

# Forging Revolutionary Consciousness: Rhetorical and Discursive Strategies in Li Dazhao's "The Victory of the Common People"

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## Abstract

This paper examines the rhetorical and discursive strategies in Li Dazhao's 1918 manifesto, *The Victory of the Common People*, to demonstrate how language functions as a constitutive force in revolutionary mobilization. Moving beyond the conventional dichotomy of Li's ideological content versus literary style, this study develops an integrated framework combining Kenneth Burke's rhetoric with Critical Discourse Analysis. It analyzes three interconnected operations: the construction of a cognitive frame through metaphor and symbol that naturalizes revolution; the discursive interpellation of readers into revolutionary subject positions via pronouns and narrative; and the cultural activation of Marxist theory through a synthesis of Chinese and Western rhetorical forms. The paper argues that Li's unique efficacy lies in this masterful synthesis, which transformed abstract theory into a culturally resonant and emotionally compelling call to action. By revealing these mechanisms, the study contributes not only to the understanding of a pivotal text in modern Chinese political history but also to broader interdisciplinary discourse about the role of discourse in political change.

## Keywords

Li Dazhao, *The Victory of the Common People*, Rhetorical Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Revolutionary Discourse

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## 1. Introduction

At the heart of Li Dazhao's 1918 manifesto *The Victory of the Common People* lies a pivotal question for understanding revolutionary discourse: How does language secure commitment to a radical political vision? This study contends that

Li's enduring influence lies less in his ideological contributions than in his sophisticated synthesis of rhetorical forms, which transformed Marxist theory into a compelling moral narrative. While intellectual historians have thoroughly examined Li's philosophical development (Meisner, 1967; Dirlik, 1989) and literary scholars have noted his prose style (Gunn, 1991), a significant gap remains in understanding how these dimensions interact—how specific linguistic mechanisms produce persuasive power. This paper argues that Li's enduring influence stems from his masterful synthesis of metaphor, discursive positioning, and cultural resonance, which collectively constituted—rather than merely described—the revolutionary subject. To demonstrate this, the study develops an integrated rhetorical-discursive framework to analyze three interconnected persuasive operations in *The Victory of the Common People*.

Li Dazhao's unique position between traditions proved crucial to his rhetorical achievement. His trajectory from classically trained scholar at Peking University to co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party embodied the intellectual transformations of the May Fourth era (Chow, 1960). This dual formation enabled him to synthesize Western political theory with Chinese cultural idioms in unprecedented ways. Where contemporaries like Hu Shi advocated gradual reform through reasoned discourse and Chen Duxiu embraced confrontational critique, Li developed a third path—a rhetoric of activation that balanced intellectual rigor with emotional resonance. His distinctive approach represents what Kenneth Burke (1969) would identify as “symbolic action,” where language does not merely describe reality but constitutes new forms of collective identity. The manifesto was first published in *New Youth* (新青年) in 1918, a leading journal of the May Fourth Movement that reached intellectuals, students, and emerging labor activists. Its wide circulation and republication in pamphlets facilitated its role in real-world mobilization, allowing Li's rhetoric to traverse social boundaries and contribute to the formation of a revolutionary public sphere (Hauser, 2022).

This analysis integrates rhetorical theory (Burke, 1969; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) to examine three interconnected persuasive operations. To aid interdisciplinary readers, we clarify key terms: a terministic screen (Burke, 1969) refers to a linguistic filter that directs perception toward certain interpretations; an ideograph (McGee, 1980) denotes a culturally potent, condensed symbol that embodies ideological commitments; and bridge rhetoric (a term we introduce here) describes discourse that mediates between distinct cultural or social groups. First, it investigates how metaphorical and symbolic patterns reconstruct social reality, transforming “common people” from passive subjects into historical agents. Second, it analyzes discursive mechanisms—including pronominal strategy, narrative sequencing, and intertextual framing—that position readers within a teleological historical narrative. Third, it explores how these operations converge to produce what Charland (1987) identifies as “constitutive rhetoric,” discourse that brings into being the very revolutionary subject it purports to describe.

