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Performing Risk: Climate Anxiety and Everyday Adaptation in Mong Cai's Coastal Communities

Ngo Thi Minh [1*], Tran Quoc Viet [2]
[1-2] Hanoi Metropolitan University, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Ngo Thi Minh**

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Abstract
This article explores how the residents of Móng Cái—a coastal border city in northeastern Vietnam—live with climatic uncertainty through their everyday moral and emotional practices. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024 across Trà Cổ, Ka Long, and Vạn Ninh, it argues that climate anxiety functions not merely as a psychological condition but as an emotional infrastructure binding society together. Through rituals of sea invocation, the act of "watching the water," and the collective circulation of storm information, local people sustain networks of mutual care in which risk becomes a moral performance. The study proposes the framework of "everyday adaptation as emotional infrastructure" to capture the community's capacity to transform uncertainty into moral sensibility. This reconceptualization broadens understandings of climate adaptation—not as a managerial technique but as an ethics of coexistence—offering insights for coastal societies worldwide amid planetary turbulence.

Keywords: Climate Anxiety, Emotional Infrastructure, Performing Risk, Everyday Adaptation, Coastal Móng Cái

Introduction – Living with Risk in Móng Cái

At the northeastern edge of Vietnam, Móng Cái unfolds as a city leaning toward the sea while resting against the border. It is a landscape where wind, water, and human life constantly negotiate their coexistence. Each year, residents endure unpredictable rhythms—early storms, rising tides, muddy currents, drifting sandbanks, and long rains that arrive out of season. On damp mornings in Trà Cổ, people read the clouds to sense the day ahead; in Vạn Ninh, the sound of wind slipping through tiled roofs is taken as the sky's whisper. For them, the climate is not a neutral backdrop but a sentient presence demanding moral response. Over recent decades, climate change has turned coastal life into a continuous negotiation with risk. Yet, locals do not treat risk as an external disaster to be fought against but as a rhythm to be felt and kept in balance. They *read* the weather through sea-praying rituals, *listen* to the ocean's moods through experience, and *respond* with gestures that are both practical and affective—tightening a sail, shifting the racks of drying fish, or warning each other of an approaching storm via the radio.

From this vantage, the study begins with a central question:

How do Móng Cái's coastal residents perform and live with climate risk?

Through close observation of emotional and material expressions in daily life, the research argues that "risk" here is not simply a threat but a social practice in which anxiety, faith, and moral order are intertwined. Instead of treating climate adaptation as a technocratic or policy-driven process, the study approaches it as a moral and affective discourse—one through which people learn to *live with* nature by performing care, ritual, and shared sensitivity.

Móng Cái is thus chosen not only for its geographical specificity—a border city both maritime and transnational—but also for its emblematic condition of living amid uncertainty. Here, risk is absorbed into a moral grammar of endurance: "When the sea is angry, we must soothe it," as one fisherman said.

Ultimately, this article understands climate anxiety not as a symptom of fear but as a social energy that binds, alerts, and sustains. Performing risk becomes less an act than a way of being, where emotion and ethics coalesce, enabling the community to persist amid the fluid movements of water, wind, and border politics.

2. Literature Review – When Risk Becomes an Emotional Experience

The notion of *climate risk* emerged in global discourse as a scientific indicator—quantified through indexes and hazard maps. Yet over the past two decades, a different trajectory has taken shape: the study of climate as social experience. Rather than treating people as passive victims of natural transformation, recent scholarship foregrounds the community's affective, performative, and moral capacities to live with uncertainty (Ahmed, 2014; Anderson, 2009; Amin, 2014) [1-3].

Sara Ahmed (2014) [1] conceives emotion as a *politics of attachment*, where fear, hope, and anxiety extend beyond the private psyche to form collective atmospheres that govern social conduct. In coastal contexts, such states of vigilance and unease can be read as moral practices—people observe, anticipate, and share weather information not simply for self-protection but to safeguard the whole community. Anderson (2009) [3] calls this the *affective atmosphere*: a diffuse layer of feeling that renders risk *sensible* before it becomes measurable.

Parallel to this turn, material and infrastructural studies have shown that the environment is no longer a static backdrop but an agent in shaping social emotions. Bennett (2010) [4] speaks of *vibrant matter*—materiality endowed with affective and animating force—while Amin (2014) [2] describes *lively infrastructure* as a web of sensing relations sustaining everyday life. Larkin (2013) [14] adds that infrastructure carries both "politics and poetics": it is at once a technology of power and a medium of belonging. Within this view, water, boats, wind, waste, and shoreline roads emerge as moral intermediaries through which residents rehearse the capacities of care, foresight, and adjustment.

