



Sunrise over the North Sea, as seen from the bow of the tall ship *Vega Gamleby* (author, August 2016).



# Floating islands, moving ecologies: ocean-based intercultural learning as an Archipelagic Heritage Method

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Oceans have often been treated as peripheral to learning and heritage, and framed as unstable spaces separating land-based cultures and institutions. Recent work in island studies and the blue humanities has challenged this view, yet questions remain as to how learning and heritage can be methodologically examined in mobile, oceanic environments. This paper explores this methodological challenge by examining ocean-based learning aboard international tall ships through an archipelagic lens. Drawing on ocean-based ethnography conducted during an international sail-training voyage, the study advances the Archipelagic Heritage Method to analyse learning and heritage as processes unfolding within moving ecologies. The tall ship is approached as a floating island – a bounded yet permeable environment shaped by ecological forces, embodied labour and intercultural proximity. Empirical analysis shows how storytelling, ritualised labour and embodied mapping operate as situated practices through which participants orient themselves socially, ecologically and culturally at sea. The paper argues that ocean-based learning cultivates forms of islandness grounded in movement, ecological attunement and relational dependence.

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## Introduction

The ocean has long been imagined as a blank hydrological expanse separating land territories, cultures and identities. Within dominant terrestrial epistemologies, water appears as an archipelagic interval to be crossed, while learning is anchored to classrooms and institutions, heritage to monumental sites, and culture to land-based communities (Harrison, 2013; Peters et al, 2023). Oceans, by contrast, have often been treated as pedagogically marginal – fluid, unstable and difficult to organise. Yet work across the blue humanities and island studies has increasingly demonstrated that seas have always been dense social worlds, where migration, cosmology, labour and knowledge take shape through movement and encounter (DeLoughrey, 2007; Helmreich, 2023; Xu, 2022).

This rethinking has been powerfully articulated through archipelagic and island studies. Hau'ofa (1993), Glissant (1997) and DeLoughrey (2007) reconceptualise islands as relational formations within expansive oceanic networks, sustained through routes, rhythms and exchange. Across maritime worlds, learning has long been embedded in movement. Navigation, ritual practice and ecological attunement organise how knowledge is formed and transmitted. Contemporary tall ships (large, traditionally rigged sailing vessels with high masts and extensive sail plans) enter this lineage as late-modern condensations of dispersed but continuous maritime traditions, bringing together seamanship, intercultural encounter and environmental exposure within a single moving ecology.

Recent interdisciplinary research reinforces this view by foregrounding the entanglement of humans at sea with more-than-human elements such as wind, weather, living creatures and historical trajectories. In marine spatial planning, Wedding and colleagues (2024) argue that ocean governance must integrate ecological processes with lived human relationships to place. From a heritage perspective, Pérez-Álvarez and Boswell (2025) show how Indigenous ocean heritages connect cultural continuity, environmental stewardship and collective wellbeing. These strands suggest that oceans function simultaneously as ecological infrastructures, cultural landscapes and learning environments

## KEY WORDS

archipelagic thinking; ocean-based learning; living maritime heritage; moving ecologies; islandness

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(Bremner, 2016; Corner, 1999). Yet their implications for how to study learning and heritage in mobile settings remain underdeveloped.

This paper argues that the international tall ship – often framed as transport, a training platform or a heritage vessel – can be productively understood as a floating island: a bounded yet permeable ecology in which environmental forces, embodied practices and cultural histories converge. Building on these insights, the paper advances the Archipelagic Heritage Method (AHM) as a framework for researching learning and heritage transmission in mobile maritime settings. It approaches the tall ship as a floating island, where human and more-than-human agencies converge and heritage is transmitted through everyday practice. This framing leads to the central research question guiding the analysis that follows: how can learning and heritage be methodologically apprehended under islanded and archipelagic conditions shaped by movement, ecological attunement and dispersed relations?

### **Theoretical groundings: ocean relationality and archipelagic pedagogy**

Archipelagic thinking (a conceptual framework that centres islands, ocean spaces and maritime connections as core units of analysis) challenges terrestrial epistemologies that treat land as the primary ground of culture, identity and heritage. Drawing from the theoretical foundations of the AHM, archipelagic thinking is brought back through Daoist relational philosophy and processual understandings of heritage. These perspectives conceptualise the ocean as a relational and pedagogical ground – one in which learning, continuity and encounter take shape through movement, ecological co-presence and dispersed connection.

