

**Rainer Dormels (2014)**

**Profiles of the cities of DPR Korea – Rason**

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## IV.2.19. Rason

### City in the northeast corner of the DPR Korea

Rason is situated near the East Sea on the border of the DPRK to China and Russia and was created as a merger of Rajin-si with Sonbong-kun to Rajin-Songbong-si in 1993. In 2000 Rajin-Sonbong was renamed Rason. In the period of Japanese rule over Korea, ports were created in Rajin and Sonbong. Rajin-Songbong Free Economic and Trade Zone was proclaimed in December 1991 and was the first free trade zone of the DPR Korea. Since the late 2000s increased activities to improve the infrastructure in the city of Rason have been observed, which are connected to investments from China and Russia.

**Table Rason-I.** Basic data

Population	196,954 (Rank 18)
Area	754 km <sup>2</sup> (Rank 9)
Population density	261 l./km <sup>2</sup> (Rank 22)
Administrative units	21 <i>dong</i> /13 <i>ri</i> (48%) (Rank 24)
"Urban" population/"rural" population	80.4%/19.6% (Rank 16)

Sonbong, which was still called Unggi until 1981, is the northernmost port, which has developed 25 km south of the Tumen mouth in Songbon Bay, which is a part of Josan Bay. Since it is a sunken bay, the water is deep. The bay is surrounded in the East, North and West by mountains and faces the sea in the South. Originally it was a remote village. The port operated since 1909, but initially had only local significance (Saitschikow 1958, 268). The opening of the port to international trade in 1912 and the opening of the Tumen line (Hoeryong-Unggi) in 1933 initiated a rapid development. Together with Chongjin, the Unggi port should serve the transport between Japan and Northeast China. In 1926 an extensive remodeling work on the port took place. For a further expansion of the ports, the port bays of Chongjin and Unggi proved to be both too small. A new port base for the Japanese was thus created in 1932 in Rajin Bay, 35 km south of the mouth of the Tumen (Saitschikow 1958, 269).

Rajin is surrounded in the East, North and West on three sides by mountains. In front of the city, there are the two islands, Taecho-do and Socho-do, thus forming a natural wharf. The inside of the bay is wide, the water deep and despite its northern location, the bay does not freeze in winter, so that a natural port was able to be built here. After the construction of the port, the population increased rapidly, and the city experienced an amazing development (Kang Sök-o 1984, 339). At the same time Rajin also became the location of one of the major Japanese naval bases in North Korea close to Soviet border (Saitschikow 1958, 269).

After the Korean War Rajin lost its function as a trading port and was used as a naval port, as location for shipyards and as a fishing base. The construction of the Sŭngri Chemical Complex in 1968 changed the industrial structure of the town radically. Also Unggi, which had developed at the end of the period of Japanese occupation as a gateway to North Manchuria, lost these conditions as a result of the Second World War and the hinterland was limited to the catchment area of the Tumen. The development of the ports of Chongjin and Rajin led to stagnation too.

The northern foothills of the Hamgyong mountain range run north of the city in northwestern direction. Narrow, long plains are between the mountains and the coast, in which Rajin and Sonbong have developed. The rivers are thus very short, apart from the border river in the north, the Tumen. Important mountains are the Songjin-san (1.146 m), the Poroji-bong (819 m) and Kwangdae-tök (638 m) near Sonbong. The coast has several bays, of which the Josan Bay and the Rajin-bay are the most important. From the offshore islands, Taecho-do is the largest with an area of approximately 4.3 km<sup>2</sup>.

**Table Rason-II.** Climate values

Annual average	January temperature	August temperature	Precipitation
7.0°C (25)	-7.3°C (19)	21.2°C (25)	793.5 mm (21)

Because of the sea and the relatively small built-up urban area, the climate of this city is greatly influenced by the sea. In summer and spring it is often very foggy and in winter, a strong northwest wind blows.

Under Japanese rule a Japanese military base was situated in Rajin, from where agricultural products were transported to Japan. Especially a lot of millet was cultivated. Dry farming was used on more than 85% of the cultivatable land in the urban area. An important product is potatoes. The livestock sector plays an important role as well. Milk or milk products such as butter are famous products of Rason. The fishing industry is of great

importance. Fishery stations emerged in Rajin and Sonbong.