At a broader scale, Gandy (2022) [10] and Edensor (2020) [8] emphasize that urban infrastructures under climatic instability constitute not merely technical systems but affective and political ecologies. When materials decay, anxiety itself becomes a connective force, opening new possibilities for moral reflection—a condition that Berlant (2011) [5] terms *cruel optimism*: the persistence of hope amid the precarity of shared futures.

For the Global South, Robinson (2016) [16] and Lawhon & Truelove (2020) [15] critique the "Northern bias" in climate urbanism, which tends to frame southern experiences as deficient or exceptional. They call for a *Southern urban critique*—an understanding of cities and communities through their own moral and affective logics, where risk, emotion, and ethics intertwine in distinctive rhythms of survival. Simone's (2004) [17] notion of *people as infrastructure* captures this idea vividly: social relations, trust, and emotion themselves constitute an enduring architecture parallel to technical systems.

Viewed from this perspective, Móng Cái—a coastal border city—remains undertheorized. Existing studies on *blue urbanism* or *urban political ecology* (Elden, 2013; Hein & Schubert, 2021) [9, 12] largely center on Western contexts, where the sea is imagined as landscape or resource. In contrast, border zones like Móng Cái inhabit a dual condition: exposed to climatic volatility while entangled in administrative surveillance and geopolitical tension. Within such conditions, communities cultivate spontaneous emotional infrastructures where rituals, rumors, and sensory observation become subtle mechanisms of risk governance.

The current research gap is threefold:

- Most climate adaptation studies still privilege policy and technology while neglecting affect, performance, and ethics as adaptive foundations.
- Though the idea of *affective infrastructure* is well developed in Western theory, it remains weakly connected to Southeast Asian experiences—particularly in border and hydrological settings like Móng Cái.
- Few studies treat *climate anxiety* as a performative social practice in which people not only react to risk but *enact* it to preserve moral order and meaning.

From this lacuna, the present article proposes *performing risk* as a southern lens on climate adaptation. Risk, here, is not merely managed through technology or planning but felt, enacted, and sustained through the emotional architectures of everyday life. The guiding question posed earlier thus seeks its answer not in technical measures but in the subtle gestures, circulating affects, and ordinary rituals through which societies learn to endure—ethically and emotionally—within a world of moving waters.

3. Theoretical Framework – Emotion, Materiality, and the Ethics of Living with Risk

In places where waves touch the border, existence itself is a negotiation. Móng Cái is not merely a city of water; it is a city of organized feeling, where people learn to balance fear and trust. Once climate risk enters daily life, it ceases to stand as an external "threat" and instead becomes a shared emotional field—one that breeds vigilance even as it binds people together.

Within this field, emotion functions as a moral mechanism, like a fine current running through everyday gestures. Ahmed (2014) [1] reminds us that emotions orient the body toward the world—they guide people toward what to trust, where to hold on. Anderson (2009) [3] speaks of this as an *affective atmosphere*, where societies think *with* and *through* feeling. These layered affects shape the community's agency: Móng Cái's residents do not wait for orders to respond; they *sense* risk and act together, as though anxiety itself were a navigational signal.

If emotion is the current, then materiality is the conduit. Each piece of infrastructure—from the dike and fishing sail to the neighborhood loudspeaker—embodies memory and responsibility. Amin (2014) [2] views infrastructure as both functional and infused with human vitality, while Bennett (2010) [4] suggests that matter "vibrates" with ethical and affective charge. In Móng Cái, such infrastructures form a composite structure—tangible yet moral—that anchors social order amid flux. When residents touch a sail, they are not only touching an object; they are touching what is *right*, the ethical logic that steadies them within a shifting world.

Between *agency* and *structure*, the deepest motivation does not lie in mere survival but in the desire to live rightly in an uncertain world. Climate anxiety, then, is not a negative

reaction but an ethical reflex: people fear *for* one another, not just for themselves. As Larkin (2013) [14] observes, infrastructure carries "the poetics of existence"—the act of maintaining, repairing, or ritualizing becomes moral practice. In this sense, small gestures—watching the tide, warning of a storm, tidying the pier—constitute the working of an emotional infrastructure through which the community learns to live with risk by sensing, not by systematizing.