#### *Ocean relationality and the archipelagic turn*

Across island studies and the environmental humanities, the ocean has increasingly been understood as a space dense with social, ecological and cultural relations. In his influential reframing of the Pacific as a ‘sea of islands’, Hau‘ofa (1993) foregrounds voyaging, kinship and ecological intimacy as forces that bind dispersed geographies into coherent worlds. Related work in anthropology, geography and oceanic studies further develops this insight, showing how seas shape perception, mobility and social organisation through their material and affective properties (DeLoughrey, 2007; Peters et al, 2023).

Within this perspective, maritime learning emerges through embodied engagement with wind, tide and current. Ingold’s (2000, 2001) account of knowledge as something grown along paths of movement offers a way to understand how skills and understanding develop through repeated trajectories of travel, adjustment and coordination in seascapes. The instability of the marine environment requires continuous recalibration of attention, posture and cooperation, situating learning within a dynamic field of relations.

The tall ship condenses these dynamics into a moving ecology. It gathers bodies, materials and elemental forces within a bounded yet permeable environment where cooperation and responsiveness are necessary for everyday functioning. Tsing’s (2015) emphasis on friction helps illuminate how encounters with weather, equipment and other people generate situated forms of understanding through shared effort and exposure. In this sense, the ship operates as a floating island embedded within wider networks of routes, histories and ecological processes.

#### *Integrating Daoist relationality and Shanshui aesthetics*

Glissant’s (1997) *Poetics of Relation* conceptualises islands as nodes within interwoven worlds, where identity and meaning emerge through encounter, circulation and opacity. In his vision of oceanic navigation, Hau‘ofa (1993) similarly emphasises mobility as a sustaining condition of social life, while DeLoughrey (2007) develops the archipelago as both a geographical configuration and a methodological lens for tracing dispersed cultural connections. These accounts foreground relation, connection and oceanic flow as structuring principles of island worlds.

This orientation finds resonance in Chinese philosophical and aesthetic traditions that centre water, flux and relational balance. In Daoist philosophy, water (水) embodies vitality and transformation, and the cosmos appears as a field of dynamic equilibrium shaped by interdependence (Ames and Hall, 2003). Shanshui aesthetics further articulate this sensibility through their emphasis on rhythmic circulation and relational perception. Islands, headlands and seas appear as interconnected formations animated by the movement of qi (氣, vital energy), linking places through routes, stories and atmospheric resonance. This ‘mountain–sea’ cosmology offers an aesthetic parallel to archipelagic accounts of island worlds as relational constellations sustained through waterborne connection.

Life at sea involves continuous negotiation between self and other, autonomy and interdependence, vulnerability and resilience. Classical Daoist texts describe the world as a field of co-emergence, in which agency arises through attunement to changing circumstances (Yi et al, 2013). This relational sensibility is further elaborated in Shanshui (山水, mountain–water) aesthetics, which conceptualises oceans, rivers, headlands and islands as interconnected formations animated by the circulation of qi. In classical aesthetic thought, perception and dwelling arise from patterns of movement, resonance and rhythmic balance (Li, 2010; Zong, 1981). Early ‘mountain–sea’ cosmologies, most vividly expressed in texts such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing)*, figure islands, reefs and coasts as linked nodes within a living seascape, held together by winds, currents, routes and stories. This imagery closely parallels archipelagic accounts of island worlds as relational constellations sustained through oceanic flows.

#### *Archipelagic pedagogy: learning in motion*

The idea of archipelagic pedagogy, thus, could be understood as the mode of learning that takes shape through movement, relationality and ecological co-presence across dispersed geographies, and treats knowledge as emerging from ongoing navigation between bodies, environments and others. Learning is cultivated through situated practice in conditions that are mobile, uncertain and materially demanding, such as tall-ship voyages. At sea, trajectories of travel, repetition and adjustment generate understanding through tasks such as handling sails, responding to wind shifts and maintaining balance on a rolling deck (Ingold, 2000, 2021).

Ecological attunement forms a key dimension. Wind, tide and weather act as participants in the learning process, making ocean-based settings into sites where human-centred epistemologies are unsettled by fluidity, uncertainty and more-than-human agency (Helmreich, 2023; Peters, 2015). Learners must read atmospheric cues, anticipate change and act collectively under conditions that often resist prediction, so environmental responsiveness becomes a central educational practice.

Archipelagic pedagogy also carries an inherently intercultural character. Shipboard life brings people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds into compressed spaces where cooperation is necessary for safety and routine functioning. Glissant’s (1997) emphasis on relation and encounter helps describe how identities and understandings are formed in such settings through negotiation, translation and shared effort. Jackson (2013) further clarifies how risk and exposure open possibilities for mutual recognition and ethical connection in these environments.