This tripartite analysis demonstrates how Li's manifesto achieved its remarkable cultural-political efficacy. By fusing classical Chinese rhetorical forms with modern revolutionary discourse, this rhetorical bridging created a "bridge rhetoric"—one capable of mediating between intellectual elites and emerging popular audiences. The study thus contributes not only to our understanding of a pivotal text in Chinese political history but also to broader theoretical conversations about how language functions as a catalyst for revolutionary change. Through systematic examination of Li's rhetorical artistry, we gain new insights into the power of discourse to transform abstract ideology into lived historical reality.

## 2. The Metaphorical Foundation: Forging a Revolutionary Worldview

Li Dazhao's *The Victory of the Common People* demonstrates how political discourse constructs reality through systematic deployment of metaphor and symbol. This section examines how the text's figurative language creates what Burke (1969) would term a "terministic screen"—a perceptual filter that directs attention toward specific interpretations while obscuring others. Through close analysis of key metaphorical patterns and symbolic oppositions, we can trace how Li's rhetoric transforms abstract historical theory into an emotionally compelling worldview that naturalizes revolutionary change and moralizes political action.

The essay's conceptual architecture rests on a fundamental metaphorical equation that permeates the text: "the common people" (庶民) as "workers" (工人). It is important to note that our analysis relies on translations that strive to balance semantic accuracy with rhetorical fidelity. Classical Chinese terms like "庶民" (common people) and "民主主义" (democracy) carry cultural and historical connotations that may shift in English. We have sought to preserve Li's parallel structures and moral tone, but readers should remain mindful of the inherent limitations in cross-linguistic rhetorical analysis. This ontological metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) accomplishes significant by mapping complex social relations onto tangible human identities. When Li declares that "今后世界的人人都成了庶民, 也就都成了工人" (from now on, everyone in the world becomes one of the common people, that is, becomes a worker), he accomplishes several rhetorical operations simultaneously. First, the metaphor constructs collective identity by erasing social distinctions under the universal category of "worker." Second, it dignifies labor as the essential human activity, making the political struggle for workers' rights appear synonymous with human liberation. Third, it naturalizes revolutionary transformation by presenting it as an inevitable progression toward this fundamental human condition.

This metaphorical foundation supports a broader symbolic system that moralizes political conflict. Li establishes a stark opposition between what he terms "大.....主义" (expansionism)\*<sup>1</sup> and "民主主义" (democracy). In his formulation,

<sup>1</sup>**\*Note on Terminology.** The translation of "大.....主义" as "expansionism" is grounded in Li's explicit contextualization of the term alongside "大日尔曼主义" (Pan-Germanism), "大斯拉夫主义"

“大.....主义就是专制的隐语，就是仗着自己的强力蹂躏他人欺压他人的主义” (expansionism is but another term for autocracy, it is the doctrine of trampling and oppressing others by relying on one’s own strength). This symbolic framing, following Barthes’s (1972) concept of mythical signification, transforms contingent political systems into archetypal struggles between good and evil. The symbolic cluster surrounding “democracy” becomes associated with light, liberation, and moral purity, while “expansionism” embodies darkness, oppression, and corruption.

The interaction between metaphor and symbol produces what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) would identify as “argumentative presence”—making ideological positions immediately visible and morally salient. When the metaphorical identification of people with workers combines with the symbolic opposition between democracy and autocracy, the resulting cognitive frame makes revolutionary victory appear both historically inevitable and ethically necessary. This synergistic effect exemplifies what Langer (2009) describes as “presentational symbolism,” where complex ideological content is condensed into emotionally resonant images that are experienced rather than analytically examined.