### Change in the economic structure by the construction of Sŭngri Chemical Complex

Important industrial sectors of Rason are the chemical industry (processing of crude oil), energy production, the mechanical engineering (ship repairs, production of agricultural machinery) and wood processing (production of railway sleepers). But also food, medicine, clothing, paper, furniture, cement and other products are produced in Rason.

In 1970, the fishing took another 60% of the production of the industry in Rajin. This changed after the Sŭngri Chemical Complex and the June 16th Thermal Power Station were built. In 1980, the chemical industry took up for 63% (1983: 67.5%) and the energy sector accounted for 12% (1983: 12%). The share of the fishery fell to 12.4% (1980) and 9.4% (1983) (KJY-29, 1990, 545).

**Table Rason-III.** Ranking (in parenthesis: number of industrial companies or cultural institutions)

Rason	KOFC	MOU	IPA	KCNA	KIET	Summary
Companies-total	24 (6)	19 (12)	24 (4)	18 (7)	15 (29)	22
Companies-important	14 (3)	19 (1)	22 (3)		22 (6)	25 (2)
Cultural institutions			15 (5)			

**Table Rason-IV.** Ranking (total number of companies in relation to population)

Rason	KOFC	MOU	IPA	KCNA	KIET	Summary
Companies – total	23	19	23–20–13	10	5–21	21–25

In the ranking about the number of companies, Rason is usually ranked behind its population rank (rank 18). In particular, there are hardly any important companies in the city.

**Table Rason-V.** Specification (in parenthesis: number of industrial companies)

Rason	Light Industry	Heavy Industry	Mining	Energy
KOFC	7 (2)	20 (3)	–	4 (1)
MOU	22 (5)	18 (3)	8 (2)	1 (2)
IPA	22 (1)	7 (2)	–	1 (1)
KCNA	6 (5)	24 (1)	–	9 (1)
KIET	17 (11)	17 (14)	9 (2)	3 (2)

A specialization on light or heavy industry cannot be deduced from Table Rason-V. In chapter III.7.3. however, only one company has been identified as important for Rason, namely the Sŭngri Chemical Complex.

The construction of this facility began in June 1968 with Soviet assistance. The first phase was completed in September 1973, the second in 1976 (KOFC 2010, 378-379). Oil was delivered from the Soviet Union. On one hand railway was used, which crosses the border at the Tumangang-rodongjagu, on the other hand crude oil was imported via the Sonbong harbor, where a pipeline to the plant was built. Important products of the factory are benzene, paraffin, petrol, naphtha, diesel, crude oil, heavy oil, among others. It was delivered to the Namhŭng Youth Chemical Complex, other chemical factories around the country, the transport industry and the June 16th Thermal Power Station, which was built in August 1973 (KJY-29 1990, 545-546). In the 1990s, the crude oil supplies from Russia were stopped. Afterwards, even oil from Iran had been processed, but the foreign exchange crisis of North Korea in mid-1994 also stopped this import (KOFC 2010, 380). After the Agreed Framework between The United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was signed on October 21, 1994, a joint venture between a North Korean company and the U.S. Stanton Asian Development Company was founded in 1995, with the aim of restarting the production of the petrochemical plant and the power plant (Kim Roi 2006). Ultimately, the negotiations were not successful and were canceled at the outbreak of the so-called second North Korean crisis in 2002. However, in the context of Toll-processing procedures the Sŭngri Chemical Complex resumed its production, where crude oil from the Yemen and Oman (1997), China (1998), Russia (1999) and Hong Kong (1999) was processed (KOFC 2010, 380-381). In June 2013 a Mongolian oil trading and refining company, called HBOil JSC, started a new trial, which is said to have acquired 20 percent of the Sŭngri refinery for \$10 million. It is expected that the plant will run again after one year. Crude oil is delivered from Mongolia, the refined products go back to Mongolia (Kohn/Humber 2013).

