“Art of Uncertainty”—Taking Fujian Art as an Example

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Abstract. As Fujian is located in a culturally open area, its art presentations have distinctive regional characteristics. From a holistic perspective, the development of traditional art in Fujian is dominated by art forms represented by art inheritors and cultural heritage. From a local perspective, Fujian art has entered the context of contemporary art history and has been divided into contemporary Fujian art and traditional Fujian art by modern cultural viewpoints. In this paper, “Fujian art” from both the holistic and local perspectives is discussed at three levels: the uncertainty principle and the study of Fujian’s regional culture, the contemporary characteristics of Fujian culture and art, and the development of contemporary Fujian art, which are discussed based on different art types and their cultural and regional characteristics. The paper argues that the development of Fujian art has a strong artistic vitality and cultural inclusiveness and, from the contemporary perspective, has an obvious characteristic of “uncertainty” in the field of cultural geography.

Keywords: Fujian art; Fujian contemporary art; uncertainty; art research.

1. Introduction

To explore the entire development of Fujian art, it is necessary to first discuss the cultural and geographical characteristics of Fujian Province, China. Geographically speaking, Fujian is located on the southeastern coast of China, boasting mountains, long coastlines, and rivers. Southern Fujian, commonly known as Minnan, has many excellent ports, abundant marine resources, and shipping facilities due to its long and winding coastline. However, Fujian is divided into several closed areas by its complex terrain of intertwined mountains and waters, making it difficult for people in different regions to communicate with each other in those days with poor transportation. For example, the prosperous and diverse culture of Quanzhou port and the tranquil Wuyi Mountain show totally distinct cultural characteristics. Culturally speaking, the development of Fujian’s artistic and cultural characteristics was influenced by cultural blending as Fujian received many migrants over the ages. To date, the demographic composition of Fujian shows the history of people from central China and merchants from other countries moving to the area from ancient times to the present, and includes the localization of the Min-Yue culture, the Western religious culture, and the Central Plains culture into the history of Fujian art and culture and demonstrating the localization of Minyue culture, the Western religious culture, and the culture from the Central Plains into the history of Fujian art and culture. The spread and development of all types of art and culture in Fujian are extremely complicated, not confined to a certain area or era, nor did an art form prevail for a long time. Therefore, the most distinctive artistic characteristics or styles in a certain period can only be judged according to the time when they exist. As the various styles in Fujian art all have their strengths and values, the appreciation of a particular form of Fujian art is not about judging a realistic standard of value but about describing the historical evidence of the existence of that art form.

2. Uncertainty Principle the Study of the Regional Culture in Fujian

In 1927, German physicist Werner Karl Heisenberg proposed the uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics, which has been applied to explain certain laws of daily life for nearly a century after its introduction. The principle maintains that humans can never know the exact position and speed of an object. “Uncertainty” represents the results of experimental measurements. All matter in the universe shows both particles and waves. A particle is present at a fixed and precise position at
each instant. The exact position and speed of an object are meaningless. Waves are ubiquitous interference waves and spread into spaces. Wavelengths are related to momentum. A very heavy object has a lot of momentum and a very short wavelength, and the changes in it seem to be invisible to the naked eye (objects in everyday life are changing). Experiments on the superposition of wavelengths reveal that quantum objects contain waves and particles, without certainty of position and momentum. A wave packet represents the momentum of a wave, and the latter is in any wave packet space. A region in the center of a wave packet can be found in the wave packet space, and a larger number of waves mean more possibilities. The position and momentum are connected by uncertainty. More wavers are needed to generate more momentum and uncertainty to determine the position, and a larger wave packet and positions and greater uncertainty are needed to obtain the precise momentum.

