CHAPTER FIVE

MODERN CHINESE CULTURE
AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF CONFUCIAN LEARNING

Generally it is held that the revolutions of the twentieth century brought radical change to Confucian thought and Confucian Learning. Although modern Confucian philosophy is a philosophical response to the present predicament of Confucian studies, and even though it occupies a place of considerable importance in discussions of modern philosophy, yet it still cannot alter the awkward situation that Confucian Learning faces in the modern Chinese socio-cultural milieu. As we approach the twenty-first century, we still cannot neglect the fact that in the twentieth century the integrity of pre-modernity has witnessed a history of Confucian culture breaking apart, being scattered and thrown to the winds. It should be said clearly that what is discussed in this chapter refers to the situation in mainland China and not in Taiwan and Hong Kong, with which I am not familiar. Given that by the twentieth century pre-modern society had already been transformed, why is it that Confucian Learning was still a topic of discussion that is constantly referred to? In modern Chinese society, is the existence of the non-philosophical aspects of Confucian Learning possible and what are the necessary conditions for this? This is the point that the present chapter wishes to address. Given the limitation of space, it will follow a historical description of the phenomenon.

1. The Fall of Confucian Learning

The orthodoxy, spread and absolute influence of Confucian thought in pre-modern society cannot be separated from its social foundation provided by the support and promotion of the ruling dynasties from the Song-Yuan period on, the educational system and the family-clan organisation. This means that the dynasties throughout history accorded Confucian Learning the status of orthodox ideology, determining the Confucian classics (including the commentaries of the Song-Ming Confucians) as the content of the state exams. The establishment of
this structure was the political and educational foundation for the great flourishing of Confucian Learning from the Song-Yuan period onwards. Meanwhile the family and clan system, and the countryside administration this gave rise to, provided an even deeper grass-roots historical social fabric. All of this led to the formation of the entire body of Confucian culture and society.

But since the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese culture, in large part Confucian culture, encountered the forceful impact of modern western culture. Colonialism and imperialism displayed to China the progressive advantages of industrial civilisation against a background of modern capitalism. The ancient tradition of Chinese civilisation was defeated by the gunboats of imperialism and forced to reform. From the Western Affairs modernisation movement to the Empress Dowager’s coup d’état in September 1898, modern natural sciences and industrial manufacturing had already begun to enter. The political structure of modern western rationalism had already been set out by progressive scholars. The Qing government had begun to gradually undertake reforms. But the setback of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5 increased the weakness of Confucian China and showed no way of solving it. By the end of the nineteenth century the state of Confucian Learning was that the body of Confucian knowledge and its political system were subject to vast challenges, but this kind of practical challenge did not aim at Confucianism by name and the structural foundations of Confucian Learning were not fundamentally sundered. The crisis of Confucian Learning had not yet come.

This situation was to change in the twentieth century. In the latter part of the Western Affairs Reform Movement, the reform party had already begun to establish new-style schools, even if they were still run concurrently with the old school system so that new and old courses were both given. In 1899 the Qing court issued a decree abolishing the eight-legged essay, poetry and prose-poems. In 1901 the Qing government announced the Decree to Revive Studies and formally demanded the whole country establish schools. These moves were already a fundamental challenge to traditional courses and the old system of education of Confucian students. Because from 1899 all old academies were gradually transformed into new schools, by 1905 traditional Confucian schools had already disappeared without leaving a trace. Even more decisive was that in 1905 the Qing government formally decided to do away with the state exams and ordered all schools to teach natural sciences whilst retaining study of the classics and moral cultivation.