In connection with the construction of the Sŭngri Chemical Complex, the June 16th Thermal Power Station was built with Soviet aid as well, which burns the produced heavy oil and provides on the other hand the Chemical Complex with electrical energy. The construction was started in 1968. Facilities were imported from the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany (Kraftwerk Union). A part of the power plant was completed in 1973, another in 1977. Between 1995 and 2002, the plant was supplied with heavy oil from KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization), which had been established in the context of the Agreed Framework in Geneva (KOFC 2010, 154-155).

The Rason Taehŭng Trading Corporation is an example for a new company, which is a fishing company with fishing operations and processing plants. It was commissioned in 2002 and is located in Sinha-dong on the beach near the Changjin Bay. Facilities for

freezing and drying of seafood amongst others are situated on a total area of 96,680 m<sup>2</sup>. Products from shrimp or crabs are also exported to Japan, Russia and other countries (IPA-2 2003, 453).

### **Rason Economic Special Zone**

In December 1991 North Korea had proclaimed the Rajin - Songbong Free Economic and Trade Zone. This was part of a funded project by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) called “Tumen River Area Development Program (TRADP).” Since it was the first special economic zone of the DPRK, the euphoria was great. There were talks about a “Golden Triangle,” which included parts of northeastern Korea as well as the neighboring states of Russia and China. However the investments in this region, which was distant from the capital Pyongyang and whose infrastructural was barely developed, did not meet expectations. Hotels, banks, trading companies and a casino, which had to be closed after Chinese officials had gambled public money away, dominated the headlines about this region for a long time. Thus, the project, in which both Koreas, China, Russia and Mongolia were involved, was interrupted, since the withdrawal of North Korea in November 2009 (RKI February 24, 2010).

However, over time, Russia and the PR China showed stronger interest in the traffic geographical advantages of the nearly ice-free ports in winter. In 2008 Russia secured a 50-year right to use the quay No. 3 of the port of Rajin. The 54-km-long railway between Rajin and Russia’s Khasan was restored with the aim of exporting coal from Russia via Rajin (RKI September 26, 2013). After the extension of the road between Wŏnjŏng-ri, on the border to China, was recently completed, extracted coal in Hunchun was transported via Rajin to the southern regions of China (Shanghai) (RKI January 20, 2012). On this highway a ride between Hunchun and Rason takes about an hour (RKI May 12, 2011). Furthermore, China also acquired a ten-year lease right for the first quay of the port of Rajin in March 2010 (RKI June 14, 2011).

Later it also received 50-year rights for the piers 4.5 and 6 (RKI May 12, 2011). The background of China’s activities in Rason is also a development plan of northeastern China, through which the economic development should be encouraged in the cities of Changchun, Jilin and Tumen. By connecting this region with a population of eleven million people, with Rason and the Russian city of Vladivostok, a direct access to the East Sea coast would be created (RKI May 12, 2011). Also China and North Korea agreed on China supplying the Special Economic Zone of Rason with electric power (RKI September 13, 2011).

Meanwhile Rason has developed into a city, in which more than 150 joint venture companies operate, who cooperate with partners from China, Japan, Russia and Canada among others (Chosun Ilbo November 12, 2013).

### **Rajin–City from 1936–1949**

Rason is a fusion of Rajin-si and Sonbong-kun, which was called Unggi-kun up to the year 1981. Rajin was already a city (*pu/si*) between 1936 and 1949. In 1949 it became a *kun*.

### **1967–1993: Rajin-si, for a few months Unggi (Sonbong) is already part of the city**

In August 1967 a part of Rajin-kun and Unggi-kun formed Rajin-si; seven *ri* of the Rajin-kun came to the Puryong-kuyok of Chongjin-si. In October 1967 Rajin-si was split and the Unggi-kun emerged again.

But the former *up* of Unggi-kun initially remained in Rajin-si. Hongŭi-ri was at first the new Unggi-up. In November 1967, however Hongŭi was converted to *ri* again and Unsang-ri became Unggi-up. In 1968 Ungsang was converted *ri* again and four *dong* (Sanghyŏn, Junghyŏn, Hahyŏn, Songphyŏng) and a part of the Paekhak1-dong of Rajin-si are formed into Unggi-kun. Thus the old Unggi-up was practically restored again like before the unification of Rajin-si. In the progress of these transformations, parts of Paekhak1-dong and Paekhak2-dong were added to Unggi-kun from Rajin-si, as Paekhak-ri and as well as Chŏlju-ri.

