

[Some recognition for Chinese free thinkers](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Saturday 9 October 2010



The Nobel Peace Prize has usually been a pretty naked political tool used to advance a centre-left agenda in international politics. It tends to be awarded to left-wing politicians like Al Gore, Martti Ahtisaari (Finland's Socialist former president), and, in a move that still gives nightmares to political satirists, Barack Obama after just nine months as president. Even though the prize is meaningless, it is still a useful media tool for the press coverage it generates.

That's why I'm glad that this year the Nobel committee has bucked this trend and [awarded the Prize](#) [3] to Chinese democracy dissident Liu Xiaobo. Liu was first jailed for his role in the pro-democracy Tiananmen Square protests, and he has lived his life under the fist of the Chinese state. He was sentenced to an eleven-year jail term on Christmas Day last year for organizing a pro-democracy manifesto, *Charter 08*, which called for free elections and the protection of private property in China. Liu gives hope to the 1.3 billion Chinese people who are still ruled by an oppressive socialist state. Giving him the Nobel Peace Prize is a commendable move by the Nobel committee, who have for once chosen to use their media influence for good.

Along similar lines, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has been [commissioned](#) [4] to use the Turbine Hall space at the Tate Modern, due to open on Tuesday October 12th. Newsnight did a very good piece on him on Thursday, which you can watch [here](#) [5]. Ai is famous for having designed the Beijing Olympics' Bird Nest stadium and for subsequently loudly denouncing the repressive Chinese regime in the run-up to the Olympics, and for the Chinese state's fatal errors before and after the Sichuan earthquake, for which he was beaten to the point of partial brain damage by police. Many modern artists are called brave, but few are beaten by police for what they say.

Many commentators breathlessly declared that the 2008 Beijing Olympics marked China's 'coming of age' as a mature state. This was wrong: China still has one of the world's most repressive governments, and its ability to marshal resources to put on a show for the West says little about the lives of its citizens. It is brave Chinese individuals like Liu Xiaobo and Ai Weiwei, who have the courage to speak out against government repression, that will really bring about China's coming of age in the 21st Century.

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