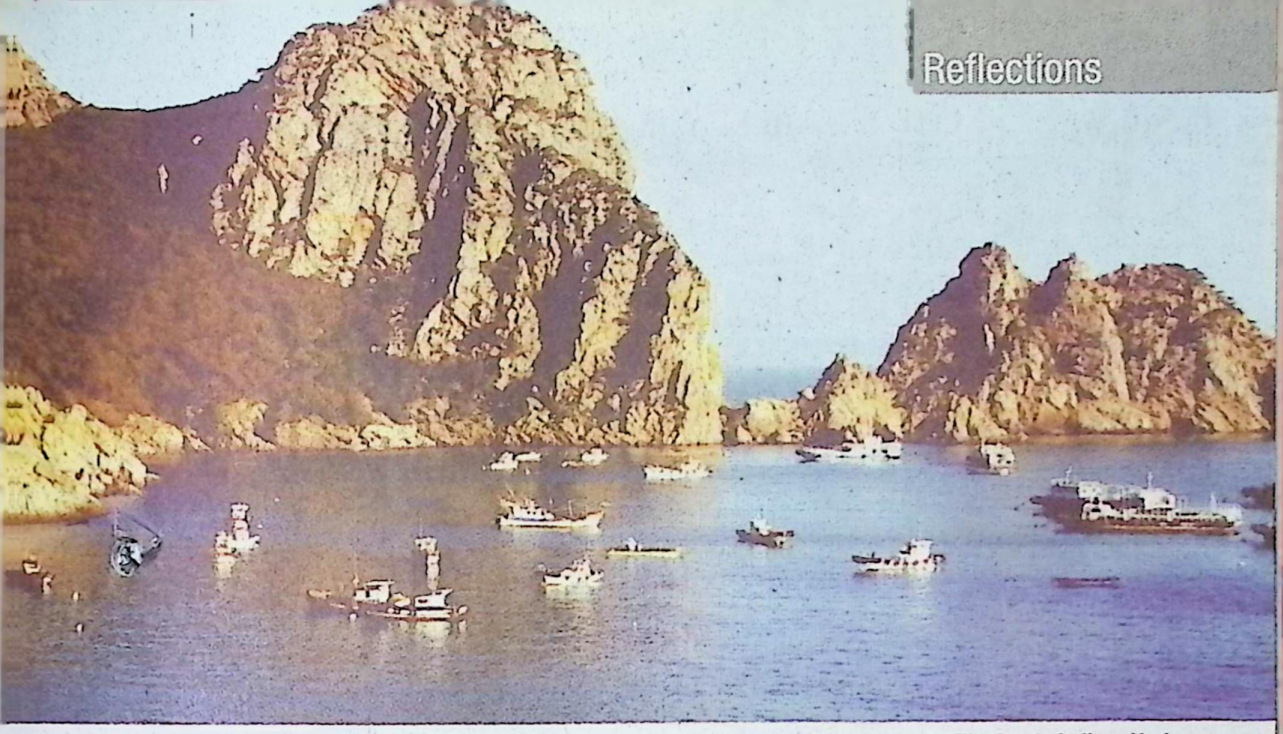


The boats in Il-gu Harbour.

The Fish of Hongdo

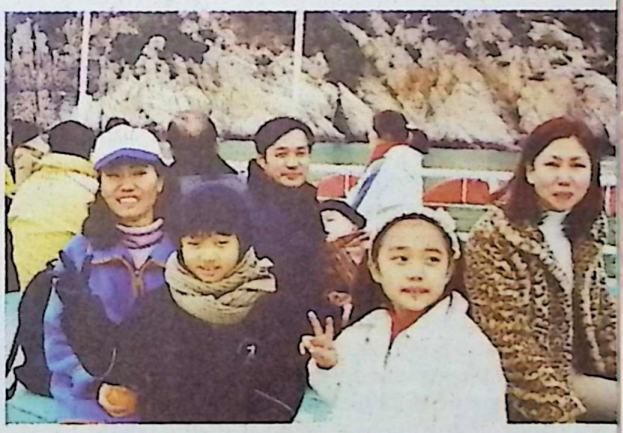
ANDREW EAGLE

It happened fast. Racing over the water, the small boat appeared suddenly, bashing against the minor waves as it crossed them, with the whirring of its motor growing louder as it unexpectedly closed in. The vessel I was on was larger but even if it tried to power away it could hardly have escaped. It was too late for that. What did they want?

I could only take my cue from the other passengers and the crew, because with everything happening in Korean I was at a minor disadvantage. The small boat sidled up to ours, its motor cut as an animated conversation across the gap of water began. The passengers were fussing; they seemed to be negotiating. It happened near the coast of Hongdo, Red Island, in the Yellow Sea.

Winter had come to South Korea. It was cold and the waters about the eight hundred islands can only have been colder.

It's in Korea's far southwest where the peninsula crumbles away like cake. Those islands might almost act as stepping stones for giants attempting to cross to China. They must've been a worthy challenge for early navigators and cartographers, charting each isle and outcrop, bay and cove. Even on the national map the torn coastline of the southwest looks like a pile of leftover puzzle pieces.



Kim (left) with her sister and their families.

At closer quarters the islands are similarly unwilling to conform to standardised design specifics. A vast range of rock shapes, delicate, unusual and unexpected, document the drop of the island into the sea. Or at least on Hongdo they do. One of the furthest islands from the mainland, Hongdo is famous for the artistry of wind and wave, which is why tourists go there. It's the reason I was on that boat.