

PALACKY UNIVERSITY OLOMOUC

Faculty of Arts

Department of Asian Studies

**MASTER'S THESIS**

**Impact of Intergroup Contact on Immigration Attitudes:  
A Case Study of Slovak Attitudes Toward Chinese Immigrants during  
COVID-19 Pandemic**

Vplyv medziskupinového kontaktu na postoje voči imigrantom: Prípadová štúdia  
slovenských postojov voči čínskym imigrantom počas pandémie COVID-19

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## **Declaration of originality**

I hereby declare that I have written the present master's thesis independently, without assistance from third parties and that I have clearly referenced all sources used in the present work.

In Olomouc, June 24, 2021

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## **Abstract**

Intergroup contact is believed to improve intergroup relations by reducing prejudice and promoting more positive attitudes toward individual outgroup members and even the outgroup as a whole. Intergroup contact and immigration attitudes have been studied across many countries. However, studies on attitudes toward Chinese immigrants in Slovakia are fairly rare. Moreover, with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the association of COVID-19 with China and Chinese people might have a negative impact on attitudes toward Chinese people and even lead to discriminatory behaviors. To date, few researchers have addressed this issue. Drawing on previous studies on intergroup contact and intergroup threat, this thesis employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the impact of intergroup contact on immigration attitudes, using Slovak attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup during COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. The aim of this thesis is to study the intergroup contact between Slovak majority members and Chinese immigrants from the perspective of the majority group, the perception of Chinese immigrants, and attitudes toward them. The present study also offers one of the first investigations into the impact of association of COVID-19 with China and Chinese people on attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup in Slovakia. Moreover, it provides new insights into intergroup contact and intergroup relations between majority members and Chinese immigrants.

**Key words:** intergroup contact, Chinese immigrants, Slovakia, COVID-19, attitudes

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## INTRODUCTION

Societies all over the world are increasingly becoming more diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity, and race. Consequently, it is becoming more common for people to engage in intergroup contact. At the same time, the reduction of intergroup prejudice is also increasingly becoming an important issue. A great variety of research has demonstrated that intergroup contact can improve intergroup relations by reducing prejudice against outgroup members (see Voci and Hewstone 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2008; Binder *et al.* 2009; Davies *et al.* 2011; Lemmer and Wagner 2015). Moreover, the effects of intergroup contact are not only limited to the reduction of prejudice, but also to other positive outcomes such as more positive attitudes toward the individual outgroup members and even toward the outgroup as a whole. Intergroup contact theory has been widely documented in the literature focusing on attitudes toward immigrants across many countries (see Gomez, Tropp and Fernandez 2011; Barlow *et al.* 2012; Nielsen, Paritski and Smyth 2012; Visintin *et al.* 2016; Liu 2020;). However, studies on attitudes toward Chinese immigrants in the European context are relatively rare (see Liu 2020, Nielsen, Paritski and Smyth 2012, for exceptions) not to mention studies on Chinese immigrants living in Slovakia.

Furthermore, with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the entire global community has been confronted by a common threat – a novel coronavirus disease, which was first reported in China and eventually spread to other countries all around the world. However, some studies have shown that due to COVID-19 virus and its association with China and the Chinese, there was an increase in prejudice and negative attitudes toward Chinese immigrants as well as an increase in number of cases of discriminatory behaviors toward Asian people (see He *et al.* 2020; Armutlu *et al.* 2020; Kachanoff *et al.* 2020). At the present time, studies on the impact of COVID-19 on attitudes toward Chinese people are fairly rare, especially in the context of intergroup threat theory.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the impact of intergroup contact on people's attitudes toward immigrants, using Slovak attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup as a case study. The present study addresses a gap in the research mentioned earlier by exploring the subjective contact experiences of individuals in everyday settings and by studying how majority members view Chinese immigrants, especially during COVID-19 pandemic. This work also offers one of the first investigations into how people in Slovakia

view COVID-19 pandemic with regard to China and Chinese people. To this end, the present study employs a qualitative research methodology to answer the following research questions:

1. How is the intergroup contact between Slovak majority members and Chinese immigrants from the perspective of the majority group?
2. How do Slovak majority members perceive Chinese immigrants? What are the attitudes toward Chinese immigrants?
3. Do majority members in Slovakia associate COVID-19 with China and/or Chinese people? What kind of impact, if any, does this association have on Slovak attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup in Slovakia?

This thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 of this thesis provides an overview of the relevant theories and previous studies. It discusses attitudes and intergroup bias as well as its importance for understanding intergroup relations. It also explores two theories essential to the present study: Intergroup Contact Theory and Intergroup Threat Theory. The chapter ends with the introduction of my hypotheses. Chapter 2 presents the research design and methodology. It discusses research methods, research sample, data collection, interview procedure, and finally, data analysis. Chapter 3 introduces the background and regional context, and the findings of the present study. This is followed by Discussion and Conclusion.



# 1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1 Attitudes and Intergroup Relations

The history of attitude research in social psychology can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s (see McGuire 1986). Early definitions of the term ‘attitude’ include the definition formulated by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918), who are credited with bringing the concept of attitude to prominence in the literature of social psychology. They defined attitude as “a process of individual consciousness which determine real or possible activity of the individual in the social world” (p. 22). Attitude is always toward something. According to Thomas and Znaniecki (1918, p. 27), social psychology is actually “the science of attitudes”. Another definition was later formulated by Thurstone (1932), he stated that attitude is "the affect for or against a psychological object" (as cited in Allport 1935, p. 7). Allport (1935) came up with his own definition according to which an attitude is “a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (p. 810). Moreover, Zanna and Rempel (1988) defined attitudes as “the categorization of a stimulus object along an evaluative dimension (i.e., evaluation)” (p. 321).

Attitudes are important for understanding intergroup relations. Maio *et al.* (2010) defined attitudes as evaluations of objects in the social world. These evaluations can be either favorable or unfavorable. Attitudes are psychological constructs, which are internal to the person and cannot be observed directly. Favorable evaluations correspond to positive attitudes and unfavorable evaluations correspond to negative attitudes (Eagly and Chaiken 1998). People can hold attitudes toward many attitude objects – abstract, concrete, individual or collective, such as specific behavior, classes of behaviors, individuals, social groups, or even social policies (see Eagly and Chaiken 1998; Maio *et al.* 2010, for specific examples). Attitudes toward particular social groups should influence the way people perceive and behave toward members of these groups (Maio *et al.* 2010).

Attitudes can be based on three different types of information or social experience defined as “components of attitudes”, namely, (1) affective component, including feelings or emotions (2) cognitive component, including beliefs or thoughts, and (3) behavioral

component, including one's actions. Attitudes can be either based on one of these components or some combination of them (Zanna and Rempel 1988; Aronson *et al.* 2015).

## 1.2 Intergroup Bias

Hewstone, Rubin and Willis (2002) defined intergroup bias as “the systematic tendency to evaluate one’s own membership group (the in-group) or its members more favorably than a non-membership group (the out-group) or its members” (p. 576). It involves unfair or unjustified responses to groups and their respective group members. These responses can be cognitive, affective, or behavioral (Dovidio and Gaertner 2010). Intergroup bias can take the form of ingroup favoritism (favoring members of one’s own group – ingroup) or outgroup derogation (devaluing the members of the other group – outgroup) (Hewstone, Rubin and Willis 2002).

### 1.2.1 Prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination

Regarding intergroup relations, scholars (e.g., Hewstone, Rubin and Willis 2002; Dovidio *et al.* 2010; Dovidio and Gaertner 2010) distinguish three forms of social bias toward outgroup members: prejudice (affect), stereotypes (cognition) and discrimination (behavior). Moreover, prejudice and stereotypes are intrapsychic (that is, they occur within an individual) and they may be explicit or implicit. Explicit processes are “conscious and deliberative”, whereas implicit processes “involve a lack of awareness and are unintentionally activated”, thus some people can be unaware of these processes (Dovidio and Gaertner 2010, p. 1085-1086). In addition, they can be automatically activated even by the mere presence of attitude objects (Gaertner and McLaughlin 1983).

