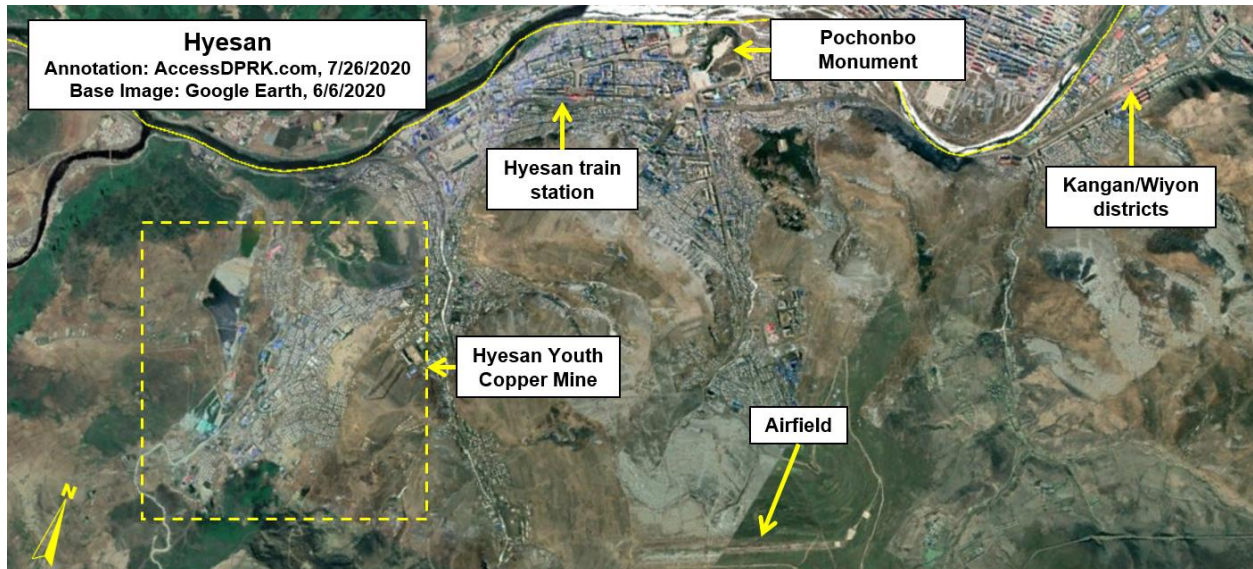


Hyesan is the provincial capital of Ryanggang Province and shares a border with China along the Yalu River. The 2008 census gave a population of 192,680 but the estimated population for 2020 is 215,800.



The city dates back at least 500 years as an important regional town, and at least three border forts exist west of the city along the Yalu. However, only a small portion of the city's defensive walls remain. Most of the city has been rebuilt since the division of Korea and the regime's mark can be seen everywhere.

The city has a compact core centered around the Pochonbo Victory Memorial which occupies the entire top of a hill in the center of town. The monument commemorates a 1937 battle against the Japanese. From the hill radiate other examples of the regime. The Kim Il Sung Revolutionary Museum and large bronze statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il stand at the foot of the hill.

From there, Hyesan spreads out east and west, squeezed between the Yalu River and the mountains that cover nearly all of the province. As a provincial capital, multiple universities and small industrial sites exist like the Hyesan University of Education and Hyesan University of Medicine, and the Hyesan Brewery and Hyesan Paper Mill. These are facilities common to all provincial capitals.

According to defector Yeonmi Park (who lived in Hyesan), a small forced-labor camp exists near the copper mine. I haven't been able to find the exact location of it but there is a candidate site at 41°21'53.39"N 128°10'1.46"E.

Economy

Hyesan has a fairly mixed economy with lumber, mining, and trade (legal and illegal) all playing a large role. The city is also tied into the Mt. Paektu tourism industry as the only road and rail line to the Mt. Paektu/Samjiyon area branch off from Hyesan.

The province is generally the coldest in North Korea and that limits the kinds of agriculture that can take place. Potatoes are one of the major crops and the plains around Taehongdan (to the north) have been deforested and are covered with thousands of hectares of potato farms.

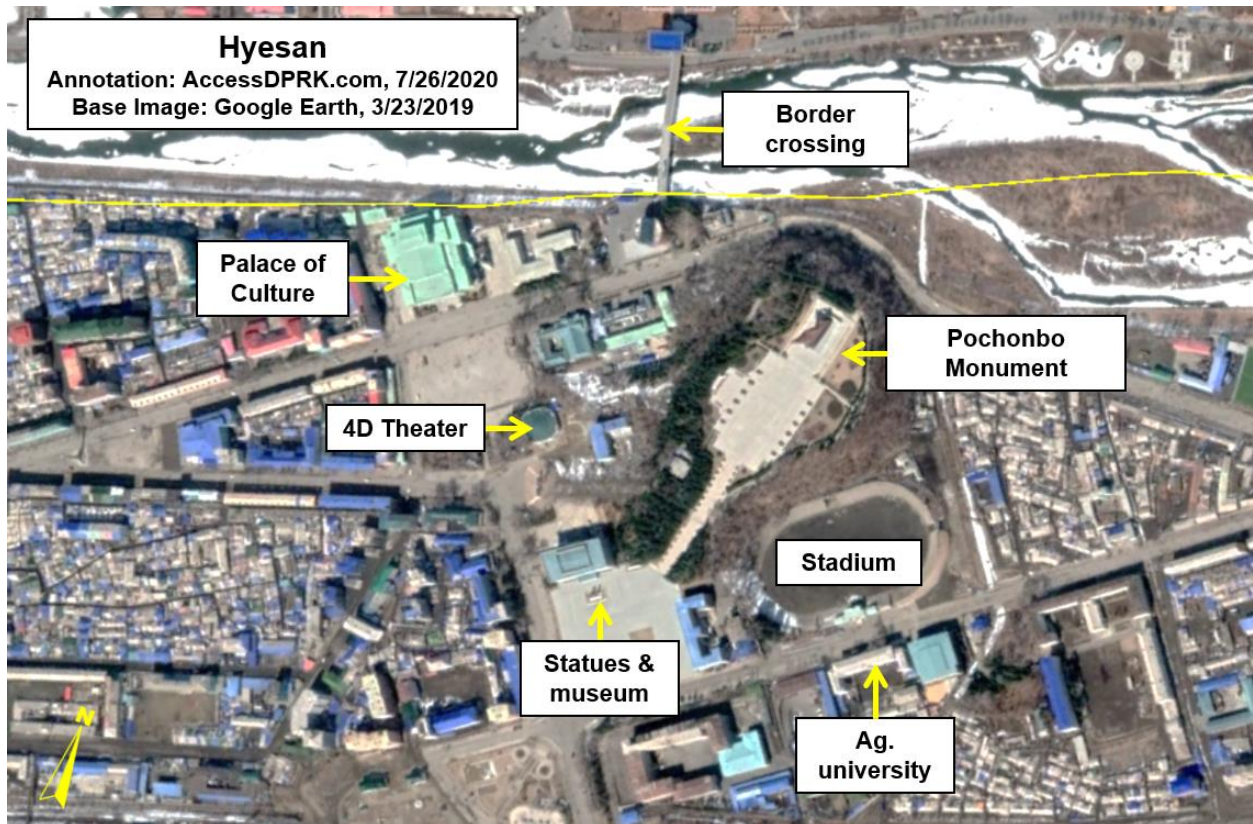
Two of the largest individual sites in Hyesan are the Hyesan Youth Copper Mine and the Samsu Hydroelectric Dam (which is largely responsible for providing electricity to the mine).

The dam, located 10 km from downtown, was built in 2004-2007 but has never been able to generate electricity to its installed capacity. Geologic problems with the dam and reservoir have also led to cracks forming and water flooding the copper mine. This has meant that the mine hasn't been able to operate to capacity with both due to flooding *and* from a lack of electricity. A very visible example of the geologic problems the dam has caused in a large landslide (41°19'21.19"N 128°12'7.22"E) that developed after the reservoir had been filled. Attempts to fix the mine has cost at least \$8.2 million.

As for the mine, the site was first explored in the 1960s and it is estimated to hold at 80% of North Korea's copper reserves. The mine has a theoretical extraction capacity of 50,000-70,000 tonnes of ore concentrate but only manages to produce 10,000-20,000 tonnes annually. In 2011 the Hyesan-China Joint Venture Mineral Company [began operating](#) the mine, securing China 5,000 tonnes of concentrate annually. According to the agreement, China now owns 51% of the mine. There are lots of variables to consider, but this deal could be providing North Korea with at least \$15 million a year.

The city has at least four markets and a direct road link to China. The border crossing facilities were expanded in 2015-2016. Illegal trade and human movement are also key components to the economy. As a result, the border is heavily guarded and has at least 30 guard posts along a 12 km stretch to catch smugglers and defectors. Kim Jong Un has given special attention to sealing off the border and has built several additional guard posts and installed electronic measures to prevent or track cross-border communication.

General changes



Along with the border crossing improvements, a small “4D” theater was also constructed. However, the largest changes have occurred in connection to the reconstruction of the city of Samjiyon and Mt. Paektu area. Concentrated in the Kangan-dong/Wiyon-dong section of Hyesan (along the north-northeast) the Wiyon train station was completely rebuilt and expanded in 2017, and over a dozen new apartment blocks were built as part of the overall effort to rebuild the city of Samjiyon and improve transportation to the Mt. Paektu region.

Earlier signs of a planned regional upgrade included the construction of 40 km of new road heading toward Samjiyon and the decommissioning of 25 km of the original rail line in the early 2000s. Since then, a new rail line has been built and numerous small train stations constructed to connect the various villages to the transportation system.

The Samsu Reservoir is also now being used in the creation of North Korea’s largest hydroelectric project, the [Tanchon Hydroelectric Power Station](#).

Military

Hyesan is one of the few examples of a border city having a substantial number of military sites. Within the immediate area are 10 anti-aircraft batteries and the city is home to the Hyesan Airfield, one of only four airfields in the entire province.

Korean People’s Army VI Corps is responsible for the defense of Ryanggang and North Hamgyong provinces. Hyesan’s airfield is under the command of the 8th Air Division (stationed in Orang) but is used for both military and civilian purposes.

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--Jacob Bogle, July 26, 2020 (edited March 6, 2022)

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