Finally, this pedagogy reframes heritage as heritage-in-action. Heritage appears as a process that unfolds through ritualised practice, embodied transmission and collective performance. The processual approach to heritage of Harvey (2001) and Harrison (2013) provides a conceptual anchor for seeing watch systems, labour chants and navigational routines as forms of living heritage transmitted on deck.

#### **Approach: Ocean-based ethnography and the Archipelagic Heritage Method**

Building on the preceding theoretical discussion, this section formalises the Archipelagic Heritage Method as a methodological framework for researching learning and heritage in mobile maritime environments. The AHM translates ocean-based ethnographic practice

into a set of methodological orientations suited to fields characterised by movement, ecological contingency and dispersed cultural lineages.

### *The ethnographic research context*

The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted aboard the *Vega Gamleby*, a traditional Swedish tall ship specialising in sail training and international educational voyages. The voyage followed a round-trip route across the North Sea to connect Gothenburg in Sweden with Blyth in the United Kingdom, navigating the open, often turbulent waters that define Northern European and Nordic maritime routes.

The onboard group comprised a diverse, multinational cohort, with a balance of genders among both trainees and professional sea staff. Full technical details of the voyage, participant profiles and the complete itinerary have already been documented (Xu, 2021, 2022), grounding the study in empirical context that is not necessary to repeat here.

### *The Archipelagic Heritage Method*

The AHM comprises four inter-related dimensions.

First, relational ontology establishes the researcher's analytical stance. On a tall ship, learning and coordination emerge through the interaction of bodies, rigging, wind and weather. Methodologically, this involves attending to how competencies develop through intermaterial and intersubjective coordination (Ingold, 2000). Daoist notions of qi offer a complementary vocabulary for understanding these resonant fields of interaction (Ames and Hall, 2003).

Second, moving ecologies reframe mobility as a focus of research. The ship's motion generates layered temporalities shaped by navigation, labour routines and environmental change. Ethnographic material emerges through routes, rhythms and transitions, requiring the researcher to track shifting relations (Peters et al, 2023). Observation, interviewing and note-taking are therefore embedded within movement, unfolding alongside shipboard routines.

Third, dispersed but continuous traditions across cultures address the challenge of tracing heritage across distance and time. Maritime practices circulate along routes and are carried by vessels and practitioners, instead of remaining tied to fixed locations (Clifford, 1997). Data collection focuses on how participants perform, reference and interpret such practices, treating heritage as living circulation rather than static preservation (Harrison, 2013).

Fourth, embodied storymapping provides a means of synthesising sensory, narrative and affective data. Shipboard knowledge is embedded in bodily skills, spatial orientation and emotional response, and articulated through stories of past voyages, storms and personal transformation. This dimension integrates bodily practice and narrative meaning-making, producing a multisensory record of how learning and heritage are experienced and communicated in motion (Casey, 1996; Csordas, 1993). It draws on the aesthetic principle of yi jing (意境), where meaning arises through the interplay of physical form, affective resonance and imagination (Cai, 2018).

### *Data collection and analysis*

The empirical material derives from a sustained period of immersive sail-training fieldwork aboard the Swedish tall ship *Vega Gamleby* as it crossed the North Sea. The ship-based study took place over a fortnight in 2016, structured by round-the-clock watch systems and involving 28 sail trainees and 15 professional sea staff aged 16–25 years from Sweden, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway and Denmark. The researcher participated as a sailing mentor, fully engaged in shipboard routines while maintaining analytical distance (Ingold, 2021; Pink, 2009).

Data were generated through participant observation, active interviews and visual documentation. Field notes recorded during watch periods, meals and shore visits documented embodied labour, spatial organisation and ritualised practices. Interviews with individuals (n = 14), pairs (n = 3) and focus groups (n = 2) explored experiences of

learning, cooperation and intercultural encounter. Photographs captured spatial configurations and embodied routines and were used as prompts in follow-up conversations (Pink, 2009). All participants gave their informed consent, and pseudonyms were used throughout to protect their identity.

Analysis combined inductive and deductive thematic coding (Azungah, 2018). Initial coding identified patterns related to movement, embodiment and cooperation across voyage stages. Subsequent analysis applied the four dimensions of the AHM to structure interpretation across field notes, transcripts and visual material, supported by NVivo.

