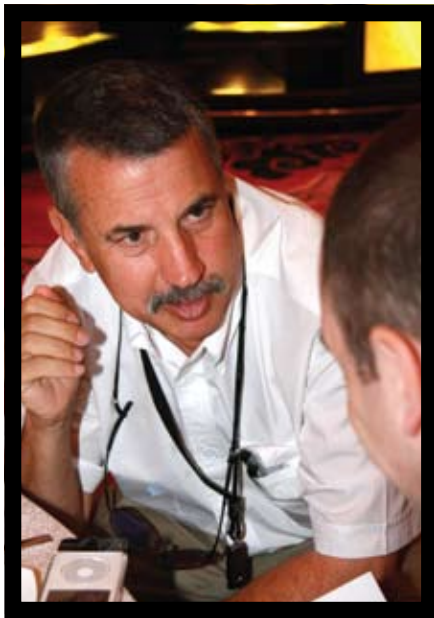


# Exclusive Interview: Thomas Friedman

**Columnist and author discusses US and China paths to success**

By Josh Gartner



Zhang Hu

*New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman*

**B**efore his speech to nearly 150 AmCham-China members following the Olympics, three-time Pulitzer Prize winning columnist for the *New York Times* and celebrated author Thomas Friedman sat down to discuss the direction of US-China relations as America gets ready for its presidential election. Mr. Friedman emphasized the need for America to focus on its internal problems, and pointed out that the close relationship between the US and China imposes constraints on leaders of both countries. In addition, he discussed the problems facing China in the months and years ahead as the country shifts from building toward the Olympics to building upon the success of the event.

**CB** Given the interdependence of the US and China, many argue that there is not a lot of room for deviation in American China policy. How different would you expect an Obama versus a McCain administration to be on this front?

**TF** Well, I would agree with those who say relationship is so fully intertwined that the opportunity or the necessity for major deviation by either side is pretty limited. We're Siamese twins. The cost of our mort-

gages depends on the level of their savings. The level of their savings depends on the strength of our consumers, so I don't see either candidate really having a big impact. And for now at least, China couldn't be less of an issue in this campaign.

**CB** Which areas are most likely to cause rifts between the next US administration and China?

**TF** Well, there's always the issue of the *Yuan* and there are economic issues that clearly are going to be a factor. There's going to be the environment question post-Kyoto. It's not that we agree on everything, it's just that our interests are so intertwined that our ability to let our disagreements become some sort of fundamental breach is fairly limited.

**CB** With regard to long-term issues facing the new administration, either domestically or internationally, which do you think will be the most pressing?

**TF** I think it's what I call nation building at home. I think what we need in America right now is the kind of nation building that China has been doing in preparation for the Olympics these last seven years. Our real priority has to be building up our own infrastructure, our own economy, our own education, gaining strength and leverage through that. The other issues are incidental.

**CB** Incidental because...

**TF** Because ultimately our ability to deliver on any [of the international issues] will depend on our own strength at home.

**CB** You just mentioned the build up toward the Olympics. What is your overall take on how China has handled the Olympics and what lessons would you draw about how China handles major policy issues?

**TF** I think the Olympics have been a great success in terms of the infrastructure

that has been built and the way the Games came off; it's been very impressive. I think the lesson for us and anyone watching—there are enormous problems in this country, but their ability to engage in long-term nation building with fixed goals is probably unparalleled in the world today. It's very impressive. I think it's something that we all need to take note of.

**CB** You talked about how China has spent at least the last seven years building towards the Olympics. It's a country that has a history of building toward goals. What do you see as the next big challenge for China?

**TF** For China the challenge is: can there be a virtual Olympics? You can't have another Olympics, nothing else is quite like it. The question is what will be the virtual Olympics that people here can focus on as a source of pride and economic strength and social cohesion? I don't know what that is, but I think that's what they'll be thinking about.

**CB** In your August 24 column in the *New York Times* you wrote that a lot of Chinese have told you the recent clean air in Beijing should not just be a short-term goal during the Olympics. How do you think the increased environmental awareness competes with the goals of economic development that China has made a priority?

**TF** Well I think they compete, no question. There is certainly a GDP-ist approach that says GDP above all others, and there is another approach that says we have to bring them into better balance. Clearly those philosophies are in competition and remain in competition and I think the challenge for China is how can it reconcile them by understanding that green is not just a necessity, but a great economic opportunity.

**CB** Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with us and good luck with your new book *Hot, Flat and Crowded*.