This theoretical frame therefore refuses to separate "emotion" from "materiality," seeing both as co-constitutive of the moral architecture of sustainability. To dwell at the border is to learn the mandates of water, to trust amid doubt, to perform anxiety as a form of mutual care. At its core, this is a sensorial epistemology of ethics—one where survival depends less on eliminating risk than on cultivating the sensitivity to *feel* it.

4. Methodology – An Ethnography of Anticipation Where the City Meets the Border

This inquiry began with movement: tracing the Ka Long River, where the city ends and the water begins to tell its story. Móng Cái, poised between the sea and the border, demands that the observer listen with both attentiveness and restraint. I stayed in three localities—Trà Cổ, Ka Long, and Vạn Ninh—not for their representativeness, but because each embodied a distinct rhythm of shared anxiety: the quickened pace of a seaside district opening to tourism, the fractured tempo of settlements near the checkpoint, and the lingering calm of a distant fishing village. These contrasts revealed the *velocity of feeling*—how people sense, respond, and regain balance within instability.

I lived among them, in homes where the sound of waves struck the walls at midnight. Mornings were spent at the pier, watching how villagers read the sky by cloud color; afternoons with women untangling nets, listening to their tales of "strange signs"; nights in sea-invocation rituals, where the entire village sang an old hymn to calm the ocean. Ethnography here meant relearning others' affective rhythms—learning to anticipate, to stay alert, to trust, and to wait.

Twenty interlocutors became the study's narrators: eight fishermen and boat owners, six housewives, four local officials and meteorological officers, and two elders preserving ritual memory. Selection followed emotional attachment rather than occupation or age: those who still *felt* the sea, who could narrate without performing authority, who allowed me to sit silently beside them when rain began. They represented two spatial tempos—the fast-changing urban zones (Trà Cổ, Ka Long) and the slower, steadier rhythm of Vạn Ninh. This contrast revealed how adaptation varied with speed: where change was rapid, people were more alert; where life slowed, emotion thickened and ritual deepened.

Conversations unfolded in humid spaces—on boats, in kitchens, at roadside tea stalls. I asked little, mostly prompting stories: how they read the weather, secured their boats, trusted omens, or feared the untimely rain. Notes and recordings captured the words, but much of the data lay in silence, glances, and tonal shifts when speaking of the "angry water."

Fieldnotes were repeatedly reread to trace emotional sequences—worry, waiting, and care—each treated as a miniature infrastructure linking human gestures to material surroundings: house walls, sails, poles, loudspeakers. I coded and compared data across "fast" and "slow" zones, recognizing that speed—of wind, of policy, of memory—reshapes how risk is perceived. Throughout, I maintained an ethical distance: present but unobtrusive. In a borderland, the researcher's presence is always observed; silence, therefore, became a form of respect. Trust was built through small gestures—sharing tea, joining post-storm cleanups, or quietly helping at communal temples. Such gestures created what might be called *field trust*—unwritten, weather-tested, and earned through time.

All recordings were transcribed manually in ELAN to preserve pauses, tone, and rhythm—the emotional grain of speech. Texts were then analyzed in NVivo 14 following the tripartite framework: *anticipatory affect* (anxiety, forecasting, vigilance), *moral materiality* (care, maintenance, watching), and *social performance* (ritual, collective action, expressive behavior). Rather than counting frequency, the analysis reconstructed *affective chains*—how emotions arose, spread, and transformed into acts. I combined narrative coding with thematic layering, reading each story as self-contained yet relationally situated in its spatial-material context. Emerging themes were then cross-compared across sites (e.g., "anticipating storms," "watching the sea," "tidal rumors") using Atlas.ti diagrams to visualize the network linking emotion, action, and infrastructure.

To ensure reliability, all data underwent *slow verification*: three months after fieldwork, I revisited main interlocutors, reading excerpts aloud, allowing them to amend, clarify, or remain silent. This process was not merely factual validation but an ethical gesture—restoring participants' right to self-correction within a border ethnography.

Ultimately, this approach forms an *ethnography of anticipation*: knowledge generated not through questioning and answering, but through dwelling long enough to learn the language of anxiety. In a space where the city meets the frontier, where state, sea, and memory converge, what matters most is not the quantity of data but the ability to attune to the moral rhythm of social life—the quiet, persistent resonance that endures amid storms and shifting tides.

5. Findings – Rituals of Anxiety and the Ethics of Maintenance

Dawn in Trà Cổ begins with sound: the ward loudspeaker announcing the monsoon wind, fishermen testing the engine's growl, waves striking the concrete revetment. This bustle signals vigilance rather than calm. In fast-changing zones, people learn to sense danger before it hardens into data. "The wind is odd today—there's likely a depression," a boat owner says while tightening the anchor rope. The remark seems casual yet carries an entire informal forecasting system where experience and feeling substitute for meteorological bulletins.

This anticipatory sensibility operates as a shared language. No one teaches it; it is sustained through repetition—reading the water's color, listening to the line of waves, watching seabirds' flight. Such gestures compose a spontaneous emotional infrastructure through which everyone participates without formal coordination. Fieldnotes return again and again to the phrase "watching the water." It is less a technical operation than a moral act. Here, to be alert is to care; anxiety is carried for the collective, not just the self.

At Ka Long—the seam between river and town—this affect takes a different form. People learn weather news from the meteorological station and from port-closure "orders."

Updates on storms and border control often travel through the same loudspeaker. Risk along the frontier is therefore institutional as well as natural. A market vendor recalls: "When the speaker bans boats from leaving, I know the storm is real—because the state is anxious too." The line ends with a half-smile, half-scoff. That blend of apprehension and acceptance reveals climate fear as a tacit dialogue between residents and authority. People "hear" the state through the voice of the wind, and "read" the weather through official reaction.

In Vạn Ninh—a "slow-change" zone—anxiety settles into ritual. Each storm season the village holds a sea-invocation ceremony, less to repel calamity than to steady the heart. Drums, incense, and whispered prayers fold into the sound of the tide. "The rite reminds the sea that we are still here," an elder says softly. Risk becomes personified: the sea is a feeling subject, capable of anger and of ease. Ritual thus serves less as religion than as a device for regulating collective emotion.

Women often bring salt and leaves to the ceremony, lay them beneath the altar, then share them to take home as "salt that keeps the house." The gesture recurs year after year, forming an ethical habit—calming space through sensuous matter. These objects work as emotional mediators; carrying the salt home, people sense they have offered a small pledge against uncertainty.

Across sites, feeling appears as a social skill. Fishermen read risk with their eyes; women curate rumor with careful storytelling; local officials disseminate reassurance through set phrases. These micro-skills produce interlocking performances in which everyone watches and is watched. In village meetings, the fishermen's silence during forecasts signals gravity; the chorus of "yes" at the headman's closing line marks the gentle sealing of worry. Such unspoken sequences form an affective loop that often substitutes for formal control.

Revisiting my own "emotion diary," I recognized a constant: every mode of maintenance in Móng Cái—from ritual to small gestures—turns on a single principle. Risk need not be eliminated; it must be tended. Anxiety, kept in rhythm, becomes the ground of endurance; extinguished, it erodes collective responsiveness. This craft of "keeping worry" enables the coastal community to hold together despite the ceaseless pressures of weather and policy.

Hence the interview corpus favors the words "stable" (ổn) and "even" (đều) over "safe." Stability here is not quietude; it is the competence to live with disquiet. Evenness speaks less to climate than to moral tempo: steady care, steady sharing of news, steady mending of roofs after each gust.

6. Discussion – Emotion as the Moral Grammar of Adaptation

The material shows that in Móng Cái, climate adaptation grows from chains of feeling sustained as a way of life. Vigilance, the sea-invocation rite, and minor everyday acts do more than enable survival; they recast what sustainability means. Much Western theory frames adaptation as technical adjustment to tame risk. Along the border, adaptation takes the form of empathy and co-exposure—a mode of moral attunement that sociology has seldom captured.

This affective stratum generates a different logic of infrastructure. Amin's idea of lively infrastructure points to life coursing through material systems; Bennett attributes a moral resonance to things; Larkin reads infrastructure as the poetics of power. In Móng Cái, material forms are felt as ethics taking shape. Walls, boats, loudspeakers, even the river itself act as keepers of order by imparting rhythm to collective anxiety. Infrastructure, in this sense, becomes emotional infrastructure—moral architecture where affect, matter, and obligation weave together.

