THE PROTESTANT HOUSE CHURCH AND ITS POVERTY OF RIGHTS IN CHINA

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Based on observations of the causes and characteristics of poverty in both the United States and China, the author has previously analyzed the four kinds of human poverty – that of materials, capability, rights, and motivations (Hong, 2005). In a similar vein, it can be argued that there are four characteristics for various disadvantaged groups of people in their struggle to gain and protect their rights, namely, the poverty of consciousness, capability, rights, and motivations. Tens of millions of members (Qiu 2009:185–186) of the Protestant House Churches in China have either already experienced or will be undergoing these four stages of poverty.

During the period from 1949 to 1976, there was a prevailing lack of consciousness concerning religious freedom in the Chinese public. Consequently, many house churches were dissolved under heavy political pressure. Generally speaking, the government policy from 1949 to 1958 was mainly one of attacking and reforming Christian believers; it changed to one of elimination in the next twenty years (1958–1978) (Liu 2009). Most of the house church members were farmers, women and elderly, many of whom were seeking economic benefits from religious belief, and who therefore found it easy to abandon their belief when faced with threats to their lives. As a result, the church members, who had to struggle for survival, often had to be very practical and expedient. On the other hand, forceful government suppression also fostered a strong sense

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2 It is very difficult, if not possible, to estimate the accurate members of China’s house churches. However, according various scholars’ estimations, their relative consensus is that the members of the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) should have approximate 20 million while estimating that house church members should be between 20–60 million.

3 Protestant house churches could be defined as the Protestant churches which have not registered and approved by the government.
of moral resentment (Weber 1963:110–116) among a significant number of determined believers, thus paving the way for the revival of the house churches down the road (Yu 2008b).

The two decades from 1978 to 1998 constituted the phase of the poverty of capability concerning religious freedom. The public consciousness about seeking and protecting their rights began to emerge and strengthen, but their ability to do so was still restricted. Since 1978, China's policy toward religion has begun to improve. The Ningbo Centennial Church was reopened on April 8th, 1979, thus becoming the first one open accessible to local believers since the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Liang 1999:93). Historical grievances generated much anti-Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and anti-Three-Self Churches (TSC) sentiment. In the meanwhile, the restoration and strengthening of relations between the house churches and their overseas connections have also raised the consciousness about the need to protect their rights (Liang 1999:157–160). In 1998, house church members delivered their announcement, “The Chinese House Churches’ Attitude toward the Government, Religious Policies and the TSC,” stating the five major reasons for their refusal to register with the government while pronouncing their five principles against joining TSC and boldly outlining three major points in calling for the government to protect their rights (Representatives of China’s House Churches 1998). However, because house churches had not popularized themselves in cities and among the young and the intellectuals, nor had they been able to identify legal experts capable of representing their interests in dialoguing with the government, their ability to protect their rights during this period remained rather limited (Aikman 2003:161–178).

During the period of continued poverty of religious rights (1999–2009), the ability of Protestants to preserve their rights has been on the rise, owing to the increasing social diversity and openness, economic development and prosperity, and the improvement of education. The number of the young, educated, and urban residents has seen dramatic increase (Gao 2005:84–85), joined by groups such as the Christians who are returned overseas scholars, college students, and entrepreneurs (Duan and Tang 2009:137). Furthermore, a team of attorneys dedicated to the defense of civil rights has emerged and is becoming increasingly effective by building means of dialoguing with free-thinking intellectuals within the system. Despite these positive developments, however, house church members still find their rights seriously deprived, seen in the “five no” policies implemented by the government, namely, they are