretive government of China can no longer delay informing its citizens of what is happening in the different parts of China. Now, the Chinese government uses Weibo as its means of communication with its people. Through this, the government is able to keep the people informed about everything concerning them and the country as a whole.

In closing, the story of Jaime FlorCruz is one that reveals the strength of human will and the power of having a clear mindset. What could have been a horrifying and traumatizing experience of going into exile in a foreign land like China became a journey of personal growth and countless opportunities for Jaime FlorCruz.

**About the Speaker:** Mr. Jaime A. FlorCruz is CNN's Beijing Bureau Chief and correspondent, responsible for strategic planning of the network's news coverage of China. FlorCruz has studied and worked in China for more than 40 years. He has reported extensively on the country as a journalist since 1980, when he started his career in China as a reporter for Newsweek Magazine. In 1982 he joined TIME magazine's Beijing bureau, and served as its bureau chief from 1990 to 2000. He has witnessed and reported on the most significant events of China's past three decades.

FlorCruz also writes a weekly online column (Jaime's China) that offers analysis about Chinese society and politics. He is considered the dean of the foreign press corps in Beijing, being the longest-serving foreign correspondent in China to date. He was a two-term president of the 200-member Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (1988-1990 and 1996-1999). He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in advertising from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines and a degree in Chinese history from Peking University.

**Editor's note**

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