Heisenberg’s theory is not a standard type of “good or bad” question. Instead, it combines the nature of particles and waves to produce an inevitable result. It is a practical limitation on both measurement and the properties of an object. It is a part of the basic structure of the universe. Although the uncertainty principle deals with problems in physical space, it is precisely in line with the concept of cultural space in cultural geography. “Uncertainty” is often used by Western postmodernists to support academic theories, and the way contemporary culture is viewed in the postmodern context is also characterized by a certain “uncertainty”. In the field of cultural studies, a wave packet space is considered a cultural space, a particle can represent a cultural phenomenon, waves can denote various types of history, a wavelength can denote a certain cultural dynastic history, and momentum can refer to the research results and methodology (a facilitating role) of a researcher. These physics concepts are again reconstructed from the perspective of cultural history, based on the practical significance of the uncertainty principle in physics: the research on a particular cultural phenomenon or the description of cultural history is not a matter of a realistic accuracy of a standard culture but aimed at deepening human thinking and perception of the evolution of cultural history. The practice of this theory leads to markedly limited results, and the shortcoming due to its timeliness inevitably requires cultural researchers to follow the changes, even if they can never reach an absolutely precise conclusion.

British geographer Mike Crang advocates theoretical experimentation and structuring in the context of scientific geography by breaking with the traditional methodological framework of cultural studies. This kind of practical activity has a certain function of cultural introspection. “If we step out of culture or remain caught up in the value system being studied, we should reflect on the process of testing the authenticity of the experiment; we should also be clearly aware of whether the culture we are in can affect research results when making descriptions,” noted Crang. He identifies four approaches to cultural introspection: objectivity and awareness (the blurred boundaries of objectivity and the universal significance of mainstream understanding), an external culture that emphasizes universal truths (facts that cannot be objective in postmodernism), the external characteristics of scientific and academic groups (the real life rooted in theory and constructing methods), and a particular worldview (cultural geography is merely a way of seeing the world).1 According to Crang’s methodological approach to cultural introspection, culture is abstract and unmeasurable, and sometimes even abstract intellectual tools cannot describe the precise location. Scientific conclusions, instead of being the discoverers of eternal, universal laws, are sometimes merely representations of a time-sensitive culture. The development of society and science serves as the material and cultural basis for cultural consensus. Scientific and technological experience and socio-cultural development complement each other. Therefore, the uncertainty of Fujian culture, coupled with its products (Fujian’s contemporary art), can be seen as the focus of the exploration of the general characteristics of Fujian art from the perspective of cultural studies.

Fujian, located in a unique geographical environment, has unique social beliefs. It combines the universal characteristics of local beliefs and distinct regional cultures. Overall, Fujian culture is traditional yet open. In addition, the development of religious culture in this region features “uncertainty”. For example, the question of how to divide cultural beliefs in the Minnan region has
vexed scholars in this field. Should Minnan religions be classified as polytheistic, monotheistic, or one admiring dominant gods from the perspective of the types of beliefs? Should they be classified as natural and humanistic religions in terms of cultural attributes? Or should they be divided into tribal, national, and ethnic due to different regional characteristics? Taxonomic classification is fraught with ambiguity because the cultural field is changing is constantly changing. As the development of Fujian’s social and cultural history is characterized by complex and variable uncertainties, it is better to follow the timeliness of regional facts in order to explore an accurate portrayal of the origin of art and culture in a certain period of time. In addition, the folk beliefs in some areas of Fujian do not have clear organizational and ideological systems, which need to be treated separately and excluded from this spatio-temporal category.