Li intensifies this figurative system through strategic hyperbole that amplifies social contrasts. His claim that “世间资本家占极少数，从事劳工的人占大多数” (in this world, capitalists constitute the smallest minority, while laborers constitute the overwhelming majority) employs numerical exaggeration to dramatize social injustice. This rhetorical amplification, following what Finlayson (2007) terms “ideological intensification,” serves to highlight structural imbalances that ordinary language might normalize. The hyperbolic contrast makes the existing social order appear not merely imperfect but fundamentally unnatural and unsustainable.

The temporal dimension of Li’s symbolic narrative further naturalizes revolutionary change. By framing history as a teleological progression from autocracy to democracy, from capitalism to laborism, Li creates what Frye (2020) would identify as an “apocalyptic pattern” that endows political struggle with cosmic significance. This narrative arc, moving from diagnosis of present ills to prophecy of future liberation, constructs what Jasinski (2001) calls “rhetorical teleology”—the representation of historical development as inevitably moving toward moral fulfillment. Within this symbolic universe, *The Victory of the Common People* appears not as one possible outcome among many, but as the necessary culmination of historical processes.

The rhetorical efficacy of this cognitive framework lies in its dual operation: it simultaneously constructs a comprehensible model of social reality and invests

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*(Pan-Slavism), and “大亚细亚主义” (Pan-Asianism)—all historical ideologies advocating territorial or political expansion. While this specific critique targets external expansionist doctrines, it is analytically valuable to note the structural resonance between such “great” ideologies and populist discourses: both employ grandiose, monolithic categories that suppress internal diversity while mobilizing against constructed external threats. This conceptual parallel, while not explicitly developed in Li’s text, enriches our understanding of how rhetorical patterns operate across different political contexts.*

that model with moral urgency. The metaphorical equations provide conceptual scaffolding for understanding complex historical transformations, while the symbolic oppositions supply the evaluative framework for judging them. Together, they produce what [Toulmin \(2003\)](#) would characterize as a compelling “warrant” for revolutionary action—one that appears grounded in both historical necessity and moral imperative.

This analysis of Li’s figurative language reveals how political discourse achieves persuasive power through the systematic orchestration of metaphor and symbol. By examining the specific mechanisms through which these rhetorical devices interact—how metaphors of social identity reinforce symbolic moral oppositions, and how both are intensified through hyperbole and embedded within teleological narratives—we gain crucial insight into how revolutionary texts construct the cognitive frameworks that make ideological commitment possible. The success of *The Victory of the Common People* derives substantially from this sophisticated figurative architecture, which transforms Marxist theory from abstract analysis into lived experiential reality.

### 3. Constructing the Subject Position: Discursive Design as Interpellation and Identification

Moving beyond cognitive framing through metaphor and symbol, Li Dazhao’s *The Victory of the Common People* demonstrates remarkable sophistication in its discursive construction of political subjectivity. This section examines how the text’s linguistic architecture—through pronominal strategy, narrative sequencing, polyphonic orchestration, and intertextual framing—positions readers as participants in the revolutionary project. Rather than merely persuading through argument, Li’s discourse performs what [Althusser \(2006\)](#) identifies as “interpellation,” hailing individuals into ideological subject positions where they recognize themselves as agents of historical transformation.

The manifesto’s rhetorical power begins with its strategic use of pronouns that construct collective identity. Li’s persistent deployment of the inclusive “we” (“我们”) functions as what [Burke \(1969\)](#) would characterize as a device of “identification,” linguistically dissolving the boundary between author and audience. This pronominal politics commences in the opening interrogation—“我们这几天庆祝战胜，实在是热闹得很。可是战胜的，究竟是哪一个？”—immediately establishing a community of interpreters facing a shared problematic ([Fairclough, 2013](#)). The progression from this inclusive “we” to the direct address “诸位” (everyone) in the climactic exhortation “快去作工呵!” marks a crucial discursive shift from collective reflection to individual mobilization. This pronominal movement enacts what [Charland \(1987\)](#) describes as “constitutive rhetoric,” where discourse does not merely address pre-existing subjects but brings into being the revolutionary agency it describes.