In 1973 Rajin was divided into three *kuyok*; the *kuyok*-system was again abolished in 1974. In 1981 Unggi-kun was renamed to Sonbong-kun.

### **1993 Rajin–Sonbong–jikhalsi; 2000 Rason–jikhalsi; 2010 Rason–thukbyolsi**

In 1993, Rajin-Sonbong emerges as *jikhalsi*. Rajin-si became Rajin-kuyok and Sonbong became *kun* of the newly formed city. In 2000 Rajin-Sonbong was reformed to Rason-jikhalsi. Rajin-kuyok and Sonbong-kun disappeared. In 2010 Rason finally became *thukbyolsi*.

### **Urban expansion, reductions**

Twice, in 1967 and 1993, Rajin was reduced in favor of the neighboring southern Chongjin:

- In 1960, the Rajin-kun had been extended by five *ri* from the Puryong-kun. In August 1967 as Rajin-si was formed, these five *ri* and two more from Rajin were added to Chongjin.
- In 1993, seven *dong* and two *ri* came from Rajin-si to Chongjin-si. One of these *ri*

(Muchang-ri) came back to Rajin-Sonbong-si in 1955.

Also in 1993, three *ri* of Undok-kun (Wŏnjŏng-ri, Hahoe-ri-ri Hayŏphyŏng) merged with Sonbong-kun, in the same year Chŏlju-ri of Sonbong came to Undok-kun.

## Structure

The following information applies only to areas of Rason, which are still today parts of its urban area. Areas that are now within the city border of Chongjin, are not listed.

At the foundation of the city in 1967, Rajin-up was divided into seven *dong* (Namsan, Tongmyong, Sinan, Anhwa, Yŏkjŏn, Jigyŏng, Changphyŏng). The emerging Sinhŭng-rodongjagu was divided into two *dong* (Sinhŭng, Chŏnggye) in 1961. Anju-rodongjagu, which had also been set up in 1961, was converted to Anju-dong.

In 1967, Unggi-up was divided into four *dong* (Sanghyŏn, Songphyŏng, Junghyŏn, Hahyŏn). At the same time Paekhak1-dong, Paekhak2-dong and the Tumangang-rodongjagu (*dong* since 2000) emerged.

When Unggi-up was re-formed in 1968, even parts of Paekhak1-dong were added, and the rest of Paekhak1-dong became Paekhak-ri. Paekhak2-dong was divided to Paekhak-ri (Unggi-kun) and the newly formed Kwan'gok-dong (Rajin-si).

In 2000, Unggi—in the meantime renamed Sonbong—was then divided again into the four above-mentioned *dong*.

Neglecting the redissolution of Sonbong-up in four *dong* in 2000, only four new *dong* emerged within the present urban area of Rason since the 70s until 2003:

- When the city of Rajin switched to the *kuyok* system in 1973, numerous rearrangements of administrative units were made. In the course of this, Sinhae-dong and Yuhyŏn-dong were newly formed.
- In 1981 Ungsang-ri (Sonbong-kun) was formed to a *rodongjagu* (*dong* since 2000).
- In 2000 Haebang-dong arises from a partition of Anju-dong.