3. Contemporary Characteristics of Fujian Culture and Art

The ecological models and art styles of Fujian art have special forms due to the diverse folk culture of the province. Therefore, the more we know about the complex background of folklore and artisan culture behind the wide range of art forms in Fujian, the more we wonder whether traditional Fujian handicrafts belong to the category of “art” in the usual sense. There are many interpretations of “art” in the history of art and philosophy in different countries. From the perspective of arts and crafts, artware is produced by activities in which human beings create art with their hands. Since prehistoric times, mankind has used different handicap techniques to create functional objects. In modern society, handicrafts are not only practical but also artistic. Because of the development of the artistic nature of modern crafts, the history of arts and crafts started. A “craft” refers to a complete activity of art creation based on tools and supported by fine creative skills and decorative patterns. Furthermore, modern and traditional art cannot be passed down smoothly without the cultural meanings of “crafts”. Excellent artware contains the concepts of artistic design (i.e., practicality and aesthetics). However, there are pure art creations that only focus on aesthetic significance rather than functions. From the perspective of art and cultural space, the creation of Fujian’s handicrafts features an active form and can be passed down. The development and passing down of the creation of neolithic artifacts, the aesthetic recreation of everyday ware in different times, and the craft of making traditional food are all good examples. This recreation and passing down of traditional handicrafts according to the aesthetic supply and demand of the times also has its special social and artistic value. Moreover, the “Hare’s fur teacup” from Shuiji Town, Jianyang District, Nanping City, Fujian Province was a popular type of tea ware among scholars and officials in the Southern Song Dynasty, which was used for tea tasting competitions. It is said that emperors in the Song Dynasty loved tea, leading the trend of tea tasting and competition among various social strata. Some people even saw this type of teacup as a symbol of power and status. The white porcelain made in Dehua, Fujian was introduced to Europe and the United States in the Ming Dynasty, collected by aristocrats and museums as works of art. Since the boom of overseas trade, the beauty of Fujian’s ware and utensils has attracted attention in the field of global cultural history. For example, the aforementioned white porcelain, also known as Blanc Dechine, is incredibly popular among European and American collectors. The British Museum alone has collected more than 2,000 pieces of Dehua white porcelain since its founding in 1753. Of course, some Chinese cultural relics that are in other countries now record the history of humiliation that is firmly entrenched in Chinese people’s minds.

In addition, Fujian art contains precious cultural heritage, which inevitably has unique regional, social, artistic, and cultural value. Cultural heritage is divided into tangible heritage and intangible heritage, both of which are artworks presented by passing down traditional artistic techniques and unique folk characteristics, despite their different ways of existing in society. Therefore, Fujian art is complex and exhibits distinctive features. In other words, the local culture is continuously integrated with other cultures from the outside.
Most of the earliest inhabitants of Fujian migrated from the Central Plains, and cultures from central China influenced the development of Fujian art. Since Fujian is located in the southernmost part of China, its hinterland was barely affected or damaged culturally by war in the Central Plains, and some art forms that had “disappeared” in central China were preserved to a large extent. The most popular Nanyin, a living fossil of folk music from Fujian, is an excellent example. This form of music has “witnessed” the development of music in China since the Tang Dynasty, and it is the best-preserved and most content-rich music genre in the history of ancient music in China. Fujian has been dubbed the world’s religious museum. Minyue people believed in ghosts, gods, and witchcraft. During the Han and Tang Dynasties, Taoism, a native Chinese religion, was introduced to Fujian. Due to the development of foreign trade in the various ports in the province, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Manichaeanism, and other foreign religions and cultures were introduced to Fujian, enriching the religious beliefs of Fujian people and developing an overall style of “being based on local beliefs and supplemented by foreign religions and cultures”.

Afterward, this unique and diverse religious culture spread to Southeast Asia and Taiwan by Fujianese going south and making a living there. Due to this diverse and inclusive culture in Fujian, the local culture there was given more intercultural meanings. Of course, the local culture is selective about this inclusiveness. Different dialects in Fujian have influenced the presentation of traditional Fujian art to varying degrees. For example, the Mazu belief is centered in the Xinghua dialect area; the belief in Baosheng Dadi is concentrated in the Minnan dialect area; the belief in Dingguang Ancient Buddha is mainly in the Hakka dialect area in the province. Different dialects in the various regions carry distinct cultural beliefs, which in turn affect the topics for the creation of Fujian art. Therefore, Fujian art, both in terms of genre and presentation, is influenced by the changes in its peripheral cultural fields.

Fujian’s traditional stone carving art also exemplifies this inclusiveness. Fujian province abounds in stone resources, and this long-standing art form has strong local characteristics. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, due to the prosperous development of religious culture in Fujian, temple buildings, stone pagodas, and statues of deities (e.g., the statue of Tathāgata erected in the Tang Dynasty in Quanzhou, the statue of Lord Laozi built in the Song Dynasty in Qingyuan Mountain, and the statue of Maitreya created in the Yuan Dynasty in Fuzhou, etc) were built all over the province for religious purposes. After the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Fujian’s stone carving techniques, in terms of the topics of creation, categories, and skills, significantly developed, with two types of carving, namely carving for memorial archways and dwellings, appearing in folk architecture. After the founding of New China, stone carving or other traditional types of art in Fujian began to enter a modern, industrialized context, in which stone carvings combine the “abstract” and the “realistic”, with a strong sense of design. 3 Contemporary Fujian stone carving has steered the focus from traditional folk carving and religious architecture to modern garden architecture and urban sculpture, and Fujian has gradually become the “world’s factory of stone carving.” In Fujian, in addition, the stone carvings in temples are different from the usual Fujian-style stone carvings in that they have a stronger literary and artistic quality. Due to the popularity of Buddhism in Fujian and its large number of temples and the fact that the region was far away from war-torn areas in central China, Buddhist cultural relics remain relatively intact. For example, the stone carvings of Chongningzang in Dongchan Temple and Piluzang in Kaiyuan Temple built in Fuzhou in the Song Dynasty are the earliest scriptures carved in stone in temples in Chinese history; Yongquan Temple in Fuzhou was once the center of Buddhist stone carvings, which was described by Master Hongyi as “the treasure cave of ancient Buddhist classics and relics”; Hualin Temple in Fuzhou is the oldest complex of wooden buildings in China. While most Buddhist buildings in China are built according to the hall-centered architectural paradigm, temples in Fujian have their own regional cultural characteristics, innovating while drawing on the ancient ways of architectural expression, with obvious artistic personality. For instance, the architectural style of Kaiyuan Temple blends tradition and innovation, the main hall of which does not have
upturned eaves, and the “hundred-pillar hall” was supported by 86 pillars, exhibiting an effect of “stealing slots and reducing the number of pillars”, in order to create a reasonable space for Buddha worship.

Fujian’s culture is geographically connected to others and inclusive, so it has diverse art forms. None of the various opera genres in Fujian has played a dominant role. There have been more than thirty styles of drama in the history of opera in Fujian, but none of them have been commonly known by local audiences or considered classics of Fujian drama. Puxian Opera, Liyuan Opera, Gaojia Opera, Xiang opera, and Min Opera are considered the five major opera genres in Fujian, but their popularity is limited in the province. Due to the differences in the traditional customs and habits and acceptance of various types of artwork between people living in northern and southern Fujian, preferences for artwork and styles of artistic creation vary from region to region. In general, people in southern Fujian are straightforward and hospitable, while those in northern Fujian are relatively introverted and self-restrained. It is because of the cultural diversity in regions of Fujian and the differences between regional cultures that the tangible forms of Fujian art are also different. For example, traditional dwellings in various regions in the province are different in terms of architectural art; residences in Minnan and Taiwan are largely old buildings made of red bricks; traditional dwellings in western Fujian are characterized by tulou (earthen houses) and wufenglou (a traditional type of residence); most houses in northern Fujian near the border of Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces have pitched roofs, which are commonly used for residential houses in Jiangsu and Zhejiang. The styles and development of art in various regions in Fujian are profoundly influenced by their respective cultural genes, which result in diverse and independent art forms. Cultural diversity is bound to stimulate innovation in traditional skills of the local culture, in terms of both creative ideas and themes. This innovation and development in artistic creation will in turn boost the competitiveness of the region’s art and culture in the market. However, the preservation of some traditional artistic skills in Fujian is waning amid the rapid development of the national economy since the reform and opening up. Although the government has formulated relevant policies to protect tradition, the passing down of traditional skills is facing many challenges due to the aging of inheritors, the development of technological means of production, and the weakened motivation of young people to preserve tradition. The history of the development of art in Fujian is of positive significance from the perspective of the cultural context of Fujian. The diverse art forms in Fujian and their independent development propelled the healthy development of society and culture and enabled people to understand the development process of their cultural history and the aesthetic significance of their times.