The text’s narrative structure further reinforces this process of subject formation through what [Jasinski \(2001\)](#) identifies as “rhetorical teleology.” Li organ-

izes temporal experience as an inevitable progression from oppressive past to liberated future, framing revolutionary transformation as both historical necessity and moral destiny. This temporal framing operates through what Bakhtin (2010) would term a “chronotope”—a time-space configuration that gives narrative shape to historical process. The manifesto moves systematically from diagnosing the failures of “expansionism” to proclaiming the victory of democracy, constructing a narrative arc in which readers occupy the pivotal position between what was and what must be.

Polyphonic orchestration constitutes a further pivotal dimension of Li’s discursive strategy. The text integrates multiple voices—analytical, moral, and hortatory—into what Hauser (2022) would characterize as a “rhetorical ecology.” The analytical voice exposes the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation, the moral voice condemns social injustice, and the exhortatory voice calls readers to revolutionary action. This heteroglossic quality (Bakhtin, 2010) enables the text to address diverse audiences simultaneously, connecting intellectual critique with emotional mobilization. The interweaving of these discursive registers creates a comprehensive subject position where readers become simultaneously analysts of social conditions, judges of moral worth, and actors in historical drama.

The manifesto’s intertextual framework anchors its authority through strategic invocation of historical precedents. Li’s references to the French and Russian revolutions function as what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) term “argument by example,” establishing analogical continuity between past struggles and present possibilities. More significantly, this intertextual positioning operates as what Kristeva (1980) would identify as “transposition”—the transformation of historical events into semiotic resources that authorize contemporary action. By situating readers within this revolutionary lineage, Li’s discourse performs a temporal form of interpellation: readers are summoned not merely as witnesses to history but as inheritors of a liberatory tradition.

This sophisticated discursive design finds its culmination in what McGee (1980) would term the “ideographic” function of key terms like “victory,” “democracy,” and “labor.” These condensed symbols fuse ideological abstraction with political mobilization, operating as linguistic sites where collective identity and historical purpose converge. Through strategic repetition and variation, these ideographs transform political concepts into lived realities, collapsing the distinction between describing revolutionary change and enacting it.

The integration of these discursive strategies reveals Li’s profound understanding of how language constitutes political reality. His manifesto moves readers systematically through stages of identification, analysis, moral judgment, and activation. The pronominal shifts establish solidarity, the narrative sequencing constructs historical agency, the polyphonic layering enables multiple forms of engagement, and the intertextual references secure legitimacy. Together, these operations construct what Emeren (2010) would identify as “strategic maneuvering”—a sophisticated balancing of rational argumentation with emotional and ethical

appeal.

In this light, *The Victory of the Common People* exemplifies how revolutionary discourse transcends mere persuasion to become what [Burke \(1969\)](#) would call “symbolic action”—language that shapes human motives and collective purpose. Li’s discursive architecture demonstrates that political transformation requires not only ideological clarity but also the linguistic means through which individuals come to recognize themselves as historical agents. The manifesto’s enduring significance lies precisely in this sophisticated understanding of how discourse operates as a mechanism of subject formation—transforming readers from observers of history into its makers.

#### 4. From Rhetoric to Reality: The Constitutive Practice of Cultural-Political Discourse

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Li Dazhao’s *The Victory of the Common People* achieves its distinctive historical significance not merely through individual rhetorical devices but through their masterful synthesis into a coherent cultural-political practice. This final analytical dimension examines how Li’s rhetorical strategies transcended textual persuasion to become active forces in the May Fourth intellectual landscape. By situating Li’s discourse within its specific historical moment and comparing it with contemporary political writing, we can understand how his rhetorical synthesis transformed Marxist theory into a culturally resonant and mobilizing force that addressed the profound epistemological crisis of post-World War I China.

