

North Korea: Administrative divisions and supplement to North Korea: Land of the Morning Calm, 2003

This short paper is intended to provide an update to the PCGN paper [North Korea: Land of the Morning Calm](#) written in 2003. The information given in that paper remains largely relevant and up-to-date today; any details from that earlier paper that are either now out-of-date or can be augmented are described below.

Romanization

PCGN continues to use the 1939 McCune-Reischauer system for the romanization of Korean in North Korea. In the absence of a widely employed official system from the country itself, the McCune-Reischauer system, widely used in academia and elsewhere since its development, is the most consistently applied and technically accurate system. Additionally, it is in fact similar to the system promoted by North Korea (the main difference being the use of /h/ in the North Korean system instead of an apostrophe to mark aspiration)¹.

However, in South Korea, in 2011 BGN and PCGN approved a change to romanization policy for South Korea from the McCune-Reischauer system to the South Korean national system. The use of this national system, developed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and introduced in 2000, had been closely monitored by PCGN since that time. By 2011 it was felt, given its comprehensive use in South Korea, that for practical purposes adoption of that system for HMG would be more relevant, albeit less technically and linguistically appealing.

Administrative divisions

It is unquestionably very difficult to be certain of the status of the administrative divisions in North Korea. BGN and PCGN's current view is described below.

The 9 provinces (*do*, or *to* (*namdo* = south province; *bukto* = north province) listed in the 2003 paper are still current. Additionally, there are a number of special cities that exist alongside the 9 provinces at the first-order level. The list of first-order administrative divisions is believed to be:

¹ As noted in the 2003 paper, the romanization system used by North Korea has been presented to the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names reporting that it "was adopted in 1992 and has been compulsorily in use for transcribing Korean including the geographical names and personal names into Roman alphabet since then". The system was reaffirmed to UNGEGN in 2012:

https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/10th-uncsgn-docs/crp/E_Conf.101_CRP15_Rules%20of%20Latin%20Alphabetic%20Transcription%20of%20Korean.pdf

Nevertheless PCGN has still seen very few North Korean sources applying this system.

<i>Administrative division (ADM1)</i>	<i>Centre (PPLA)</i>	<i>Coordinates of centre</i>
Chagang-do	Kanggye	40°58'N 126°35'E
Hamgyōng-bukto	Ch'ōngjin	41°47'N 129°46'E
Hamgyōng-namdo	Hamhŭng	39°54'N 127°32'E
Hwanghae-bukto	Sariwŏn	38°30'N 125°45'E
Hwanghae-namdo	Haeju	38°02'N 125°42'E
Kangwŏn-do	Wŏnsan	39°09'N 127°26'E
Kaesŏng-t'ŭkpyŏlsi ²	Kaesŏng	38°44'N 125°24'E
Namp'o-t'ŭkpyŏlsi ³	Namp'o	38°43'N 125°24'E
P'yŏngan-bukto	Sinŭiju ⁴	40°06'N 124°23'E
P'yŏngan-namdo	P'yŏngsŏng	39°15'N 125°51'E
P'yŏngyang-jikhalsi ⁵	P'yŏngyang (Pyongyang)	39°04'N 125°50'E

² Kaesŏng-si was a further city with first-order administrative level status, though the 2003 paper reported on a newly created industrial zone formed from part of its area. Kaesŏng-kongŏp chigu (i.e. Kaesŏng industrial zone) functioned as a special industrial zone focussing, due to its location close to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), on industrial ties with South Korea. The remainder of Kaesŏng-si was subsequently subsumed into Hwanghae-bukto. However, South Korean staff were recalled from the industrial zone in early 2016, after nuclear weapons tests, and the site was not operational for some years. In 2019 the special status of Kaesŏng-si (as Kaesŏng-t'ŭkpyŏlsi) was reinstated and BGN and PCGN are now of the view that there is sufficient evidence to warrant its inclusion in the list of administrative divisions (e.g.

<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20200213161400504?input=1195m> and North Korea Information Portal, South Korean Ministry of Unification.

<https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/overview/nkOverview.do?sumryMenuId=SO302> (in Korean)).

³ Namp'o-si as given in the 2003 paper is believed now to be properly **Namp'o-t'ŭkpyŏlsi** (i.e. metropolitan city). Namp'o-si had been a special city between 1993 and 2004, but at this time was subsumed into the neighbouring P'yŏngan-namdo province. It is understood that a certain level of special status was reinstated in 2010. It may be of interest that **t'ŭkpyŏlsi**, is translated as "metropolitan city" in North Korea but "special metropolitan city" in South Korea. "t'ŭk" usually translates as "special" in English, but North Korea chooses not to use this word, perhaps because it has taken on a different connotation in the North Korean dialect. BGN and PCGN reflect the form used by the country itself, and feel, since the difference is minor, this should not present a significant problem to users.

⁴ Sinŭiju had been declared a "special administrative region" in September 2002. Imitating Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in structure, the area was to be walled off from the rest of North Korea with the intention that foreigners, including South Koreans, would be able to visit the zone (on the border with China) without visas. However, in 2003, the appointed governor of the region, Yang Bin, was arrested on tax evasion and other charges, and the implementation of this special zone never happened.

<i>Administrative division (ADM1)</i>	<i>Centre (PPLA)</i>	<i>Coordinates of centre</i>
Rasŏn-t'ŭkpyŏlsi ⁶	Rasŏn ⁷	42° 15'N 130°16'E
Ryanggang-do ⁸	Hyesan	41°23'N 128°10'E

As noted in footnote 3, a special area around Sinŭiju was recorded in the 2003 paper as equivalent to the first-order administrative divisions, but is now believed to be not functioning. Additionally, the mountainous area Kŭmgang-san-kwan'gwang chigu (i.e. Kŭmgang-san tourism zone) had been designated a tax-free 'tourism zone' in October 2002 allowing South Korean tourist access. However, since the shooting in 2008 of a South Korean tourist there have been no South Korean tours to the zone, and it is believed no longer to be functioning as a special region.

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⁵ P'yŏngyang-t'ŭkpyŏlsi as given in the 2003 paper is more commonly now seen as **P'yŏngyang-jikhalsi** (i.e. directly controlled city). The Korean form, 직할시, romanized chikhalsi, becomes '-jikhalsi' with the euphonic change that occurs from the preceding consonant 'ng' in P'yŏngyang.

⁶ This special economic zone, created in 1993, continues to exist. A contraction of the city names Najin and Sŏnbong, this was included in the 2003 paper as Nasŏn or Najin Sŏnbong-si. This name has not changed in Korean (the short form being 라선), but in 2016 BGN and PCGN decided to reflect this initial letter as 'r' in North Korean contexts. This pronunciation has fallen out of use in South Korea but still pertains in the North, so this metropolitan city should now be labelled **Rasŏn-t'ŭkpyŏlsi**.

⁷ Some sources record the centre as Rajin, as this is the principal urban area in the composite of Rajin and Sŏnbong.

⁸ Previously recorded as Yanggang-do, this altered spelling reflects the BGN/PCGN decision to reflect the initial 'r' in North Korea (as for Rasŏn, above).