Such a configuration also complicates earlier views of affective atmosphere. Anderson emphasizes diffusion; Móng Cái shows organization. As worry is distributed with cadence—from fishermen to traders, from broadcast speakers to ritual grounds—the community sustains equilibrium without command. Emotion operates as a soft governance, at once spontaneous and normatively charged.

Comparative glimpses clarify the distinctiveness of this pattern. In New Orleans or Jakarta, resilience studies often pivot on physical rebuilding and post-disaster recovery. In Venice, living with water is read as cultural habit yet remains closely tied to technical control. In Móng Cái, adaptation unfolds before, during, and alongside hazard as a daily ethic. The outcome is not "resilience" in a technological key, but moral porosity—the capacity to absorb instability without shattering.

This difference suggests a theoretical shift: everyday adaptation as affective infrastructure. The move arises from reflecting against the grain of established theories. If Ahmed sees emotion as the politics of attachment and Edensor describes the liveliness of matter, Móng Cái indicates that feeling and materiality co-produce an ethics of existence. It marks a passage from an affective turn toward an ethical turn of affect, where emotion functions as society's self-education under uncertainty.

Viewed more widely, Móng Cái is not an outlier. Threshold cities along water—Lagos, Kolkata, coastal towns in Thailand—exhibit kindred moral patterns: vigilance, mutual aid, the ritualization of risk. The case thus offers a general proposition for littoral societies: anxiety can serve as ethical infrastructure, and sustainability can begin with the practice of worrying for one another.

The implications travel beyond the local. They invite a rethinking of humanity's climate project: adaptation is less the conquest of nature than the cultivation of sympathy with a transforming world. Where a society preserves worry as a shared capacity, it preserves moral competency—a resource diluted by many development templates.

In this sense, the findings refine our understanding of a small city while also sketching the contours of a planetary moral infrastructure under climate volatility. Wherever risk becomes lived experience—from the Mekong's banks to the Atlantic shore—the pattern may recur in altered form: communities that know how to worry, to wait, and to hold one another amid wind and water. To adapt, simply put, is to feel together.

Limitations and directions for further research

This study covers three coastal sites in Móng Cái over a little more than a year, which does not exhaust seasonal cycles or longer climatic shifts. Working with twenty interlocutors allowed deep mapping of affective structure yet could not capture generational, gendered, or livelihood diversity after the pandemic. Border sensitivity constrained certain forms of data, so interactions between residents and the state are recorded primarily at the level of expression rather than through institutional mechanisms. A focus on emotion also

meant that technical layers of infrastructure were only partially examined.

Two paths open from these limits. First, pursue cross-regional comparisons across Southeast Asian borderwaters—Koh Kong (Cambodia), Ranong (Thailand), reaches of the Hậu River—to test whether an "ethics of anxiety" is characteristic of tropical communities. Such comparison would probe the scope of everyday adaptation as affective infrastructure and enable a cartography of climate emotion. Second, integrate ethnography of affect with environmental sensing—tracking humidity, storm frequency, and signal density—to build an interdisciplinary model of coastal cities' emotional sensitivity. Local anticipatory knowledge and scientific observation could then jointly recalibrate standards of sustainability around attunement and co-exposure rather than control.

7. Conclusion – The Ethics of Living with Uncertainty

On my last morning in Trà Cổ, the ebb left only footprints and nets not yet gathered. The scene distilled the journey of the research: a city learning to live by a gentle vigilance. In Móng Cái, people do not wall themselves off from storms; they keep their breathing even, and that cadence sustains existence.

From small lives one can read a distinct mode of adaptation: endurance maintained through feeling rather than technology. Anxiety here is not a sign of frailty; it is the moral substrate that keeps concern alive. Emotion becomes a social organizer through which fear, care, and alertness bind a community.

"Everyday adaptation as affective infrastructure" thus addresses more than one shoreline. It offers a way of thinking for societies dwelling in a climatic age: instead of tabulating damage, attend to how people preserve their humanity under threat. Along the border, the crucial skill is not prediction; it is the capacity to remain with uncertainty, to share worry, and to let that worry hold people together.

What unfolds in Móng Cái resonates elsewhere. Many waterside communities are searching for ways to live with changes beyond their control. This article therefore adds a small piece to a larger project: relearning how to exist ethically in a fragile world. If there is a quiet message, it is this: computation does not keep society intact—care does. Those coastal residents show that, between risk and uncertainty, ethics lies less in triumph over nature than in finding a way to breathe with it.

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