The unique efficacy of Li’s manifesto emerges clearly when contrasted with other prominent May Fourth intellectuals. Where Hu Shi advocated gradual reform through what he termed “more study of problems, less talk of isms,” emphasizing pragmatic solutions through clear, rational exposition, and Chen Duxiu embraced militant iconoclasm through direct confrontation, Li developed a distinctive third path. His rhetoric fused analytical depth with emotional invocation, creating what [Burke \(1969\)](#) would characterize as “symbolic action” that united cognitive understanding with moral commitment. This synthesis enabled Li’s discourse to achieve a level of ideological resonance that neither purely intellectual nor purely polemical approaches could match, addressing what [Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca \(1969\)](#) identify as the need for arguments that engage both “the universal audience” of reason and “the particular audience” of specific historical actors.

Li’s distinctive achievement lies in his creative adaptation of traditional Chinese rhetorical forms to modern political purposes. His prose maintained the moral earnestness and rhythmic cadence characteristic of classical Chinese writing while

incorporating the argumentative rigor and dialogic energy of Western revolutionary discourse. This hybrid approach is exemplified in his declarative statement “民主主义战胜，就是庶民的胜利” (The victory of democracy is *The Victory of the Common People*), where classical parallel structure conveys modern political content. This rhetorical bridging created what might be termed a “cognitive-cultural interface” that rendered unfamiliar Marxist concepts intelligible through familiar Chinese cultural patterns. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrate through conceptual metaphor theory, such framing allows new ideas to be understood through existing cognitive schemas, making ideological transformation feel less like cultural rupture and more like moral recovery.

The manifesto’s capacity to transform political discourse into shared emotional experience represents another crucial dimension of its cultural work. McGee’s (1980) concept of the “ideograph” illuminates how Li’s deployment of terms like “victory,” “democracy,” and “labor” condensed complex ideological commitments into potent cultural symbols. Unlike Hu Shi’s carefully qualified academic language or Chen Duxiu’s confrontational polemics, Li’s diction achieved simultaneity of cognition and affect: understanding became inseparable from feeling. This rhetorical approach enabled his language to circulate across educational and class boundaries, addressing both intellectuals and emerging labor movements in terms that were culturally legitimate and emotionally compelling.

The historical timing of Li’s intervention proved crucial to its effectiveness. In the aftermath of World War I, when the moral authority of Western liberalism had been severely compromised, Chinese intellectuals faced what might be termed an epistemological crisis—a profound loss of faith in existing political models. Li’s rhetoric addressed this crisis by framing revolution not as destructive rupture but as moral awakening and historical continuity. His repeated invocation of “我们” (we) created what Burke (1969) would identify as a new “terministic screen” that transformed individual disillusionment into collective purpose. This rhetorical reframing functioned as a form of cultural therapy, restoring coherence to a fractured intellectual community by aligning personal anxiety with historical mission.

The comparative dimension reveals Li’s distinctive contribution to modern Chinese political discourse. While Hu Shi’s rhetoric ultimately appealed to intellectual elites through its scholarly precision, and Chen Duxiu’s writing often polarized audiences through its uncompromising militancy, Li developed a stance of “inclusive militance”—a rhetorical stance that maintained revolutionary urgency while creating space for diverse participation. His strategic use of what Eemeren (2010) identifies as “argumentative maneuvering” enabled him to balance conviction with invitation, moral seriousness with accessibility, creating a discursive style capable of both instructing and inspiring across social divisions.

In the broader trajectory of twentieth-century Chinese political culture, Li’s rhetorical synthesis established an influential prototype. The integration of moral persuasion, historical narration, and collective identification that characterizes *The Victory of the Common People* reappears in transformed iterations through-

out subsequent revolutionary discourse. The durability of what McGee (1980) would term Li's "ideographs"—particularly his reconceptualization of "the people" as historical agents—demonstrates how politically effective rhetoric, once crystallized into cultural symbols, persists as a generative resource across changing historical contexts.

