

Beyond the Myth of Idealism: North Korea's Marxist-Leninist Materialism and Its Place in the Global Intellectual History of the Cold War*

Thomas Stock

According to the conventional understanding, by the 1980s North Korean ideology had little to do with Marxism-Leninism, not to mention Marxist-Leninist materialism. Scholars typically highlight the ideology's uniqueness and liken its philosophical worldview to an idealism. From the perspective of intellectual history, the resultant image resembles a disconnect between North Korean ideology and intellectual developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. This study aims to begin a process of reconnecting these locales into a global intellectual history by demonstrating the deep-seated Marxist-Leninist materialism inherent in North Korean ideology. Through a careful examination of political dictionaries, theoretical journals, and archival documents, this study offers the following reevaluation of North Korean ideology: Even in the 1980s, at the height of North Korean ideology's particularity during the Cold War, Marxist-Leninist materialism remained a fundamental component, crucial to the rationalization of human willpower and North Korea's leadership conception.

Keywords: North Korea, Ideology, Chuch'e, Marxism-Leninism, Cold War

*This work was supported by the Laboratory Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2019-LAB-1250001).

Thomas Stock (thostock@ucla.edu) is a Humboldt Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at Heidelberg University, Germany

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 33, no. 1 (June 2020): 215–242.

© 2020 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies