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April 2020, Part I



Kyongwon is a county seat in North Hamgyong Province and has a 2020 estimated population of 113,946. From 1977 to 2005, it was called *Saebyo*.

Many currently populated places do have very long histories; however, like in Europe, many have also experienced rapid, government-directed growth and would not have been considered an important location in the past. So while there are many examples of historic fortifications throughout North Korea (read more [here](#)), not every town would necessarily have had them. Having said that, about 4 km to the west is a fortified structure of some kind. It could be the original site of Kyongwon (several towns have been reestablished away from their historic centers) or it could be one of dozens of border forts that date to the Goryeo and Joseon periods. Its exact coordinates are 42°48'56.94"N 130° 9'9.14"E and the wall would have run approx. 2.2 km and formed a roughly rectangular shape.

The region was [once populated](#) by the Yeojin Tribe (pre-14th century), but this area was incorporated into the Korean kingdom of Goryeo in the late 14th century, with the region being administered as *Gyeongwonbu* starting in 1398. The current administrative boundaries of Kyongwon were established in 1958.

Design & Economy

Kyongwon's civic layout is "spread out", as I talked about in my city planning [article](#). The Tower of Immortality and joint murals of the Kim's are located by the train station, the Juche study hall is across from the stadium, and city hall appears to be a large square building to the north of the stadium. The oldest part of the town would be the train station and rail line (having been constructed during the Japanese occupation), but the current station building would date to after the Korean War.

Construction of the stadium actually began around 2013 but most work has been carried out since 2017. It is still not finished.

The main streets of Kyongwon follow a grid pattern and wrap around the neighborhoods, but the neighborhoods themselves lack vehicle-appropriate streets and can only accommodate foot/bike traffic. Other than the traditional Korean “harmonica house” style, every building that I saw except one follows more modern architectural styles. This is repeated across the country and reflects a lack of architectural development in rural areas. Even newly constructed buildings will often follow the same decades-old styles except in major cities or locations undergoing a modernization program.

A new neighborhood was constructed to the east of the train station in 2017 with 110 new housing units that can accommodate 220 families.

The one modern but traditional appearing building in town is a noodle restaurant (marked on the map above). That design can be used as a decent guide to finding restaurants (at least ones serving traditional foods) as they are often built in more historic architectural styles. Kyongwon also has a moderately-sized hospital located at 42°48'31.77"N 130°12'1.41"E and at least one hotel at 42°48'39.61"N 130°12'18.72"E.

The city’s primary economy relies on agriculture as it has no industrial sector, and cross-border trade with China is very limited. Evidence for limited direct trade with China can be seen in the almost total lack of visible vehicle traffic across the Ryudasom border crossing to the south. However, the local market is ~7,160 sq. m. in size and the amount of active stall space being used has grown by about 345% since 2011.

Military

There are no identified military installations nearby. The closest site is an anti-aircraft artillery battery in Onsong 20 km away.

***Free online access has been granted by the patron. This city brief has been edited for tone, context, and added references when needed.**

--Jacob Bogle, April 22, 2020 (edited June 2021)

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