Ultimately, Li Dazhao's manifesto demonstrates that rhetorical artistry, when fully integrated with cultural understanding and political purpose, can function as what Charland (1987) would call "constitutive practice"—not merely describing social reality but actively transforming it. By uniting aesthetic discipline with ethical vision, Li transformed the art of persuasion into a practice of historical world-making. His achievement reminds us that politically significant rhetoric operates not through stylistic ornamentation alone, but through the strategic synthesis of cultural resources, historical understanding, and moral imagination—a lesson that transcends its specific historical moment to illuminate the enduring relationship between language and social change.

## 5. Conclusion

Avoid the stilted expression, "One of us (R. B. G.) thanks..." Instead, try "R. B. G. thanks". Do NOT put sponsor acknowledgements in the unnumbered footnote on the first page, but at here.

Through a systematic rhetorical and discursive analysis, this study has demonstrated that language functioned not merely as an instrument of expression but as a constitutive force in Li Dazhao's revolutionary thought. *The Victory of the Common People* exemplifies how political discourse achieves transformative power through the sophisticated integration of three interconnected rhetorical operations: the cognitive reframing of social reality through metaphor and symbol, the construction of revolutionary subjectivity through discursive positioning, and the cultural activation of political ideology through strategic synthesis. Li's manifesto succeeds precisely because it operates simultaneously on intellectual, moral, and emotional registers, making Marxist theory appear not as foreign doctrine but as the logical culmination of both historical progress and ethical necessity.

By applying an integrated rhetorical-discursive framework, this study moves beyond the conventional separation of Li's "thought" from his "style." It demonstrates that his rhetoric was the very medium through which revolutionary ideology became existentially meaningful and politically actionable. This approach offers a model for analyzing political texts that acknowledges the constitutive power of language. The significance of this research extends beyond understanding a single text to illuminate broader patterns in the formation of modern Chinese political discourse. Firstly, it reveals how Chinese intellectuals creatively synthesized Western political thought with indigenous rhetorical traditions, developing a distinctive mode of political communication that maintained cultural continuity while enabling ideological innovation. Li's adaptation of classical Chinese rhetorical patterns to express revolutionary content represents a crucial moment in the

vernacularization or indigenization of modern political theory in China.

Secondly, this study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the analytical value of integrating rhetorical theory with critical discourse analysis. This integrated approach enables scholars to trace how political language operates across multiple dimensions—from conceptual metaphors that reshape understanding to discursive strategies that construct identity to cultural practices that enable mobilization. Future research might productively apply this framework to other pivotal texts in the Chinese revolutionary tradition or to comparative analysis of political discourse across different cultural contexts.

Finally, this investigation offers historical insight with contemporary relevance. In an era of renewed attention to political language and its power to shape public consciousness, Li Dazhao's manifesto reminds us that enduring political change requires not just compelling ideas but the linguistic means to make those ideas resonate within specific cultural frameworks. His achievement demonstrates how politically significant discourse bridges the gap between abstract theory and lived experience, between intellectual critique and popular mobilization.

While this study offers a detailed rhetorical anatomy of a pivotal text, its focus on a single manifesto necessarily limits generalizability. Future research could productively extend this framework through comparative analysis—for instance, examining Chen Duxiu's polemics or Qu Qiubai's popularizations—to trace the evolution of revolutionary discourse across authors and periods. In the final analysis, *The Victory of the Common People* stands as a powerful testament to language's world-making capacity. Li Dazhao's rhetorical artistry enabled him to transform political theory into historical force, using words not merely to describe revolutionary change but to set it in motion. Through understanding how his text achieves this remarkable synthesis, we gain not only deeper insight into a crucial moment in China's modern transformation but also a more nuanced appreciation of language's enduring power to shape human destiny across different historical and cultural contexts.

## Finding

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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