#### *Researcher reflexivity and interpretive positionality*

As the only Asian member on board this Nordic-led, transnational voyage, I held a position as a Chinese cultural insider that shaped both the data collection and theoretical interpretation of islandness, ocean connectivity and cross-cultural maritime learning. In bridging Eastern philosophical thought and Western maritime practices, this position highlights unspoken connections between seafaring cultures, offering a distanced yet deeply engaged viewpoint.

Grounded in Daoist relationality and classical Chinese Shanshui (water–mountain) aesthetics, frameworks shaped from the lifelong cultural understanding and scholarly outlook of the researcher provide a reflective tool to uncover shared sensibilities across global maritime traditions. Daoist thought rejects rigid human–nature dualism. Instead it emphasises harmonious attunement with the natural world, a stance echoed in Nordic maritime practices of respecting the volatile North Sea, Polynesian wayfinding and Indian Ocean seafaring cosmologies. Similarly, Shanshui aesthetics centre fluidity, interconnectedness and sensory immersion in landscape, aligning with the archipelagic thinking framework that guides this research.

Framing Daoist relationality and Shanshui aesthetics as a reflexive interpretive lens allows these concepts to complement Nordic maritime traditions. It reveals a transoceanic kinship of maritime thought: across cultures, seafaring communities prioritise embodied sensory knowledge, collective care and respectful harmony with the sea. This cross-cultural dialogue elevates the study beyond a single-region analysis, emphasising the shared, universal dimensions of maritime life.

### **Cultural continuities across dispersed geographies**

The AHM rests on the proposition that cultural continuity in maritime contexts emerges from the routes, rhythms and relational practices that circulate across dispersed geographies. To understand why the contemporary tall ship functions as a potent site of intercultural learning and living heritage, it is essential to locate it within longer genealogies of oceanic knowledge in which mobility, ecological attunement and ritualised seamanship have historically structured cultural life. The tall ship, in this sense, inherits, concentrates and re-animates these longer genealogies of oceanic knowledge and the relational practices that sustain them.

This section positions contemporary sail training within these broader yet continuous maritime traditions. It draws from Chinese, Pacific, Indian Ocean and European traditions to demonstrate how the AHM operates across divergent oceanic worlds.

#### *Chinese maritime worlds as archipelagic corridors*

The Chinese maritime sphere provides a historically comprehensive example of dispersed cultural continuity shaped by monsoon ecologies and archipelagic infrastructures. Across the southeastern seaboard, from the Zhoushan Archipelago through Fujian to Hainan, coastal and insular communities developed livelihoods and ritual systems that were inseparable from shifting winds, currents and seasonal cycles. As Levathes (1994) demonstrates, the Ming dynasty voyages of Zheng He (who lived 1371–1433 and led seven state-sponsored maritime expeditions between 1405 and 1433) exemplified this relational maritime worldview: fleets followed monsoon corridors, navigated via chains of islands,

and linked inland production centres of porcelain and silk with transoceanic ports such as Quanzhou, Melaka and Calicut.

These voyages amplified existing archipelagic corridors, where cultural exchange occurred through dispersed nodes of ritual, labour and storytelling. Mazu worship, for instance – a UNESCO-recognised form of Intangible Cultural Heritage centred on a maritime protective deity – articulates a relational cosmology embedded in coastal and island lifeworlds. Mazu worship and boat-blessing rites resonate strongly with contemporary archipelagic thought (Yao et al, 2020). The maritime rituals of fisherfolk – aligned with monsoon rhythms and tidal cycles – echo Ingold's (2021) account of knowledge as grown 'along lines', through movement and ecological attunement.

Coastal ritual practices further encode this relational worldview. Sea offerings, Mazu worship and boat-blessing ceremonies articulate ties between human communities, island landscapes and powerful marine forces. Aesthetic traditions – such as Shanshui painting and sea-themed poetry – often depict islands, headlands and open water as co-emergent forms shaped by the circulation of qi (氣). This is a vision that aligns with the emphasis of contemporary archipelagic theory on interdependence and movement. Chinese maritime culture thus offers a historically deep, indigenous articulation of oceanic relationality.

#### *Oceanic pathways of connection: Polynesian, Arab and Indian Ocean and Nordic navigation*

Across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, other maritime regions developed similarly relational ways of knowing and connecting with the sea. Polynesian wayfinding traditions – based on reading swell patterns, bird flight, star paths and the tactile sensations of wave movement – embody what Finney (2002) describes as a 'imaginal epistemology', where navigation is performed through the body's ongoing attunement to the ocean.