*Prejudice* is often defined as an unjustified and usually negative attitude toward people from other groups (for example, Allport 1954; Eagly and Chaiken 1998; Maio *et al.* 2010; Aronson *et al.* 2015). However, Brown (2010) argued that such a definition is not sufficiently accurate and should include positive attitudes as well. Therefore, Brown defined prejudice as “any attitude, emotion or behavior towards members of a group, which directly or indirectly implies some negativity or antipathy towards that group” (Brown 2010, p. 7, emphasis added). Additionally, Dovidio and Gaertner (2010) defined prejudice as “a negative (or a *less positive*) evaluative or affective response, or both, to others in a given context based on their group membership” (p. 1085, emphasis added). Prejudice, like other attitudes, has three components: cognitive (beliefs about other groups, often irrationally based), affective (feelings and emotions toward other groups,

dislike), and behavioral/conative (behavioral actions toward other groups, predisposition to avoidance of other groups) (Maio *et al.* 2010; Dovidio and Gaertner 2010).

*Stereotypes* are often classified as a cognitive component of prejudice (see Maio *et al.* 2010; Aronson *et al.* 2015) and they are defined as “associations and beliefs about the characteristics and attributes of a group and its members that shape how people think about and respond to the group” (Dovidio *et al.* 2010, p. 8). They can be both positive as well as negative, but people tend to generate more negative stereotypes (*ibid.*).

*Discrimination*, on the other hand, is classified as a behavioral component of prejudice (see Maio *et al.* 2010; Aronson *et al.* 2015). Discrimination is defined as a negative behavior toward a specific member of a group or the group as a whole. It is a biased behavior that includes “inappropriate and potentially unfair treatment of individuals due to group membership” as well as favorable treatment of one's own group (Dovidio *et al.* 2010, p. 9).

### **1.2.2 Stereotype content model**

Stereotype content model distinguishes between two trait dimensions – warmth and competence, and they are results of interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Fiske *et al.* 2002). Warmth is related to other person's intentions. These intentions are reflected by realistic or symbolic threats. Competence is related to the other person's capability, in other words, how people put their intentions into practice (Froehlich and Schulte 2019). Stereotypes can include high competence and high warmth or low competence and low warmth. Moreover, stereotypes can also include a combination of two separate dimensions, the so-called *mixed stereotypes*. More specifically, they can include low competence but high warmth (paternalistic stereotypes) or high competence but low warmth (envious stereotypes) (Fiske *et al.* 2002).

However, stereotypes can vary across different socio-cultural contexts and across different social groups. For example, in the US, Americans were perceived as high-high and Turks mostly as low-low, Chinese were perceived as relatively competent but not warm, and Italians were perceived as incompetent but warm. Moreover, while Chinese immigrants were perceived as relatively competent but not warm in American context, in German context, Chinese immigrants were perceived as highly competent and moderately warm (Fiske 2012; Froehlich and Schulte 2019).

### **1.3 Contact Hypothesis (Intergroup Contact Theory)**

The origins of the contact hypothesis can be traced back to the 20th century. The contact hypothesis was first proposed by the American social psychologist Gordon W. Allport in his famous work *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) as an effective way to reduce prejudice and promote more positive stereotypes between majority and minority members (see Allport 1954). Allport formulated his hypothesis on the previous research conducted during the 1930s and 1940s. Most notably on the research of the American sociologist Robin M. Williams, which already included an initial formulation of the contact hypothesis (see Williams 1947). According to Allport's theory, intergroup contact can effectively reduce prejudice against outgroup members, but the contact must be meaningful and positive. Allport identified a set of conditions, which he found to be optimal for such a contact, namely, equal status between the groups, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authority, law, or custom (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Moreover, Allport (1954) insisted on face-to-face interaction (direct contact) as the preferred form of intergroup contact.

Allport's publication has become one of the most read publications in the field of social psychology and intergroup relations, because it introduced a new perspective on intergroup contact. It eventually inspired a great deal of extensive research focusing on the study of the potential for intergroup contact to reduce intergroup prejudice. Over time, Allport's contact hypothesis was reformulated and extended in many new research directions. Consequently, it is now generally considered a developed social psychological theory (see Hewstone 2009; Hewstone and Swart 2011). Many researchers have found that when there is an increase in contact with outgroup members, there is also a reduction in prejudice toward that outgroup (for example, Cook 1984; Pettigrew 1997, 1998; Voci and Hewstone 2003; Binder *et al.* 2009). Certainly, not all studies were in accordance with these findings, some researchers have concluded that contact under unfavorable conditions may lead to increased intergroup prejudice and tension (Amir, 1976) or that the effects of intergroup contact can be limited to only individual prejudice (Amir 1976; Forbes 1997). Overall, however, positive intergroup contact is believed to be one of the most important interventions for improving outgroup attitudes. Various meta-analytical studies have also supported the positive impact of intergroup contact on prejudice (for example, Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2008; Davies *et al.* 2011; Lemmer and Wagner 2015).

Significantly, Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) highly-cited meta-analysis with 515 contact studies has demonstrated a negative relationship between contact and prejudice (mean effect size,  $r = -0.21$ ). They found that the effect is even larger for majority groups ( $r = -0.227$ ) than minority groups ( $r = -0.175$ ). However, Tropp and Pettigrew (2005, p. 1150) found that “affective indicators of prejudice tend to show stronger relationships with intergroup contact than such cognitive indicators as stereotypes”. Thus, even if members of the ingroup come to like the outgroup that will not necessarily result in reduced stereotyping of the outgroup (Pettigrew *et al.* 2011). Although the contact hypothesis was initially developed for groups of different races and ethnicities, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) argued that the positive effects of intergroup contact can be extended to other groups as well, such as stigmatized groups. The intergroup contact theory can be also applied to a vast variety of settings and the effects of intergroup contact are universal (Pettigrew 2008).

### **1.3.1 Moderators of intergroup contact effects**

As mentioned before, Allport (1954) defined several optimal conditions for intergroup contact – equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support. However, according to Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis, the reduction in prejudice and changes in attitudes, although not as large, are possible even without Allport's set of optimal conditions. They explained that Allport's conditions are facilitating rather than necessary for enhancing the positive effects of intergroup contact. In addition, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) believed that these conditions should function together rather than separately. The fact that the effects of intergroup contact depend on several other facilitating factors than just the four defined by Allport has inspired research on both moderators as well as mediators of intergroup contact's effects, focusing on when and how intergroup contact actually works (Pettigrew and Tropp 2005).

Over time, researchers have defined various approaches to optimize intergroup contact. Kenworthy *et al.* (2005) highlighted three different lines of research dealing with social categorization. These include a *deategorization* approach aiming to minimize group salience, while focusing on personal information of separate individuals (see Brewer and Miller 1984), a *recategorization* approach aiming to use only one social entity (“us”) instead of two group representations (“us” and “them”) (see Gaertner, Murrell and Dovidio 1989), and *categorization* approach aiming to keep group categories salient during intergroup interactions (see Hewstone and Brown 1986).

*Group salience* is defined as “the extent to which group memberships are psychologically ‘present’ during contact” (Brown and Hewstone 2005, p. 257). In other words, group categories are salient when people are aware of their own and others' group membership during intergroup contact. Although many studies have confirmed the importance of a personalized interaction, maintaining sufficiently high levels of group salience during interactions is also desirable to generalize positive attitudes to other outgroup members (Kenworthy *et al.* 2005). Thus, group salience is considered an important moderator of intergroup contact's effects (Voci and Hewstone 2003; Pettigrew *et al.* 2011).