4. The Development of Contemporary Art in Fujian

Today, Fujian artists are the group with the best aesthetic tastes for contemporary art, among whom Huang Yongli, Cai Guoqiang, Xu Bing, Xu Jiang, Qiu Zhijie, etc. have gone global and become well-known worldwide. Artistic concepts with philosophical thinking are the key for contemporary artists from Fujian to lead the contemporary art community. Since the reform and opening up, China’s contemporary art community has paid attention to Western philosophical thinking and art history, and some young artists are extremely concerned with the creation of Western art concepts. Fujian is located in a region featuring cultural diversity, and the unique cultural inclusiveness of Fujian people, coupled with the passing down of and attention to Fujian culture, has given a property of cultural blending to the creative thinking of contemporary artists from Fujian. This property is in line with the aforementioned characteristics of local culture, which is a universal value used by Fujian artists to perceive and explore the world. “The value of the local culture in Fujian needs to be talked about. It is now the critical moment when Chinese contemporary art can no longer see Western values and images of language as role models. Since the reform and opening up, Chinese art has changed in multiple dimensions and become diverse... But when we look at ourselves from the perspective of the entire international art landscape, we are
still facing formidable challenges from the Western culture... It is extremely important to focus on both local culture and contemporary art,” 4 said Fan Dian, an art critic from Fujian.

The development of contemporary art in Fujian is more complex, covering a larger scope of cultural factors. The knowledge production system of Fujian culture is also more open than before, and the space of social complexity and uncertainty is constantly extending and developing. The development of social sciences today is highly modern, and the writing of the history of cultural thoughts in the world has generally abandoned the simple dualistic hypothesis of relationships and instead portrayed and studied a certain culture after placing it in the spatio-temporal dimension. The basis for the research on Fujian art is not a simple, absolutely precise chain of multiple lines of relationships because of the diverse local culture in Fujian. Instead, there are endless hidden lines appearing irregularly, suggesting a chaotic pattern in which the precision is unpredictable. In this chaotic era of information explosion, researchers should pay attention to the evolutionary patterns of a specific artistic and cultural phenomenon in the spatio-temporal dimension and grasp the characteristics of the culture in the context of social contextualization when studying the phenomenon. Swiss scholar Helga Nowotny sees time as an extension of the present and the future and the future as a forming uncertainty. Space is the elastic distance. The borders between countries become blurred and elastic due to globalization and the disintegration and fusion of regions.5 When considering the uncertainty of the relationship between art forms in Fujian from the perspective of social hermeneutics, we can find that the current artistic context in Fujian is gradually shifting to a cultural and aesthetic consensus and the previous culturally marginalized regions isolated by geographical reasons can now communicate with the outside world with the help of science and technology and convenient transportation. Today, participation in the international art community is no longer a dream beyond the reach of local artists or inheritors of crafts or techniques. For example, Wang Xiangrong, a “stone carving tycoon” from Chongwu, Huian County, Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, has shared with the author his visits to multiple famous art schools and museums at home and abroad. Huian, the “world's processing factory for stone carvings”, often hosts international sculpture festivals.

The development of some contemporary art in Fujian has adopted the cultural industry mode. The social production of artworks is bound to be touched upon in discussions on the overview of regional art. Artworks are social products produced by human society and an integral part of social and cultural existence, which profoundly influence the aesthetic value of human beings in different periods and regions. Fujian art is traditional yet contemporary. In the passing down and development of excellent traditional skills in contemporary times, attention should be paid to traditional artisans’ quality of life. This kind of concern is not only for the survival of artisans, social welfare, and policy support but also for the respect of society for individuality and aesthetic interests of them. Scholar Jiang Mingqing argues that an integrated training program of digital promotion and design innovation should be provided for these traditional artisans and the continuation of this skill must be seen as a spontaneous production process that conforms to the demand and supply of the art and culture market. If programs fail, the preservation of traditional skills cannot go further and is likely to wane.6 At present, the cultural identities of academic artists and the inheritors of traditional skills. With the help of the training policies formulated by the government, the inheritors can join the academic atmosphere without going through educational tests such as the art-related college entrance examination, which, to some extent, protects the modern “artistic dignity” and social rights of traditional artisans and promotes the development and modernization of traditional arts in Fujian. The establishment of the academic art system in China has not only facilitated the diversified development of contemporary art in Fujian but also accelerated the transformation of the industry model of traditional art inheritors in the province. Thus, both the academic contemporary artists and the creators of folk art are an indispensable and pivotal part of Fujian’s contemporary art.
Moreover, in terms of Fujian’s contemporary art, the most notable ones are the contemporary artists from the province who have gone international. They have injected fresh blood into Fujian’s excellent traditional art and culture and provided the world’s artistic diversity with China’s schemes with Fujian characteristics. Fujian art scholars have expressed their views. Professor Li Yumin holds that Fujian culture has two sides, nourishing the development of Fujian’s contemporary art, which is no longer a single form, but a multi-dimensional world with a myriad of concepts and rich languages. Contemporary artists from Fujian excel as they are good at extending from traditional cultural topics.7 “Fujian artists can express reality acutely on the one hand, and on the other hand, they all choose to transfer traditional resources in a contemporary manner in terms of both artistic languages and expressions, more eagerly pursuing new contexts and new cultural meanings of art,” said Professor Fan Dian.8