The vision Hau'ofa (1993) has of the Pacific as a relational sea-world is grounded in such practices, which link widely dispersed islands through voyaging routes and genealogical exchange. This relational, body-centred maritime logic is not unique to Pacific and Indian Ocean societies. Nordic seafaring cultures share a deeply rooted tradition of sensorial ocean literacy, forged by centuries of navigating the stormy, unpredictable North and Baltic seas. Nordic mariners of the past relied on reading wave rhythms, celestial cues, coastal landmarks and seasonal weather patterns to traverse vast, often treacherous waters, connecting scattered coastal settlements and island archipelagos through trade, cultural exchange and communal voyaging. Such maritime cultures framed the sea as a vital, living corridor, embedding navigational wisdom, ritual practices and communal values in seafaring life.

The Indian Ocean world presents a parallel configuration shaped by monsoon ecologies. Chaudhuri (1985) shows how seasonal winds structured circulatory networks connecting East Africa, Arabia, South Asia and Southeast Asia through repetitive sailing cycles. Ports such as Zanzibar, Aden and Calicut formed cosmopolitan archipelagos of exchange, where stories, navigational knowledge and ritual practices moved along with spices, textiles and ceramics. Ritualised seamanship, prayers for safe passage, rhythmic labour songs and offerings before departure permeated these oceanic cultures and reflected a shared understanding of the sea as agentive, unpredictable and socially binding. As Diaz (2025) notes, water in many maritime societies functions simultaneously as a material resource, cosmological force and mnemonic archive. Such sensorial navigation and monsoon ecologies exemplify the moving ecologies that underpin archipelagic learning. This shared global heritage lays vital groundwork for analysing Nordic tall-ship fieldwork as a continuation of these long-standing maritime traditions.

#### *Tall ships as contemporary sites of transoceanic heritage*

Against this background, European tall ships appear as contemporary vehicles in a much older relational matrix. Although tall ships descend from nineteenth-century merchant sail traditions, their continued use in sail training and increasingly in sustainable sail-cargo initiatives reflects the adaptability of maritime heritage as a lived, embodied and

mobile practice. Through watch systems, coordinated manoeuvres, labour chants and climbing routines, tall ships preserve what Harvey (2001) calls ‘heritage-as-process’, indicating heritage is enacted through repeated performance instead of being preserved as static artifact.

Modern sail-training organisations – such as Sail Training International, the Association of Sail Training Organisations and national tall-ship programmes – employ these practices explicitly as pedagogical tools, creating intercultural spaces where young people learn through shared physical effort, risk management and environmental attunement. These shipboard practices demonstrated how sensory attunement and bodily coordination generate collective learning. The sail-cargo movement, exemplified by vessels such as *Tres Hombres* or the *Grain de Sail* fleet, further illustrates the future-oriented potential of maritime heritage. By reintroducing wind propulsion into contemporary logistics, these projects rehabilitate historical knowledge systems in response to ecological crises, demonstrating what DeLoughrey (2007) identifies as the capacity of island and ocean imaginaries to catalyse new environmental futures. In these initiatives, heritage becomes a speculative tool, mobilising past practices to imagine low-carbon alternatives to extractive maritime infrastructures.

Through the AHM, tall ships can be understood as living laboratories where dispersed maritime traditions converge in the present. Practices shaped across Chinese, Pacific, Indian Ocean and European sailing worlds – organised around routes, rhythms, ritualised labour and sensory attunement – are condensed on board into an intensified, mobile ecology. This convergence provides the conceptual bridge between transoceanic genealogies and lived practice. The tall ship concentrates relational logics forged across different maritime histories into a bounded yet permeable environment, creating the cultural and ecological conditions through which the AHM operates.

To examine how these continuities across diverse traditions take shape in everyday life at sea, the analysis now turns to situated shipboard practices. Through storytelling, ritualised labour and embodied mapping, archipelagic heritage becomes tangible within the textures of daily experience.

## Findings and discussion

The convergence of dispersed maritime traditions aboard the tall ship becomes most visible in everyday shipboard practice. A tall ship becomes an island of relational pedagogy precisely because participants engage in shared practices, weaving their own intercultural trajectories into longer histories of oceanic knowledge.

### *Heritage futures: storytelling as situated navigation*

Storytelling has long functioned as a primary medium through which seafarers transmit ecological knowledge, risk perception and moral orientation (Mack, 2011). Aboard the contemporary tall ship, it emerged as a situated intercultural practice that enabled participants from diverse backgrounds to locate themselves within a shared oceanic world. Stories circulated through the rhythms of shipboard life and in those moments narrative was interwoven with ongoing activity, shaping how participants oriented themselves within the moving seascape.

