Having presented our research questions in previous chapters, in this chapter we will describe our fieldwork experiences (from September 2011 to January 2012) in order to obtain different perceptions of communist officials on Xinjiang issues. We will explore how the dynamic political situation in China and individuals’ political situations influenced the recruitment of participants. We will then discuss how we used our personal relations (guanxi) to approach them and how we adopted techniques to avoid sensitive topics in interviews, such as de-focusing the research topic, establishing allies, carefully selecting the location for interviews and not always relying on tape recording. Zhang, as both an insider and outsider, managed to interview 23 officials and scholars. As we have found, participants used interviews as the site for risk-sharing to speak the truth and used the researchers as “informants” to the government. Interviews thus became a politic theatre, through which the sensitivity of the topic can be minimized and by which communist officials are encouraged to act as specific intellectuals through practising parrhesia in the context of an authoritarian country where free speech is risky.

2.1 Political sensitivities: researching sensitive topics in China

When undertaking qualitative research, the researcher must “achieve intimate familiarity with the settings” of the field (Lofland and Lofland 2006: 17). Bearing this in mind we were aware that, from the perspective of the Chinese authorities, doing research in Xinjiang is classified as researching a “sensitive topic” (Yee 2003: 433). In China many research topics dealing with social and political issues can be regarded as sensitive, depending on the timing and framing of the research (Heimer and
Thøgersen 2006: 263–264). In this case, although general methodological literature in the social sciences is helpful, it is limited with regards to research conducted in countries like China, which has specific research challenges, that is, “traditional difficulties are intensified by a particular set of political and social constraints” (Finley 2008: 172–173). That is to say, state politics and interpersonal politics among gatekeepers, the researchers and interviewees are intertwined when it comes to researching important social and political issues in China (Smith 2006: 132).

During our fieldwork, we noted that the general political environment and the individuals’ political situation have a significant influence on the process of conducting research in Xinjiang. From the beginning of our research to our final interview, participants were constantly concerned with the political implications of discussing Xinjiang issues. This was not only the case for officials working for the government, but also for scholars who are generally considered to be more open and possessing greater freedom of speech. Sensitivities and reservations can alter with time and participants may change their mind during or after interviews, so we also ensured that participants knew that they always had the option of freely withdrawing from the study at any stage. We were aware of these sensitivities and took some precautions when arranging interviews, for example avoiding contacting participants through international phone calls, as the conversation might be easily intercepted by state agents.

An example of the shifting dynamics of conducting research in China is illustrated through the case of a leading academic figure in Chinese minority issues. Our communication with this scholar was primarily via land-line telephone conversations and emails; he had agreed to become a participant in our study. However, at the time of our research, his political situation had been significantly affected by WikiLeaks’ exposition of his conversations with US diplomats in 2011. According to WikiLeaks, in August of 2010 he explained to US diplomats that the Urumqi riots of July 2009 had badly rattled China’s leadership and that the real death toll was closer to 1000 rather than the official figure of 197. As a result, he observed that the Chinese government would therefore take strong measures to suppress unrest within Xinjiang, since “stability” was the most important issue before the new leaders were elected in the 18th Conference of Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party in the autumn of 2012.¹ According to an informer close to the leaders of the Political and Legal Commission, leaders of the Commission were very angry about this leaked conversation. Some officials in this field even began to view him as a spy working for foreign governments, which is a serious crime in China. Consequently we were unable to conduct a