5. Summary

Both contemporary Fujian art and traditional Fujian art have developed their distinctive artistic characteristics in specific environments and historical stages (i.e., artistic and cultural inclusiveness and the independence of local culture under cultural uncertainty). Therefore, the appreciation of this uncertain art landscape and the analysis of characteristics should be divided into two parts, namely the traditional and the contemporary. Fujian’s traditional art has the following three characteristics. First, some traditional arts have always maintained their distinctive artistic characteristics as it is difficult for them to intermingle with others. Second, there are many types of art and strong colors in folk styles, with religious and folk art styles predominating. Third, rich tangible artistic and cultural heritage has been well preserved. Fujian’s contemporary art is characterized by cultural uncertainty, which is worth noting. The history of contemporary art in Fujian has entered the context of globalization, and the characteristics of contemporary art in Fujian should be explored in the history of the world’s contemporary art. For example, the research on the artistic ideas of Huang Yongli should start with a certain research focus. Most contemporary artists from Fujian have a perspective of Chinese and Western intellectual history (excluding professional backgrounds in arts), and the creative topics of this group are trending globally or controversial, culturally and ideologically.

“Viewing an artwork is special training and modification of researcher’s sensory perception. The artistic methodology is a technique that guides and accelerates the process of artistic research. The sensory experience of an artwork must undergo a period of cognitive practice mixing good and bad. The key is to place something next to similar things for a comparative study, with the aim of finding differences and similarities,” said Austrian historian Otto Pacht when talking about contemporary art methodology. It is the researchers’ logical introspective activity to comb through the process of viewing artworks and their art forms. The ultimate goal is not merely to discuss relative value, but to find multiple paradigms for research in cultural spaces or an outline of the cultural positioning of the research objects and thus find out the truth. Max Weber, who proposed “value-freedom” in his study of art history, argued that the application of new technologies to the study of primitive or modern art suggests two outcomes: the differentiated growth of the concept of art history resulting from new technologies and the possibility of consolidating the “wealth” of art. Empirically and causally speaking, the change in technology (in the highest sense of the word) is an important factor in the development of art that can be generally determined. The cultural position of art history can be located by the purely aesthetic experience of an individual, and its artistic value in a real situation can be judged from the perspective of scientific logic, which may reach the way of thinking “against the tide” due to “value-freedom” .9 “Value-freedom” is not a certain truth, but a relatively neutral and historically materialistic view of social science research methods. It can be understood as an ideal model that requires researchers to clearly identify the boundary between
“factual situation review” and “scientific-theoretical analysis” and remain vigilant over the research process, even if it is a demanding requirement.

A theoretical approach based on the art of research can be seen as a technique. This is also true in the field of scientific research if we find differences and similarities between the subjects of this cultural term. Heisenberg said that the opening of physics to the concepts of various subjects raises the hope that many different cultural traditions can finally coexist and that different human endeavors can be integrated into a new balance between thinking and working, between activity and contemplation.10 Contemporary people of different cultural identities view the development of the history of art in Fujian from a modern perspective based on their own cultures. Fujian art is not only intangible and tangible cultural heritage and crafts but also the history of contemporary art in Fujian. The perspective of contemporary art can bring an unprecedented research space to the study of traditional art in Fujian and profound reflections on the current human society and culture. In the end, it is believed that the writing of the history of art and contemporary art in Fujian will soon become a major discipline in the field of China’s art history. The reason is that the development of Fujian art has a strong artistic vitality and cultural inclusiveness, which is the main reason why it has become an “art of uncertainty”.

6. References