Brown and Hewstone (2005) later revised their categorization model by recognizing the importance of both interpersonal and intergroup factors. According to them, the most effective form of contact is a cross-group friendship. However, they argued that “group membership must be sufficiently salient to ensure generalization but not so salient that it leads to intergroup anxiety or otherwise exacerbates tensions” (p. 330). In the case of cross-group friendship, cross-group friends need to maintain their group membership in order to promote generalization of the contact's effects to other group members (Hewstone and Swart 2011). Moreover, Brown and Hewstone have also emphasized the role of *perceived typicality*, meaning that individuals involved in the interaction should be regarded as typical or representative of their groups (Brown and Hewstone 2005). Otherwise, individual outgroup members are seen as exceptions and the outgroup is viewed as homogenous. In such a case, positive contact effects may not generalize to the whole outgroup (Voci and Hewstone 2003).

### **1.3.2 Mediators of intergroup contact effects**

Since the formulation of the contact hypothesis, researchers have gradually shifted their attention from studying the optimal conditions of intergroup contact to studying how contact actually works and what mediates the positive effects of intergroup contact on outgroup attitudes. It has been concluded that the effects of intergroup contact are due to a variety of mediating mechanisms or processes, more specifically, cognitive and affective mechanisms (see Brown and Hewstone 2005; Tausch and Hewstone 2010).

Initially, Allport (1954) favored the cognitive mechanism – *increased knowledge* as an essential mediating mechanism between contact and reduced prejudice. He believed that intergroup contact led to greater learning about the outgroup, and this new

information about the outgroup could eventually lead to prejudice reduction. Some support for such a mediating effect is available. For example, Stephan and Stephan (1984) found that intergroup contact increased knowledge about the outgroup and that eventually led to more positive attitudes toward the outgroup. However, Turner *et al.* (2007) argued that evidence for increased knowledge as a mediating mechanism was “fairly weak”. In addition, according to Pettigrew (1998), learning about the outgroup was not the only process involved. In fact, he identified three other interrelated processes, namely, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and in-group reappraisal. In a meta-analytical study conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2008), the mediational value of increased knowledge was significant but comparatively weaker than the mediational value of other mediators. Knowledge was identified as a minor mediator (Pettigrew *et al.* 2011). Moreover, according to Kenworthy *et al.* (2005), *self-disclosure* can also have a prejudice-reducing effect by increasing familiarity, reducing threat and overriding stereotypes about the outgroup.

On the other hand, there are affective processes, including negative and positive affect, which can also mediate intergroup contact effects on prejudice (*ibid*). *Intergroup anxiety* is defined as a type of anxiety that stems from interactions between the members of different groups. It is a negative affective state that is restricted to intergroup contexts and is often experienced when anticipating or expecting interaction with members of different cultural, racial or ethnic groups. It may also result from intergroup threat. However, intergroup anxiety can also be experienced during the actual interaction. Individuals can experience intergroup anxiety not only in relation to a specific outgroup but also to outgroups in general. Intergroup anxiety is a result of individuals' expectations of negative consequences, such as embarrassment, rejection, negative stereotyping, and discrimination, to name a few (Stephan and Stephan 1985; Tausch and Hewstone 2010; Stephan 2014). Stephan (2014) identified four basic categories of antecedents of intergroup anxiety, namely, personality traits and personal characteristics, attitudes and related cognitions, personal experience, and situational factors. He also discussed consequences of intergroup anxiety, including cognitive consequences such as negative attitudes, affective and emotional consequences such as embarrassment and behavioral consequences such as outgroup avoidance (*ibid*).

Research has demonstrated that intergroup contact can reduce intergroup anxiety, which can eventually lead to reduced prejudice (e.g., Voci and Hewstone 2003). Thus,

reduced intergroup anxiety is an important mediating mechanism, moreover, according to Barlow *et al.* (2012), even the strongest. However, anxiety mediates the relationship between contact and prejudice especially when the levels of group salience are high (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Moreover, with regard to negative emotions, Pettigrew *et al.* (2011) also identified other mediators, such as *fear*, *anger* and *threat to the ingroup*.

Positive affect such as *empathy* as well as *perspective taking* are also associated with positive intergroup contact. Kenworthy *et al.* (2005) defined empathy as “a vicarious emotional state triggered by witnessing the emotional state of another” and considered it to be the result of perspective taking (p. 287). Additionally, Aberson and Haag (2007) defined perspective-taking as a cognitive empathy, meaning understanding the perspectives of other people, and contrasted it to emotional empathy. Various studies have highlighted the important role of empathy and perspective taking in mediating intergroup contact’s reduction of prejudice, improving attitudes and reducing stereotyping (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2008; Aberson and Haag 2007).

More recently, *outgroup trust* has also been identified as one of the valuable mediators between contact and reduced prejudice as it is associated with positive expectations toward outgroup members and “feelings of transparency and confidence in the other’s intentions” (Visintin *et al.* 2017, p. 4). It can therefore be asserted that although cognitive processes are important and can have a mediating effect on outgroup attitudes, affective processes are more important and comparatively more effective (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008; Pettigrew *et al.* 2011).

### **1.3.3 Generalization of intergroup contact effects**

Research has also focused on the possible generalization of intergroup contact effects to the entire groups involved in the intergroup contact, to new situations, and even to outgroups not involved in the original intergroup contact (Pettigrew *et al.* 2011). Results from Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis showed that intergroup contact effects can indeed generalize from the immediate participants to the entire group. Besides, as it was described earlier, positive effects of intergroup contact are more likely to generalize from individuals to whole groups when group salience is maintained in intergroup interactions (Brown and Hewstone 2005; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).



Moreover, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) argued that the effects of intergroup contact can generalize beyond the setting of the immediate contact situation (for some examples, see Nesdale and Todd 2000). As Pettigrew (1997) pointed out, intergroup friendship effects may generalize even to outgroups not involved in any previous contact. He explained that “intergroup friendship reduces prejudice and, in turn, reduced prejudice increases the likelihood of further intergroup friendship” (Pettigrew 1997, p. 181). Similarly, according to Hewstone (2015), contact with members of one group (primary group) has an impact on attitudes toward members of other groups (secondary groups), via a process defined as *attitude generalization* (Meleady and Forder 2018).

In other words, contact has a *secondary transfer effect* and a number of studies (e.g., Van Laar *et al.* 2005; Tausch *et al.* 2010) have provided support for this assertion. However, it was also argued that intergroup contact may require some degree of similarity between the two outgroups in order to have such an effect or even strengthen it (Pettigrew *et al.* 2011; Lolliot *et al.* 2021, as cited in Boin *et al.* 2021). In addition, some studies have also suggested that attitude generalization applies not only to positive contact experiences but also to negative contact experiences (Meleady and Forder 2018; Brylka, Jasinskaja-Lahti and Mahonen 2016). Meleady and Forder (2018) further expanded the discussion by exploring the existence of generalization effects for outgroup avoidance, a process they referred to as *avoidance generalization effect*. They concluded that outgroup avoidance was not only associated with reduced intentions to interact with the primary outgroup but also with secondary outgroups that were not involved in the original intergroup contact.

### **1.3.4 Direct and indirect forms of intergroup contact**

Researchers differentiate between two distinct forms of intergroup contact: direct and indirect contact. Direct contact is a face-to-face interaction and its effectiveness on intergroup attitudes and relations has already been discussed earlier in this thesis. However, the impact of direct contact can differ and it depends on the quantity and quality of intergroup contact. Notably, direct cross-group friendship is of special importance because of its particular effectiveness in reducing outgroup prejudice. In fact, research has found that, in comparison to general contact, cross-group friendship promotes more positive intergroup attitudes (for example, see Pettigrew 1997; Vonofakou *et al.* 2008; Barlow, Louis and Hewstone 2009; Davies *et al.* 2011). Accordingly, direct cross-group friendship is believed to be the most effective form of intergroup contact, because it is a

close relationship under optimal conditions, which can be sustained over time and can involve contact across many situations (Pettigrew 1997). Moreover, cross-group friends come into contact on a frequent basis, maintaining the level of group salience relatively high and thus allowing the positive contact's effects to be generalized to other members and to an outgroup as a whole as well (Brown and Hewstone 2005). However, according to Davies *et al.* (2011), friendship measures such as active interaction and self-disclosure are mostly related to intergroup attitudes. In addition, intimate relationships can also have a buffering effect. To illustrate, Fuochi *et al.* (2020) found that intimate direct intergroup contact can buffer the negative association between negative mass media news and outgroup attitudes.

