Revolution from 360 Feet Below: Form and Ideology in the P’yŏngyang Metro

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Among the deepest subway systems in the world, the P’yŏngyang Metro is marked by an ostensible disjunction with the space of the North Korean capital above it. Rather than referencing street names or landmarks above ground, each of the seventeen stations on the metro is named after and designed according to a revolutionary theme, ranging from “victory” to “reunification.” Furthermore, the metro stations contain no maps of P’yŏngyang, and city maps do not indicate the locations of the metro stations. This essay draws on visual evidence and North Korean textual sources in order to demonstrate that the apparent bifurcation of the metro and the city space stems from the North Korean state’s chuch’è ideology, which holds that ideas, rather than material conditions, determine reality. I demonstrate how the architectural design and mosaic murals of the metro stations evidence an attempt to cast the space of the metro as a realm of revolutionary thought detached from the material world above ground. Beyond merely reflecting the ideology of the state, however, the artistic forms comprising the metro also give rise to aesthetic effects that are irreducible to the narrative content signaled by the themes of the stations, thereby complicating understandings of how so-called totalitarian art operates in relation to the ideological context in which it is produced.

Keywords: Chuch’è ideology, North Korean art, Pyŏngyang Metro, Socialist realism, Totalitarian aesthetics