

Musan is a county and county seat in North Hamgyong Province. Its population at the last official census in 2008 was 123,721. It has a 2020 estimated population of 136,000.

Musan County contains one town, the eponymous Musan, six worker's districts, and fifteen villages. For the purpose of this report, I will focus on the town and the three closest worker's districts as they constitute the main urban core.

Musan lies on the Chinese border (the Tumen River) and is bisected by the Songchonsu River which separates the city from the Musan Iron Mine.

I haven't been able to find too much information about the city's history and there are no obvious ancient sites, but the name of Musan comes from 1438 and a garrison fort was built in the area. There is no clear evidence of archaeological remains visible from satellite. The city is also found on the 1861 *Daedongyeojido*, an important wood block-print map of Korea that is listed as Korea Treasure No. 1581 by South Korea. There have been a number of territorial realignments and renaming districts over the centuries, but the current status of Musan has been stable since 1990.

Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerrillas took over the area in 1939. The entire Chinese border area remained largely in North Korean control during the Korean War, so the war was mostly limited to the air war and no great battles were fought around the town.

Economy

The economy of Musan is dominated by the large [Musan Iron Mine](#). The mountains around Musan contain an estimated 7 billion tonnes of iron ore, with at least 1.3 billion tonnes being economically recoverable with current technology. This makes it one of the largest iron reserves in northeast Asia. The mine also provides smaller amounts of titanium and other associated minerals.

Large scale mining operations began in 1935 by the Mitsubishi Mining Co. Initial capacity was expected to be 500,000 metric tonnes annually. Interestingly, a lot of the mining equipment used during this time

was imported from the United States. The capacity was expanded in 1940 to 1 million tonnes and operated at a high level throughout the years of Kim Il Sung after independence.

More recently, the mine has been beset by many problems that stem from the country's economic collapse in the 1990s and have been exacerbated by equipment and fuel shortages and recurrent flooding. Although, prior to increased sanctions in 2017, the mine was still earning North Korea \$330 million each year from exported minerals.

Since then, reports show the mine may only be working at half capacity in normal times but even that has substantially declined as a result of North Korea's COVID-19 measures which included closing the Sino-DPRK border.

Despite Musan's position on the border, there is no border crossing. So, any international trade has to take place elsewhere, with Musan simply being the central production site.

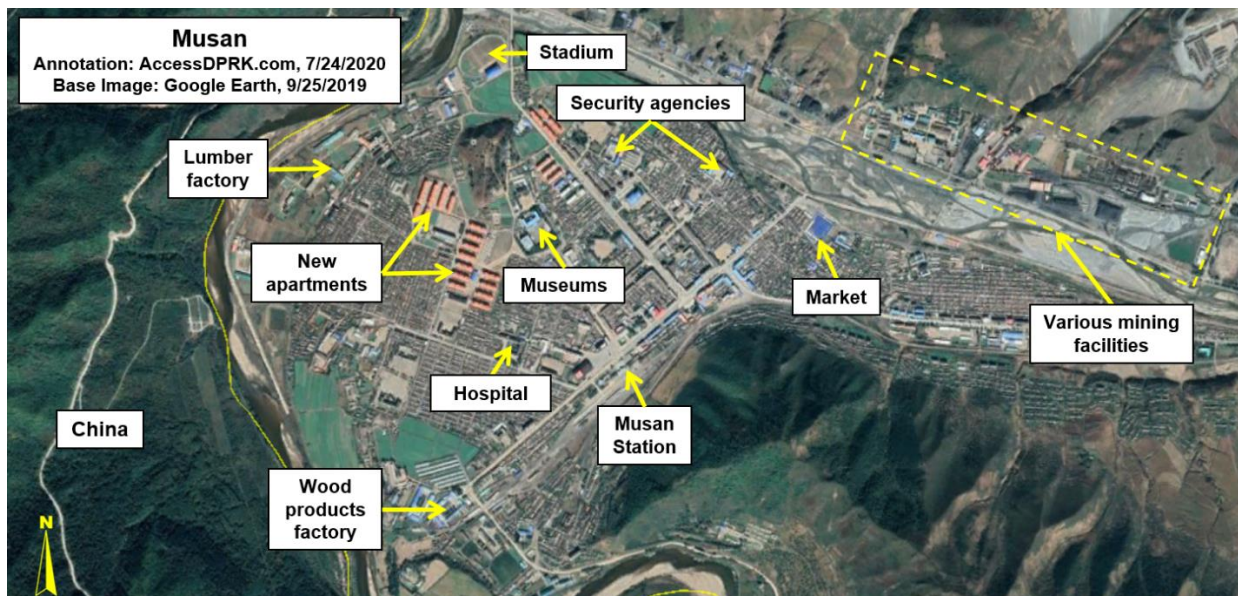
Musan's next largest economic sector is in lumber. Lumber is a major economic sector in the northern regions of the country. Musan has at least two wood product-related factories. The general domestic economy (small hotels, restaurants, etc.) rounds out the bulk of the city's economy.

Defense

The DPRK-Sino border region is the least defended of North Korea and that applies to Musan. There are no anti-aircraft batteries or directly associated army bases. It is covered only by surface-to-air missile batteries stationed along the coast. At 70 and 100 km away from the batteries, Musan is near the limit of their coverage range.

Civilian "defense" is carried out by the various state security ministries. 38 North identified the locations of the State Security Ministry and the Social Security Ministry (formerly People's Security). I have these two marked on the image provided below.

General changes



Prior to flooding in 2016 as the result of Typhoon Lionrock, the city's market occupied 7,740 square meters. The flooding destroyed some 2/3rds of the market. It was later rebuilt in the same site along the Songchonsu River and occupies ~4,370 sq. m.

The flood and resulting mudslides damaged or destroyed hundreds of homes in the Namsan and Changryol worker districts. Along with the damage elsewhere, a large building program was initiated and at least 40 new apartment buildings and 270 other housing units were constructed throughout the city.

The Children's Driving Park wasn't completed until late 2019, making it one of the most recent ones to have been built. Located next to several new apartments, it lies within sight of the Musan Youth Park (a small hill in the center of town) and the Kim Il Sung and Revolutionary History museums.

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--Jacob Bogle, July 24, 2020 (edited March 14, 2022)

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