Between approximately 22:00 and 24:00, conditions on deck were calm. The wind had eased after sunset, though a long swell continued to move beneath the vessel, producing a slow, rhythmic roll. While maintaining lookout near the bow, Mia began speaking to David about the presence of women in maritime traditions. She referred to stories she had encountered about ships being ‘watched over’ by female figures, including carved figureheads placed at the bow. She described one version in which these figures of ‘Prow Goddess’ were understood as protective presences, often associated with mothers, daughters or sea goddesses, meant to face

danger first and guide the vessel safely through uncertain waters. David responded that he had heard a different version – figureheads were sometimes offerings to the sea, intended to appease unpredictable forces. He noted that in some stories the female form symbolised both care and risk, embodying the sea’s capacity to sustain life while demanding respect and restraint from sailors. (Field note, author, 24 August 2016)

Within these conditions, storytelling served as a situated form of orientation. Such storytelling resonates with ethnographic accounts of Polynesian navigators reading swell patterns (Finney, 2002), Arab sailors interpreting monsoon winds (Chaudhuri, 1985) and Chinese fisherfolk recounting the capriciousness of typhoons. Through contrasting versions of protection and appeasement, care and risk, the conversation provided a shared interpretive frame for thinking about uncertainty at sea. In this way, storytelling functioned as a navigational resource, linking present sensory engagement and practice with dispersed maritime imaginaries and enabling collective reflection on vulnerability, responsibility and endurance as the voyage continued. Narratives of storms, injuries and near misses formed a recurring genre of ethical pedagogy. These accounts encoded environmental cues and dispositions toward uncertainty, reinforcing awareness of vulnerability and interdependence.

Intercultural dimensions of storytelling were visible on and below deck. The under-deck saloon functioned as a shared social space where bodily fatigue, emotional exposure and informal learning converged. Participants from eight different nations exchanged stories over meals, often negotiating linguistic differences through demonstration and adaptive communication (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The under-deck saloon accommodating participants from eight different nations (image by author, August 2016).

Through repeated interaction in this confined space, participants developed an intuitive sense of group dynamics and mutual reliance. These daily practices illuminate how communication and learning at sea unfold through relation and movement. This dissolution of cultural borders reflects the non-hierarchical, interconnected worldview rooted in Daoist thought, which erases fixed binaries and centres mutual dependence (Yi et al, 2013).

As Ingold (2021) suggests, understanding grows along paths of movement and attention; at sea, darkness, fatigue and environmental variability reorganised perception, creating conditions in which narrative became a means of attunement to both others and the surrounding ecology. Storytelling functioned as heritage-in-action, weaving together movement, memory and intercultural relationships within the learning ecology of the floating island (Harvey, 2001).

*Social futures: ritualised labour and collective timing*

Ritualised labour aboard the tall ship structured learning through repetition, coordination and shared timing. From the outset of the voyage, daily routines such as sail handling, standing watch and vessel maintenance were introduced as ordinary work. These sequences were repeated under changing wind and sea conditions, embedding learning within the ship's everyday temporal rhythms and aligning participants' attention with the vessel's operational demands.



**Figure 2.** Coordinated sail handling as ritual practice (image by author, August 2016).

Sail handling provided a clear illustration of how collective timing emerged through practice (figure 2). Each manoeuvre depended on coordinated actions across dispersed positions on deck and aloft, so accurate timing became a shared responsibility. As Csordas (1993) suggests, such repeated bodily coordination fosters ‘somatic modes of attention’, where perception and action are organised through embodied synchrony. Over successive days, one could expect a gradual shift as participants begin to anticipate movements before commands were fully articulated, responding to the rhythm of the group and the movement of the vessel.

The watch system further structured this collective temporality. Dividing day and night into cyclical intervals, the watch synchronised human activity with wind, tide and the ship’s motion. During the 00:00–04:00 watch, for example, the routine practices included checking sail trim, maintaining lookout and entering log data. The repetition of these tasks offered orientation in conditions of uncertainty, fostering attentiveness to subtle environmental change. This aligns with Mack’s (2011) account of maritime temporality as a sensory synchronisation with the sea’s rhythms, and with Ingold’s (2000) notion of the ‘taskscape’, where time is experienced through the rhythmic coordination of movement and environment.



**Figure 3.** Climbing the mast as a routine daily exercise (image by author, August 2016).

Ritualisation was also evident in vertical labour such as mast climbing (figure 3). As a skill introduced early in the voyage and revisited under different weather conditions, mast climbing required participants to have trust in equipment, be attentive to wind and coordinate with others ascending and descending the rigging.