In contrast to direct contact, indirect contact is a form of intergroup contact in which groups do not come into any direct physical interaction. Researchers have started to explore different alternatives to direct contact because of the limited opportunities for direct contact in some intergroup contexts (Tausch and Hewstone 2010). Consequently, over the years, researchers have identified several forms of indirect intergroup contact. To illustrate, Wright *et al.* (1997) introduced the *extended contact* hypothesis, which proposes that the mere knowledge that an ingroup member has a close relationship with an outgroup member can positively impact intergroup attitudes and outgroup prejudice. Participants therefore rely on indirect information that comes from the experiences of other ingroup members. Research has also found that even directly observing interactions between ingroup and outgroup members can lead to improved intergroup attitudes. Zhou *et al.* (2019) identifies this kind of contact as a special kind of extended contact called *vicarious contact*.

Extended contact can have several advantages. According to Wright *et al.* (1997), group membership in a close relationship such as cross-group friendship is more salient to an observer than to the participants themselves. Consequently, if both the ingroup and outgroup categories are more salient, positive attitudes can be further generalized from a specific outgroup member to the whole outgroup (Brown and Hewstone 2005). Moreover, observing such an interaction as an indirect participant should not elicit intergroup anxiety that direct intergroup contact otherwise might (Wright *et al.* 1997). In fact, knowing about positive interactions between members of different groups can reduce intergroup anxiety and, in turn, reduce prejudice (Tausch and Hewstone 2010). Research has also found that extended contact may even positively impact expectancy for future intergroup contact for

members of both majority and minority groups (Gomez, Tropp and Fernandez 2011). Since extended contact does not require personal experience, its consequences can have an impact on a larger audience, “because positive outgroup attitudes can spread to several individuals from a single ingroup member” (Vezzali *et al.* 2014, p. 377). It can also be applied in contexts with limited opportunities for direct contact or even highly segregated contexts. Thus, extended contact strategies are very flexible (*ibid*). This hypothesis was later supported by various studies (see Pettigrew *et al.* 2007; Vezzali *et al.* 2014; Zhou *et al.* 2019).

Even though research has shown that there are various advantages of extended contact, direct contact is still preferable to indirect contact, because of its stronger effects on intergroup attitudes (Vezzali *et al.* 2014). In addition, Wolfer *et al.* (2017) found that negative extended contact has similarly negative effects on intergroup interactions as negative direct contact. They argued that people experiencing negative contact via an ingroup friend might not get all the relevant details and factors. Consequently, it can lead to “an over-interpretation of the indirectly experienced negative contact event and result in comparably strong effects than negative direct contact” (Wolfer *et al.* 2017, p. 14)

Several other forms of indirect contact have demonstrated positive effects on intergroup attitudes as well, namely, *imagined contact*, simply imagining contact with outgroup members (e.g., Turner, Crisp and Lambert 2007), *online or virtual contact*, internet-based intergroup communication (e.g., Schumann, van der Linden and Klein 2012), *parasocial or mediated contact*, another kind of extended contact via media (e.g., Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes 2005; Mutz and Goldman 2010), among others. It was also found that indirect contact with outgroup members through mass media is often more common than face-to-face interaction (Mutz & Goldman 2010). However, regarding the valance of mediated intergroup contact, Pettigrew *et al.* (2011) pointed out that “negative intergroup encounters are often publicized, while the more numerous positive encounters go unrecognized or are not viewed as newsworthy” (p. 277).

Dovidio, Eller and Hewstone (2011) conducted a broader analysis of various forms of indirect contact and concluded that indirect contact can have broad effects on intergroup attitudes and relations. In addition, Lemmer and Wagner (2015) further extended the existing literature by conducting a meta-analysis of various studies focusing on the effects of both direct and indirect interethnic contact interventions in real-world

settings outside of the lab. According to their data, both direct and indirect intergroup contact interventions can improve attitudes even in real-world settings, while the outcomes of such interventions are sustained over a certain period of time.

### **1.3.5 Positive and negative intergroup contact effects**

Even though societies all over the world are increasingly becoming more diverse and it is becoming more common for people to engage in intergroup contact, intergroup prejudice is a still existing social issue. Previous research has predominantly focused on positive contact experiences. However, in real-world settings, intergroup contact can be positive as well as negative (Paolini, Harwood and Rubin 2010). Consequently, contact researchers have recently started to focus on the role of negative contact as well. To illustrate, Paolini, Harwood and Rubin (2010) found that negative contact is associated with higher category salience, whereas positive contact is associated with lower category salience, the so-called *valence-salience effect*. Moreover, they concluded that negative contact may worsen intergroup relations because of the contact generalization.

Furthermore, Barlow *et al.* (2012) extended the contact hypothesis by concluding that “the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice depends on its valence” (p. 1639). They introduced the so-called *positive-negative contact asymmetry* hypothesis. Although positive contact is associated with lower levels of prejudice than negative contact, negative contact is more powerful in predicting racism than positive contact (*ibid*). Similarly, Graf, Paolini and Rubin (2014) found negative contact to be more influential than positive contact, but they also found that positive contact is more common in real-world setting intergroup interactions. However, Arnadottir *et al.* (2018) argued that the evidence for positive-negative contact asymmetry is not consistent and the results of previous research have varied. In fact, they found stronger evidence for alternative *positive-negative contact interaction* and its effects (especially buffering and facilitation effects) on group salience and intergroup attitudes (see Arnadottir *et al.* 2018). They found that people with fewer negative contact experiences are also less aware of their respective group memberships during intergroup contact, which might actually reduce the contact’s potential to generalize to other outgroup members. On the other hand, negative contact was associated with higher levels of category salience, even more for those people with more positive contact experiences.

### 1.3.6 Intergroup contact and immigration attitudes

Intergroup contact theory has been widely documented in the literature focusing on attitudes toward immigrants and minorities across many countries (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Berg 2020). Research on attitudes toward immigrants usually involves studying attitudes towards immigrants in general, without concretely specifying the country of origin (for example, Voci and Hewstone 2003; Gomez, Tropp and Fernandez 2011; Visintin *et al.* 2016) or studying attitudes toward different types of outgroups (for example, Liu 2020). A great deal of research has focused on the perspective of majority group members (for example, Barlow *et al.* 2012), some studies have also considered the perspective of minority group members (for example, Binder *et al.* 2009; Nielsen, Paritski and Smyth 2012) or even the perspective of both ingroup and outgroup members simultaneously (for example, Gomez, Tropp and Fernandez 2011).

Research has shown strong evidence for the existence of a link between intergroup contact and a decrease in prejudice and negative stereotypes between majority and minority members (Berg 2020; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Moreover, there is a relationship between the number of immigrants and outgroup attitudes. For instance, Wagner *et al.* (2006) pointed out that the proportion of ethnic minority members in Germany is related to a reduction of prejudice in the majority due to increased possibilities of contact as well as higher frequencies of contact both in the neighborhood and in the workplace. Similarly, but in the French context, Jolly and DiGiusto (2013) demonstrated that a higher number of immigrants is associated with less xenophobic attitudes. Research has also demonstrated that the frequency and quality of previous intergroup contact is significantly crucial. To illustrate, Kehrberg (2007) argued that the higher the number of friends from out-group an individual has, the better his attitudes toward immigrants. In addition, people with immigrant co-workers also tend to be less xenophobic than those without such co-workers (Hjerm 2007). Some research has even found quality (or valance) of contact to be more important than quantity (or frequency) of contact (Binder *et al.* 2009; McKeown and Psaltis 2017).