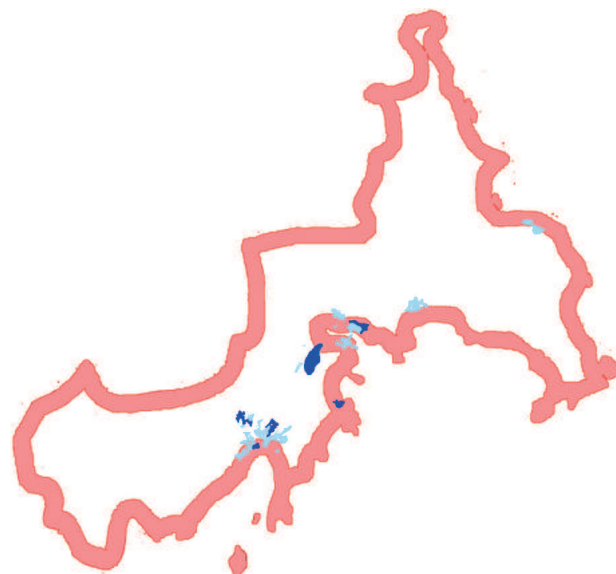
On Figure Rason-I you can see that the center of Rajin consists of the former *up* and two adjacent *rodongjagu* (Anju, Sinhŭng), which were formed in 1961. The splitting of the eastern Haebang-dong from Anju-dong within the former Anju-rodongjagu however occurred later in 2000. North and South at some distance to the city center, Sinhae-dong and Yuhyŏn-dong developed. Both became *dong* in 1973.

Four *dong* in the former Sonbong-kun originate from the former Sonbong-up. This region forms the second center within Rason-si. In the North the former Ungsang-





**Figure Rason-I.** Dong and former rodongjagu



**Figure Rason-II.** Urbanized areas (light blue) and industrial areas (dark blue)  
 (Source: Yi Sang-jun et. al. 2012, 42)

rodongjagu is situated and in the very North the former Tumangang-rodongjagu.

The Sŭngri Chemical Complex in Kwan'gok-dong was built *quasi* in the middle of the two centers of Rajin and Sonbong.

The map in Yi Sang-jun et. al (2012, 42) was developed by using GIS methods and it confirms the results of the above analysis. Figure Rason-I and Figure Rason-II show six major built up areas within the city of Rason. These are - from North to South - the former Tumangang-rodongjagu, the former Unsang-rodongjagu, the former Sonbong-up, Kwangok-dong (Sŭngri Chemical Complex), which was founded in 1968, Shinhae-dong, which was established on the coast in 1973 (Rason Taehŭng Trading Corporation, which was put into operation in 2002 is located there) and the core of the former Rajin-kun (with the *up*, the former *rodongjagu* of Sinhŭng and Anju, both founded in 1961, and the 1973 established Yuhŏn-dong).

## Statistics

Urbanized areas prior to city foundation (*up* and *rodongjagu*)

1952 - 1967 Rajin-up (1)

1952 - 1967, 1968-2000 Unggi-up (since 1981 Sonbong-up) see above (2)

1961 - 1967 Sinhŭng-rodongjagu (3)

1961 - 1967 Anju-rodongjagu (4)

	<i>Dong-Formation</i>	<i>Dong-splitting</i>
1967 (17)	2 <i>dong</i> , 1 <i>rodongjagu</i>	(10)
1967 (18)	1 <i>up</i>	-
1967 (18)	-1 <i>up</i> /1 <i>up</i>	-
1968 (13)	-1 <i>up</i>	-4 <i>up-formation</i>
1973 (15)	2	-
1981 (16)	1 <i>rodongjagu</i>	-
2000 (20)	-	4, (3 of them because of <i>up</i> -separation)

Adjusted, without taking into account the multiple displacement of up of Sonbong-kun:

	<i>Dong-Formation</i>	<i>Dong-splitting</i>
1967 (17)	2, (1)	(10)
1968 (16)	-	-1

1973 (18)	2	-
1981 (19)	(1)	-
2000 (20)	-	1

### **Rason – Ports near the new Chinese economic development zones**

The two ports Rajin and Sonbong had already been developed under Japanese rule in Korea. After 1945, the geopolitical conditions changed and the two ports stagnated. Fishing dominated the economic structure in the region Rajin-Sonbong up to the 1970s, until the Sŭngri Chemical Complex was completed.

The proclamation of the Rajin-Songbong Free Economic and Trade Zone in December 1991 aroused only moderate interest from potential investors. The region was too far away from the capital Pyongyang and the infrastructure was underdeveloped. Additionally, there were more reasons why a financial engagement in the DPR Korea seemed problematic. The location of the port of Rajin and Sonbong recently led to greater engagements of the neighboring states of Russia and China. Investments, especially in the ports and their infrastructure, have been made. For the PR China, the port of Rajin is of importance to the development of the region Changchun-Jilin-Tumen.