Participants reflected explicitly on this embodied shift. Fiona explained that she eventually ‘stopped thinking about each step and started moving with everyone else’. Such reflections marked a transition from conscious attention to embodied timing, where knowledge was expressed through synchronised movement.

During an early sail-handling manoeuvre on the third day of the voyage, coordination across the deck briefly broke down. The first officer commanded to set the sails, but responses were uneven: two trainees began pulling immediately, while others hesitated, scanning nearby lines before acting. Tension built asymmetrically along the halyard, causing the sail to rise unevenly and flap momentarily. A pause followed. Without further instruction, positions were adjusted – one participant shifted grip, another stepped half a pace back – and the sequence resumed. On the second attempt, movements aligned more closely, with hauling occurring in near-unison and the sail settling into place. (Field note, author, 27 August, 2016)

These practices illustrate how crew heritage was transmitted through a collective sense of repetition and performance. Sail-handling routines, watch rotations and embodied sequences carried traces of longer maritime traditions sustained through bodily transmission (Harrison, 2013). The tall ship functioned as a site of heritage-in-action, where continuity was maintained through coordinated practice embedded in everyday labour.

The sociality that emerges at sea is a reconfiguration of belonging itself. Participants often describe a newfound sensitivity to interdependence, a recognition that identity is formed through relations. The tall ship, therefore, becomes one such place: a temporary archipelago of bodies, stories and skills. Crew members carry these relational sensibilities home, forming small transnational islands of shared maritime experience that persist long after the voyage ends.

#### *Ecological futures: embodied mapping and ecological attunement*

Navigation at sea becomes a bodily, sensory and affective practice shaped by movement, weather and shifting spatial relations. On the tall ship, embodied mapping developed through sustained exposure to the vessel’s motion and the surrounding seascape. Orientation emerged gradually as participants learnt to move with the ship, attuning posture, balance and attention to wind, waves and changing conditions. Over time, the deck, rigging and horizon became familiar reference points, allowing participants to navigate confidently even when fatigued or having limited visibility.

Early in the voyage, movement across the deck was cautious and visually guided. Trainees frequently paused to locate handholds, adjusting stance only after observing others. During sudden rolls, balance was often regained through exaggerated corrective steps. As days passed, movement became smoother and less visually dependent. Participants began to anticipate the vessel’s motion, bracing before the deck tilted and shifting weight instinctively as wind pressure changed. (Field note, author, 9 September 2016)

Sensory mapping is central to this process. Participants learnt to read the environment through tactile and auditory cues: the vibration of a taut line, the flutter of a sail losing wind, the creak of rigging under strain, or the altered rhythm of the hull meeting swell. Such embodied reading resonates with maritime traditions that privilege sensory attunement, including Polynesian swell navigation (Finney, 2002), Indian Ocean monsoon seamanship (Chaudhuri, 1985) and Chinese fisherfolk practices attentive to

cloud form and water colour. Ingold's (2000) notion of the taskscape captures this process, where spatial knowledge grows through skilled activity and repeated engagement.

Ecological attunement formed a central part of this process. Changes in wind direction, swell pattern and weather conditions shaped daily routines and required constant recalibration of attention. During night watches or periods of poor visibility, participants relied on auditory cues, tactile feedback from ropes and subtle shifts in the vessel's motion to maintain orientation. Several trainees described moments when they began to 'read' the sea through their bodies, such that they sensed approaching changes before anyone announced them verbally (figure 4). This fluid, relational experience of islandness depicts the ship as a floating island and seas as interconnected nodes animated by vital energy (Li, 2010).



**Figure 4.** Watching the sunrise during a 4–8 am watch (image by author, August 2016).

Encounters with marine life further shaped ecological awareness. The appearance of dolphins alongside the bow or a sudden concentration of seabirds often interrupted routine labour, redirecting collective attention outward (figure 5).



**(a)**



**(b)**

**Figure 5.** Marine life encountered at sea: **(a)** dolphins and **(b)** seabirds (images by author, August 2016).

During one such encounter, work on deck slowed as participants gathered along the rail, tracking the movement of marine life, such as dolphins, in the water and commenting on its behaviour and proximity. In later conversation, they referenced these moments as turning points in how they perceived the sea as a living system within which the vessel moved. Periods of heightened vulnerability sharpened this awareness.