However, studies on attitudes toward Chinese immigrants in the European context are relatively rare. Liu's study (2020) on public attitudes and Chinese migrants in Central-Eastern Europe is one of the few examples. Moore and Tubilewicz (2001) studied Chinese migration to Central Europe and Czech Republic. Nielsen, Paritski and Smyth (2012) studied intergroup relations between Italians and Chinese immigrants, however, from the

perspective of Chinese minority members. Moreover, Turcsanyi *et al.* (2020) studied public opinion in 13 European countries on China in the age of COVID-19. Whereas Nyiri (2003) studied the Chinese migration to Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, these studies (Turcsanyi *et al.* 2020; Nyiri 2003) have not focused on the impact of intergroup contact on attitudes toward Chinese immigrants. Therefore, more work is needed to explore this area of research as it has not yet received much of the scholars' attention.

The same applies to the Slovak context. Very few studies have been done about Chinese community in Slovakia. To illustrate, Pleschova (2007) dealt with the composition of Chinese population in Slovakia and their engagement in the business sphere, and Ondris (2015) briefly discussed Chinese migration to Slovakia, Chinese community in Slovakia and Slovak government's approach to Chinese immigrants. Similarly, Benicka (2014) dealt with Chinese migration as well as Chinese presence and associations in Slovakia. Interestingly, Turcsanyi *et al.* (2020) studied Slovak public opinion on China and found that Slovak people view China rather negatively. However, this study has not focused on attitudes toward Chinese immigrants as such. So far, there has not been, to my knowledge, any research studying intergroup relations and intergroup contact between natives and Chinese immigrants. Thus, conducting research on Slovak attitudes toward Chinese immigrants is a great opportunity to expand the number of societies in which intergroup contact effects have been studied. Moreover, it is a great way to get a better understanding of the relations between the two groups, and to study Slovak opinions on the presence of Chinese immigrants in Slovakia.

As mentioned, although research on attitudes toward Chinese immigrants in Slovakia is scarce, there are several studies focusing on public opinions and attitudes toward immigrants in general. To illustrate, Bolecekova and Androvicova (2015) studied Slovak attitudes toward immigrants in the context of refugee and migration crisis. The authors identified a lack of direct contact to be among the causes of the prevailing negative attitudes towards immigrants. In addition, they also stressed the importance of socio-political factors such as the migration crisis itself or the reactions of politicians in Slovakia, and ethnocentrism. Similarly, Bozoganova (2020) also studied the perspectives of Slovak people on immigration and found that in contrast to other Central European countries, Slovak attitudes toward immigration are rather negative and immigrants are viewed more like a burden than help. The author also highlighted two main explanations, more specifically, the lack of relevant information, which can lead to the fear of the

unknown, and low frequency of contact. Taken together, these studies show the importance of intergroup contact in improving attitudes toward other outgroups.

#### 1.4 Intergroup Threat Theory

Following the research of various authors studying threat and its impact on intergroup relations, Stephan and Stephan (2000) aimed to develop a more comprehensive and more broadly applicable threat model of prejudice. Consequently, they introduced a theory called *integrated threat theory*. According to this theory, attitudes toward other outgroups can be predicted by using four threats, namely, (1) *realistic threats*, including threats to the welfare, political and economic power, and well-being of the ingroup (2) *symbolic threats*, including threats to the worldview, morals and values of the ingroup (3) *intergroup anxiety*, including the fear of negative outcomes such as being embarrassed, rejected, or ridiculed, and (4) *negative stereotypes*, including the fear of negative consequences from having negative expectations. In addition, even if these threats are not real, the mere perception of these threats can negatively impact attitudes toward other outgroups and result in prejudice and discrimination (Stephan and Stephan 2000).

Integrated threat theory was later revised to include only two basic types of threat, realistic threats and symbolic threats (Stephan and Renfro 2002). In the revised theory, *realistic group threats* include “threats to a group’s power, resources, and general welfare” whereas *symbolic group threats* include “threats to a group’s religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or worldview” (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, p. 44). Authors also distinguished between *realistic individual threats* including “actual physical or material harm to an individual group member such as pain, torture, or death, as well as economic loss, deprivation of valued resources, and threats to health or personal security” and *symbolic individual threats* including “loss of face or honor and the undermining of an individual’s self-identity or self-esteem” (*ibid*). Nowadays, this theory is known as *intergroup threat theory*.

Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison (2009) explored several antecedents of threat. Why and when people perceive threat depends on a number of factors. According to the authors, one of these factors are intergroup relations – how powerful groups are, whether there is a history of conflicts, and the size of the respective groups. Another factor is related to cultural dimensions – the difference between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures, the level of power distance and uncertainty avoidance, and communication style,

to name a few. Moreover, situational factors are also important, as they are related to the setting and context of intergroup encounters. Lastly, they stated that the perception of threat also depends on individual differences such as “strength of ingroup identity, amount and type of contact, and outgroup knowledge” (p. 49). Furthermore, Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison (2009) also focused on the consequences of threats, in other words, how people respond to threats. As stated by the authors, these responses can be (1) cognitive, which affect how people perceive other outgroups, (2) emotional, which mostly include negative emotional reactions, and (3) behavioral, which include different forms of intergroup conflict.

#### **1.4.1 COVID-19 pandemic**

In December 2019, the first known case of COVID-19, a novel coronavirus disease was reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. In just a few months, the virus rapidly spread to other countries all around the world, leading to a worldwide pandemic (WHO 2020). The ongoing pandemic has not only resulted in many deaths and health consequences but it has also led to preventive measures with a negative impact on economy, education, socialization, and other areas of people's lives. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has also led to discrimination and social exclusion of certain outgroups. To illustrate, according to He *et al.* (2020), numerous cases of discriminatory behaviors toward Asian people were reported in countries such as Canada, the US, Australia and Germany. Also, according to their survey, 25.11% of the respondents, Chinese residents living abroad across 70 countries, reported some forms of discrimination. As mentioned by Demirtas-Madran (2020), when a disease is linked to a certain population, a false illusionary association is created and it can lead to stigmatization, prejudice, and it can even trigger xenophobic reactions.

Up to date, there is only little knowledge about the impact of COVID-19 on attitudes toward Chinese people available in the literature. In the context of intergroup threat theory, Armutlu *et al.* (2020) pointed out that due to COVID-19 virus and its association with China and the Chinese, people of other nations could perceive Chinese people as a potential threat, especially as a realistic threat to their health. In fact, the study on the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the Turkish behavior towards Chinese tourists showed that the Turkish host community feared contracting the COVID-19 virus from Chinese visitors, and Chinese people were often blamed for spreading the virus. This in turn negatively influenced their attitudes and intended hospitable behavior toward



Chinese visitors. However, with more positive perceptions of Chinese people, the perceived risk of infection decreased (Armutlu et al. 2020). In a similar vein, Faulkner *et al.* (2004) concluded that feelings of vulnerability to the disease can also exacerbate negative attitudes toward foreigners.

On the other hand, Kachanoff *et al.* (2020) stressed that COVID-19 pandemic not only poses a realistic threat but also a symbolic threat to individuals as well as the whole group because of the social distancing, which may weaken the sense of community and national identity. With the focus on American's national group, Kachanoff *et al.* (2020) conducted three studies and concluded that both realistic and symbolic threats predict higher levels of distress and lower levels of well-being. Also, according to Stephan (2014), people who are concerned about being contaminated by disease can also manifest higher levels of intergroup anxiety.

Furthermore, another factor influencing the perception of foreigners, and more specifically Chinese people, may be media coverage. Zheng, Goh and Wen (2020) emphasized the important role of media coverage in daily life and its influence on public opinion. For this reason, they pointed out that misleading and biased media coverage on COVID-19 and its association with Chinese origins could negatively impact Chinese people abroad as they could face “racial discrimination, social isolation, unequal treatment, and resultant stress or anxiety when overseas” (Zheng, Goh and Wen 2020, p. 2).

