

Kapsan is a county seat in Ryanggang Province with a 2021 estimated population of 75,340 (based on 0.5% annual growth since the last census in 2008). Kapsan is located at the edge of the Kaema Plateau, from there the land tilts toward the north and is drained by the Hochon River into the Yalu River. The Hochon is the most important river in the province after the Yalu. It feeds the Samsu Hydroelectric Dam reservoir and is now the source river for the major [Tanchon Hydroelectric Project](#).

The area was first incorporated into Goguryeo (37 BC-668 AD). After Goguryeo's fall, the area belonged to the Chinese Tang Dynasty. It wouldn't become independent Korean territory again until the late 13th century. During both the Joseon and DPRK eras, the region has been used to resettle exiles and less desirable people. The exact time of Kapsan's founding is unknown, but it is attested to by 1391.

An unidentified hillfort exists at 41.078109° 128.315159°. The style of the fort is not typical for post-13th century Korean designs, so it was likely built much earlier. There is, however, a more "modern" fort (post 13th century) three km east at 41.082564° 128.352619°. It is at great risk of disappearing.

Within the town, there is a remaining city gate (41.086310° 128.293579°) that was constructed ca. 1448.

The area was a base for anti-Japanese fighting including for the "Manchurian Faction" of which Kim Il Sung was a member. Kapsan County reached its present administrative form in 1954 when it became part of Ryanggang Province.

Economy

Due to the mountainous topography and short summers, agriculture is limited but plays a large role in Kapsan's small economy. Much of the agricultural land is situated on hillsides and in the floodplains of narrow river valleys. Timber is another major component as over 70% of the county is forested. Some small mines also exist extracting coal and copper.

Like all county seats, small foodstuff factories exist along with a restaurant, several schools, a medical clinic, a market (that covers 2,800 sq. m.), and several government buildings in the town's core.

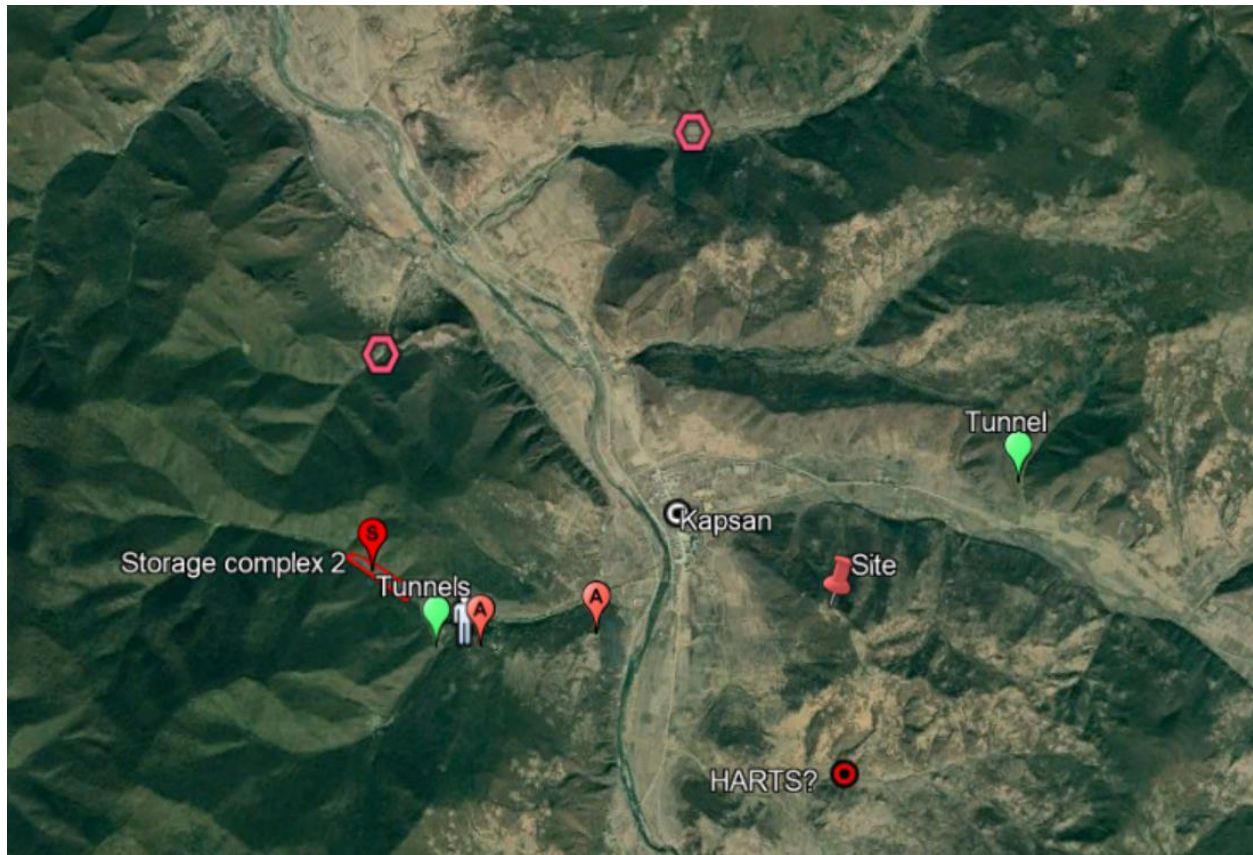
The tunnel work required to redirect water from the Hochon River to the Tanchon Hydroelectric Plant, 36 km to the south, likely provided some temporary employment to Kapsan residents from 2017-2020.

The town is not well connected to country's cellular network, but two cell towers were built prior to 2013 (likely in 2011) and provides at least basic communications for a small number of local cell phone users.

Very little change has been noted in recent years. Of the change that has occurred, three monuments were built in 2018 in the nearby village of Namphyong-ri, mines around the 5.1 Worker's District (41.277050° 128.292440°) have shown continued expansion, and a small group of houses was built in 2016. Within the town of Kapsan itself, the only change I could find is that the marketplace was moved sometime between 2014 and 2018, and a Children's Driving Park was constructed in a schoolyard.

[Report continues below]

Military



Kapsan military sites (active only) based on the 2021 AccessDPRK Map.

Along the Hochon River, between the Hwangsuon Airbase (47 km south) and Hyesan (35 km north), Kapsan has the largest concentration of military sites. Across the river is a military base protected by two air defense sites that has a military storage facility (including underground sites), there are two potential military sites downriver (pink hexagons), there is another storage complex here 41.075642° 128.481374° , and two other sets of tunnels nearby.

Near the ancient hillfort is an unidentified site (41.082689° 128.311101°) that may serve as a reserve radar facility or fire control site.

The military units within Ryanggang largely serve as reserve forces and aid in logistics as no direct attack could come from the north unless China decided to invade.

***Originally created for An AccessDPRK Patreon supporter. 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, originally published May 2021 (updated July 18, 2022)

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