It was a really windy night, and steering felt like something you had to keep adjusting all the time. You couldn't see any land, and everything on deck felt tense. We were leaning with the ship, gripping the wheel and the ropes, just trying to stay steady. You stopped thinking ahead and just reacted to how the ship was moving, one moment at a time. (Henry, interview, 29 August 2016)

Such moments foregrounded the ocean's agency as an active participant in learning. This experiential vulnerability aligns with Daoist cosmological principles of harmonising rhythms, where effective action arises through responsive adjustment to changing conditions (Ames and Hall, 2003). Over time, participants developed an intuitive sense of where to stand during manoeuvres, who anticipated environmental shifts and who offered calm during moments of instability.

These relational geographies organised trust and responsibility across the vessel. Viewed through the lens of archipelagic pedagogy, embodied mapping cultivated an orientation to space grounded in relation and process. Spatial knowledge emerged through movement, encounter and collective activity across a dynamic environment (DeLoughrey, 2007). These practices also staged maritime heritage in an ecological register, sustaining traditions of environmental reading and bodily navigation through repetition and adaptation.

## **Implications and conclusions**

This paper has shown how ocean-based learning aboard a tall ship generates forms of knowledge, heritage and intercultural relation through movement, ecological attunement and shared vulnerability. By examining storytelling, ritualised labour and embodied mapping as everyday practices, the analysis demonstrates how learning unfolds within a moving ecology. The tall ship emerges as a floating island, concentrating dispersed maritime traditions, environmental forces and social relationships into an intensified space of encounter.

Through tracing dispersed maritime genealogies, ranging from Chinese monsoon corridors to Pacific and Indian Ocean voyaging traditions, and reading them alongside contemporary sail-training cultures, this paper has shown how the tall ship functions as a floating island: a mobile ecology that concentrates older oceanic ways of knowing into an intensified, lived environment. On this basis, it has advanced the AHM as a framework for researching intercultural learning and heritage transmission in mobile maritime settings. Centred on the tall ship, the AHM integrates archipelagic thought, Daoist relational philosophy and processual heritage approaches through four inter-related dimensions: relational ontology, moving ecologies, dispersed traditions and embodied storymapping. These dimensions translate ocean-based ethnography into a methodological orientation for analysing how learning and heritage take shape within more-than-human assemblages of wind, weather, living creatures and historical trajectories.

The findings carry important implications for how learning is conceptualised in archipelagic and islanded contexts. Storytelling at sea functioned as a mode of situated navigation, orienting participants in uncertain contexts by linking present experience to dispersed maritime histories. Ritualised labour cultivated collective timing and coordination, transmitting heritage through embodied repetition and shared rhythm. Embodied mapping fostered ecological awareness by grounding spatial understanding in bodily responsiveness to wind, tide and movement. These insights suggest a reorientation of heritage thinking toward heritage-in-motion. Maritime heritage was enacted through

everyday practices such as handling sails and standing watch and by sharing stories, in ways that sustained continuity through adaptation and repetition. Such processual heritage aligns with both archipelagic perspectives and Daoist relational thought, which understand continuity as emerging through dynamic balance and responsiveness to change.

The implications extend beyond maritime settings. As climatic volatility and ecological uncertainty reshape educational and cultural imaginaries, the capacities cultivated aboard the tall ship – attunement, coordination, relational responsibility – point toward forms of learning suited to archipelagic futures. These futures privilege connection over isolation, responsiveness over control and process over permanence. Ocean-based learning thus offers more than experiential enrichment; it provides a methodological and ethical orientation for engaging with environments characterised by movement, interdependence and uncertainty.

In summary, the AHM contributes to debates in environmental humanities, heritage studies and intercultural education by redirecting attention from fixed sites to heritage-in-motion. It foregrounds routes, practices and situated traces of everyday labour as key sites of cultural continuity, and aligns with emerging work that treats mobile and transient practices as generative spaces of ecological and social imagination. It also invites scholars and practitioners to take moving environments seriously as sites of knowledge-making, and to recognise how cultural continuity is sustained through routes, rhythms and everyday practice. In doing so, it positions archipelagic thinking not only as an analytic lens but as a practical orientation for navigating the intertwined challenges of ecology, culture and education in a changing world.

### About the author



Dr Yujun Xu is a research professor at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China where she works at the intersection of intercultural learning, maritime heritage and environmental humanities. She has conducted long-term qualitative and ethnographic research on international sail-training programmes, exploring how tall ships function as mobile learning environments that bring together intercultural encounter, maritime heritage and more-than-human relations. Her broader scholarly interests include living heritage, water-based experiential learning, ecological aesthetics and intercultural communication. For more information about her research, publications and academic activities, go to: <https://person.zju.edu.cn/en/xuyujun>.

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### Declaration on the use of generative AI

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