With regard to the situation in Slovakia, according to the findings in Turcanyi et al. (2020), people in Slovakia associate COVID-19 with China. Additionally, they found that many people in Slovakia believe in various conspiracy theories related to the origin of COVID-19, with some people blaming the US, while others blaming China or Chinese people. However, it remains unclear what kind of impact, if any, this association of COVID-19 with China and Chinese people had on Slovak attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup in Slovakia.

## **1.5 Hypotheses**

In line with the previous research reviewed earlier, I develop the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Positive intergroup contact with Chinese immigrants in Slovakia is more common than negative intergroup contact.

- Hypothesis 2: Not only can intergroup contact improve attitudes toward individual Chinese immigrants, but also toward the whole out-group of Chinese immigrants as well.
- Hypothesis 3: COVID-19 is associated with China and Chinese people in Slovakia.
- Hypothesis 4: Attitudes of individuals with a lack of personal contact with Chinese immigrants were more affected by COVID-19 compared to individuals who already had personal contact with Chinese immigrants prior to pandemic.

## 2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was identified as an appropriate methodology to address the research questions posed by the present study. I opted for this approach because I wanted to get a deeper understanding of people's experiences and thoughts in the context of local and social determinants. I also wanted to follow up on previous theories that provided us with a more general picture of meanings. As Creswell and Poth (2018) pointed out, qualitative research addresses “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” and collects research data in a natural setting that is sensitive to the individuals under study (p. 81). Therefore, it can focus on a diversity of perspectives of individuals (*ibid*).

Furthermore, to collect data about the individual contact experiences of Slovak majority members with Chinese immigrants and Slovak attitudes toward Chinese outgroup, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were selected as a primary research method, conducted with a sample of Slovak majority members. Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) define in-depth interview as “a conversation designed to elicit depth on a topic of interest” (p. 113). In-depth interviews allow the interviewer to get complete and clear answers to why and how questions, and to use probing (that is, asking unscripted questions) to gain more insight on any emerging topic. Additionally, unlike closed-ended questionnaires or surveys, in-depth interviews allow respondents to answer questions in their own words or ask for an explanation if something is unclear (Guest, Namey and Mitchell 2013).

In order to create a sample that would be coherent with the present research aims and questions, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was followed. For example, I included people who have a permanent residence in Slovakia, people who have Slovak nationality and I excluded people whose parents were born outside of Slovakia. In addition, participants were recruited using purposive sampling and snowball sampling strategies to select and locate information-rich cases (Patton 2014). With respect to the research questions and hypotheses, the aim of the sampling process was to mainly interview people from the following categories:

- (1) Slovaks with direct contact experiences with Chinese immigrants,
- (2) Slovaks with extended contact experiences with Chinese immigrants,

- (3) Slovaks without any direct and extended contact experiences with Chinese immigrants.

## **2.1 Participants**

A total of 18 participants volunteered to participate in the present study (for a better overview of participant demographic information, see Appendix A). The sample consisted of 7 female and 11 male participants, who reside in Kosice Region. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 67 years and were distributed as follows: 18-25 (44.4 percent), 26-30 (16.7 percent), 31-40 (5.6 percent), 41-50 (22.2 percent), 51-60 (5.6 percent), and 61-70 (5.6 percent). Six percent of the participants have obtained a primary level of education, 50 percent of the participants have achieved a secondary level of education and the remaining 44 percent have achieved a tertiary level of education.

## **2.2 Data Collection and Interview Procedure**

An interview protocol was developed for this study. Guiding topics were based on the literature review and research questions. The initial version of interview protocol was later revised after the completion of pilot interviews. In order to identify questions that were unclear or difficult to answer, a total number of three pilot interviews was completed with participants representing three different categories described earlier. Consequently, some questions were reworded or completely omitted. Moreover, a set of new topics was identified and included in the revised version. These pilot interviews were excluded from further analysis. The final interview protocol consisted of 15 mostly open-ended questions and 4 sub-questions, all organized into three thematic blocks (for a complete list of all questions, see Appendix B).

Finally, online interviews were conducted in the period of three months, from March 2021 to May 2021. The interviews continued until sufficient information was obtained and saturation was reached. All interviews were conducted in Slovak language. Individual interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes with a range of 50 to 120 minutes. Each interview started with a consent to audio recording and a brief introduction of the study. It was also clarified that by “Chinese immigrants” I meant people who moved to Slovakia from China, thus, first-generation immigrants. While interview protocol was followed, additional probing questions based on the individual responses of the participants were also included. Moreover, in some cases, short follow-up interviews

were conducted for clarification. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author.

The interviewer (author) made it clear that the research participation was voluntary and anonymous. Only minimal demographic information (age, gender, education, region of residence, type of contact) was obtained in order to preserve anonymity. For the same reason, the actual names of participants were substituted with a participant number (for example, Participant 1). Participant numbers were later included alongside the cited participants' statements.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis was selected as an appropriate research technique to analyze the data of the present study. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within data in a rich and detailed way (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the present study, analysis was conducted by the author using transcripts in original language – Slovak language. Relevant parts were later translated into English by the author. Data analysis was conducted according to the method proposed by Nowell *et al.* (2017). The analytic strategy consisted of organizing the data, taking notes while reading, coding and organizing themes, interpreting and verifying the data and identifying the essential themes within the data set.

## **3 CASE STUDY OF SLOVAK ATTITUDES TOWARD CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN SLOVAKIA**

### **3.1 Background and Regional Context**

Chinese migrants are characteristic for their high geographical mobility, notably in the pursuit of economic opportunities. Thus, the reasons behind Chinese migration are mainly economic (Benicka 2014). In the case of Central Europe, the biggest wave of Chinese migration was recorded in 1989 and early 1990's. According to Benicka (2014), two major events contributed to the arrival of Chinese immigrants into the region. Firstly, there was the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989, which was followed by an economic recession. As a result, there were concerns about the future of private sector and many Chinese entrepreneurs started to look for some new business opportunities outside of PRC. Secondly, there was a new bilateral visa agreement between Hungary and PRC in 1988, which enabled all PRC nationals to enter Hungary without visa and resulted in an influx of more than 45,000 Chinese people into the country between 1989 and 1991 (Moore and Tubilewicz 2001). The emerging market economies of Central European countries provided Chinese entrepreneurs with attractive business opportunities and little competition. Moreover, they were often directly or indirectly supported by Chinese state-owned enterprises that provided them with some working capital (Moore and Tubilewicz 2001). New business opportunities in Central Europe also attracted a number of Chinese migrants coming into the region from other parts of Western Europe (Benicka 2014).

In Slovakia, the number of migrants in general was relatively low. The authorities recorded the greatest increase in the number of Chinese applications for residence permits in 1992, when numerous Chinese people arrived from Hungary after the re-establishment of visa requirements (Benicka 2014). Moreover, with Slovakia becoming a fully-fledged member of the EU in 2004, the overall number of residence permits increased, including residence permits to Chinese citizens (Ondris 2015). At present, Chinese community is the second largest Asian community in Slovakia (see Appendix C). According to the latest data, the official number of Chinese people living in Slovakia is 2,687, out of which, 1,842 people are permanent residents and 845 people are temporary residents (BBFP PPF 2021). A great majority of Chinese people come from Zhejiang Province and many of them are from Qingtian County in Zhejiang Province (Ondris 2015). Almost half of Chinese immigrants are living in Bratislava Region, especially in the capital of Slovakia

(see Appendix D). The majority of Chinese people living in Slovakia have only obtained elementary level of education and only a small number of the Chinese hold high school or university diplomas (Ondris 2015). Many Chinese immigrants own small businesses and employ Chinese employees. They focus their businesses mainly on restaurant and textile markets. However, Ondris (2015) pointed out that despite this fact, “the Chinese community in Slovakia is not homogeneous and there is a low level of cooperation” (p. 89).

The present study was conducted in the area of Kosice Region in Slovakia and it was mainly focused on the city of Kosice, the second largest city of Slovakia, and its surrounding areas. Kosice Region is located in the southern part of eastern Slovakia. The region shares foreign borders with Hungary and Ukraine. With the population of 801,460 people, it is the second largest region in Slovakia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2021). The number of Chinese immigrants living in Kosice Region is 220, which makes only 0.13% of the region's population (see Appendix E). Chinese outgroup is the second most populous Asian outgroup in Kosice Region. However, the number of Chinese people living in the region is significantly lower than the number of Vietnamese people, which is, with a number of 1,051 Vietnamese immigrants, the most populous Asian outgroup in the region (BBFP PPF 2021). In fact, although Kosice Region is Slovakia's second most populous region, its number of Chinese immigrants is among the lowest in the country. Therefore, there are limited opportunities for direct contact with Chinese immigrants, which makes the intergroup context of the region more suitable for studying both forms of intergroup contact. Furthermore, the choice of this area was also influenced by convenience, access, and geographic proximity to the author.

Furthermore, regarding the context of the present study, it is important to mention that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when there was a lockdown in Slovakia, which began at the end of December 2020. Consequently, face-to-face interactions were limited to a bare minimum, and many businesses, including Chinese restaurants and shops, were closed for a certain period of time. Thus, the opportunities for intergroup contact were even more limited, and many retrospective accounts and opinions reported by some participants of the present study were mostly based on contact experiences with Chinese immigrants prior to lockdown or even prior to the pandemic. For this reason, it was also desirable, in my opinion, to address the COVID-19 pandemic and its possible impact on attitudes toward Chinese immigrants.

## 3.2 Findings

Overall, data analysis revealed 6 major themes and several subthemes, each of which will be presented in this section.

### 3.2.1 Intergroup contact

In total, four forms of intergroup contact were identified during data analysis, namely, direct contact, extended contact, vicarious contact, and parasocial contact. To specify, seven participants reported having a face-to-face interaction with Chinese immigrants in Slovakia (labeled as direct contact). Six participants were close to people who were in direct contact with Chinese immigrants (labeled as extended contact). And five participants did not have any personal experience nor knew anyone who would, their only point of contact with Chinese immigrants was contact via media consumption (labeled as mass media). Participants with predominantly direct contact experiences also reported different forms of indirect contact experiences, but not vice versa.

#### *Positive-negative contact*

The findings showed that positive contact was more common in intergroup interactions than negative contact. In fact, hardly any participants reported negative encounters with Chinese people. Participant 1 has been part of Chinese community for more than 20 years and throughout these years she has experienced only a small number of negative encounters. For example, she talked about her negative experience with Chinese people at the time she was expecting a child with her late Chinese fiancée:

Probably one of the most absurd things that has ever happened to me was when I got pregnant with my Chinese fiancée... after his death, a childless Chinese couple came to me and offered me money, they actually wanted me to sell my unborn child to them... They said that I was young and I had my whole life ahead of me, those were their arguments. I was disgusted. (Participant 1, woman, 45, direct contact)

However, she explained that “fortunately, I was always surrounded by good people, these were just some of the exceptions. ... In case of these two, I thought to myself that they are psychos.” In this case, it appears that her negative experiences did not have impact on her attitudes toward other Chinese people, which could indicate that the effects of negative contact were neutralized by positive contact and negative effects did not generalize to the whole outgroup. In addition, Participant 17 shared her negative experience with Chinese people when traveling to China. She said that she was fazed by



the way Chinese people behaved in the plane but eventually, this negative experience also did not negatively impact her attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup.

Furthermore, among the sample of participants, reports of negative extended contact experiences were even more rare. Only Participant 3 mentioned that his girlfriend told him several stories about Chinese immigrants, which he considered to be negative. He talked about Chinese people engaging in some illegal activities in Slovakia. Although he did not mention many details, he shared one story about his girlfriend getting cheated on by a Chinese man. Additionally, he described all Chinese men as “pretty unfaithful” and added that “they want our women, but maybe only as an object of sexual desire... or for a marriage, I don't know. Simply put, our women probably seem exotic to them”. He also declared that he does not think he could be friends with Chinese people and he does not really have intentions to meet them in the future because he is “totally different than them”. Such comments could possibly indicate a presence of jealousy, a generalization of negative contact effects to the whole outgroup, and also generalization effects for outgroup avoidance.

Regarding contact through mass-media, a vast majority of participants reported seeing mostly positive portrayals of Chinese immigrants across various countries around the world. Participants with no personal experiences often referred to movies and videos on the Internet as their sources of information about Chinese people. For example, Participant 13 enjoyed watching e-sports tournaments in his free time. He said that many good players were Chinese and he often looked up information about them on the Internet. Some participants also mentioned videos about Chinese people building highways and buildings in a very short time, YouTube videos about Chinese history and culture, movies with Jackie Chen, TV series with Chinese immigrants or movie scenes set in American Chinatowns. On the other hand, a number of negative news was also mentioned. For example, Participant 9 talked about animal cruelty, Participant 3 mentioned air pollution and communism, Participant 11 and Participant 13 both talked about human rights abuses, Tibet and Hong Kong protests. It should be noted that these examples were all related to the portrayal of China, not Chinese immigrants.

### **3.2.2 Intergroup anxiety**

When asked how they would feel if they were the only Slovaks among a group of Chinese immigrants, some participants with no personal ties to Chinese people

commented that they would feel “uncomfortable”, “shy” or “awkward” because they would not speak their language. Interestingly, among these participants, people with extended contact experiences felt more anxious about future interaction than people without such experiences. For example, Participant 2 stated “I would feel like I don’t fit in. I would have doubts, whether they would consider me as equal in their community... they would speak Chinese, I wouldn't understand, I wouldn't feel comfortable”. Similarly, Participant 3 declared “I wouldn’t feel very good, I don’t think they would accept me”. On the other hand, the same participants reported that they would feel more comfortable among immigrants from Eastern Europe because they are culturally and linguistically more similar to Slovak people. In this case, it is important to consider previous negative experiences and different personal characteristics of participants. As Wolfer et al. (2017) pointed out, experiencing intergroup contact via an ingroup friend does not necessarily mean getting all the relevant details about the interaction. As a result, this can lead to “over-interpretation” and can have negative impact on attitudes or, in this case, lead to intergroup anxiety and avoidance of future contact. Similarly, hearing about communication difficulties could also lead to negative expectations.

During data analysis, I have discovered several patterns, now presented as subthemes, related to intergroup anxiety, with the most prominent being (1) language barriers, (2) lack of opportunities for contact and (3) lack of knowledge. I have identified them as antecedents of intergroup anxiety as they have potential to induce feelings of anxiety, embarrassment as well as negative expectations and concerns about rejection (Stephan 2014). However, previous negative experiences or different personal characteristics as mentioned previously should also be taken into consideration.

### ***Language barriers***

According to the findings, a great majority of participants believed that Chinese immigrants cannot speak Slovak language very well. Consequently, most participants found communication with them very challenging and limiting. For example, Participant 15 said “I don’t know a lot of information about them because of the language barrier... I only know some very basic information about their personal lives”. When asked about engaging in future interactions with Chinese immigrants, most participants with no direct contact experience reported having concerns about a language barrier, which could lead to mutual misunderstanding and feelings of awkwardness. For example, Participant 18 said “if they wouldn’t speak Slovak then I don’t know what I would do... look at them

and smile awkwardly”. Many participants believed that being able to communicate in Slovak language is one of the main drivers of successful integration into Slovak community.

Participants with direct contact experiences also reported having difficulties during interaction with Chinese people. For example, Participant 1 declared that although she is already used to their way of talking, sometimes she has to “try really hard to get the meaning of their words”. Also, she said that at some point she started to use “Chinese version of Slovak language” when talking to them. She explained that “I am only using infinitive verbs... it sounds really funny, people might laugh at me but it is easier for them to understand”.

### ***Lack of opportunities for contact***

The findings showed that there is a lack of opportunities for contact with Chinese immigrants. At the same time, many participants do not spontaneously engage in intergroup contact with Chinese immigrants. Among the participants, Chinese immigrants were mostly associated with small family businesses, that is, small textile shops and restaurants located mainly in cities. These places were the most common places of contact. Although a majority of participants declared they visited such places in the past, many participants also reported they have never had a face-to-face interaction with Chinese immigrants or they were not sure what Asian outgroup they were interacting with. Participant 18 pointed out that “you can find them in China shops, I guess but you barely see them on the street... and honestly, I really wonder where they buy groceries or spend their free time”.

This finding was also confirmed by participants with direct contact experiences. For example, Participant 1 stated that Chinese people do not engage in social activities in Slovakia and they prefer online conversation with friends in China. She identified it as the main reason why they do not have many friends in Slovakia. She also said:

After work, they just go home and stay there... We usually meet at work and then occasionally hang out in Chinese restaurants or at their home or mine. They don't really have many hobbies. Some of them like to go to casinos. Hm, but I think it is different if they have a Slovak spouse... then they are more involved in our community. (Participant 1, woman, 45, direct contact)

In addition, people who were in contact with Chinese immigrants declared that their first point of contact was at workplace or they met through relatives, for example, during family gatherings.

### *Lack of knowledge*

A large proportion of interviewees said they did not have much information about Chinese immigrants or Chinese culture. Moreover, participants with direct or extended contact experiences mentioned a number of Chinese customs and traditions that they found to be different and unexpected due to prior lack of knowledge. In some cases, these cultural differences contributed to higher levels of anxiety and enhanced feelings of awkwardness or led to disapproval. Among the most mentioned were Chinese table manners, such as making noises and burping while eating or using plates as an ashtray, which were found “not typical”, “weird”, or even “rude” and some participants were “fazed by these behaviors” or “felt bothered”. Participant 2 said he knew that “when guests enjoy the food they are eating, then in order to express that they really like it, they burp out loud” and he continued that “that’s not something typical for us in Europe”.

On one hand, some participants did not mind such behavior. For example, Participant 17 stated that “I take it as something that is normal for them, it is rude for us, but somehow I do not care about it because I know that all Chinese people do it. I don't think they should stop doing it only because they are in Slovakia”. On the other hand, some participants did not approve of such behavior. To illustrate, Participant 15 commented that such behavior is rude and “those who live here should follow our social etiquette rules” but she added that most of Chinese people eventually get accustomed to Slovak manners. Additionally, Participant 1 mentioned that with her other Slovak colleagues, they tried to change the table manners of their Chinese colleagues, even though they were aware of the reasons why they behave the way they do:

**Participant 1:** ... after years, we taught them not to behave like this when dining. Although it has been explained to us that it is their way of saying that the food tastes good, like a gratitude for the food, that it is delicious. However, in our culture it is actually very rude ... They are used to eating cooked food. Therefore, we had a kitchen at work so that they could always cook themselves some food. They always made a lot of food, so we, Slovaks, would also have lunch with them. We ate together and we somehow got used to their table manners. But when we went to the restaurant, we realized that we were actually bothered by their

table manners, we were mostly minding the waiters and those sitting around us, so then we talked to them about it.

**Interviewer:** And in your opinion, was there any significant progress made?

**Participant 1:** Yes, because when they stayed here in Slovakia and decided to live here, they themselves did not want to be so visible, so they learned it even by themselves. But I think they keep doing it at home. (Participant 1, female, 45, direct contact)

Furthermore, Participant 15 talked about the time she received a gift from her Chinese acquaintances and there was a price tag on it. She added “they even stated that it was an expensive gift, which is very unusual in our country, it made me feel uncomfortable”.

### **3.2.3 Chinese immigrants through the lens of Slovak majority members**

According to the findings, it seems that among the sample, Chinese immigrants are viewed positively and the whole outgroup is viewed as warm and competent. Direct intergroup contact did not seem to play a significant role in this matter as the descriptions of Chinese immigrants were positive almost among all participants. Interestingly, people with more personal ties to Chinese immigrants defined Chinese people with predominately warmth-related traits, while people without personal experiences defined Chinese people with predominantly competence-related traits. This finding could indicate the importance of direct intergroup contact.

#### ***Warm and competent***

When asked to describe Chinese people in a few words, the most common view among participants with Chinese friends and acquaintances was that Chinese people are friendly, respectful and generous. For example, Participant 15 pointed out that she found Chinese people very respectful, when she talked about her positive experience during a visit of Chinese people at her home:

Chinese people are very respectful. What I experienced and really liked was, for example, the respect for the elderly. When Chinese people came to visit our home and my great-grandmother entered the room, everyone stood up and waited until one of them sit her down. And they treated her very respectfully. (Participant 15, woman, 50, direct contact)

Similarly, Participant 17 shared her experience with family friends from China, who regularly invite her family to have dinner at their place:

They were hospitable, generous, they cooked a lot of different dishes, which they kept offering us the whole time, so I was pleasantly surprised because they treated us in a way that even some people in Slovakia do not, even some of our own family members do not treat us like this. And they were so happy that we enjoyed the food they cooked for us. (Participant 17, woman, 23, direct contact)

At the same time, some participants also described them as hardworking, helpful and ambitious. For example, Participant 1 said “they are very ambitious. They lose contact with their families in order to have a better life and they do everything to make it happen. Even if it means to take risks”. Some participants also used expressions such as “very straight-forward”, “adaptable to any situation”, “quiet and good listeners”, and “secretive about their personal lives”.

In contrast, the most common view among participants without any personal ties to Chinese immigrants was that Chinese people are very hardworking, disciplined and intelligent. For example, Participant 2, with extended contact experiences, described Chinese people as “hardworking, disciplined and innovative”. Some of the examples of people with no contact experiences include Participant 13 who said that “not that I want to compare them to ants, but they kind of are like them, hardworking, very hardworking” and Participant 10 who stated that “they are skillful, active people... intelligent, hardworking... obedient, in fact, I think it's their common sense”. At the same time, some participants also described them as friendly and nice. Nonetheless, Participant 12 shared a different opinion, he said “in my opinion, they are... cold and greedy but also very intelligent. I think that business, career and money are more important to them than family”.

### ***Closed community***

Although participants seem to have positive attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, it also appears that among the participants, Chinese immigrants are viewed as not interested in developing social relationships outside their own communities or small groups. Some participants declared that Chinese immigrants in Slovakia seem to have their own network of connections within which they cooperate and help each other out. In contrast, some participants, particularly those with no personal contact experiences, did not feel like there was any Chinese community present in Slovakia.

Chinese community was also viewed as a closed community among some people with extended contact experiences. For example, Participant 3 commented that “it's a

community that doesn't let men in, women yes, but men no". Furthermore, even participants with Chinese friends and acquaintances declared that Chinese community is very closed. For example, Participant 17 said that first-generation immigrants from China barely engage in intergroup contact and it is more likely for second-generation immigrants to interact with majority members. She explained that:

My Chinese friends, I don't think they meet with anyone else besides my family. They are old. Older people from China distance themselves from Slovaks, because they are probably better off alone or with other Chinese families. Maybe because they are aware of the fact that they don't speak our language very well, maybe it's just uncomfortable for them, maybe they don't know how to make first contact with locals. You barely see them on the street hanging out with Slovak people. It's easier for younger generations... for those who grew up in Slovakia. (Participant 17, woman, 23, direct contact)

Participant 15 discussed how special it is to get invited to Chinese immigrant's home because they are very protective of their privacy. In addition, Participant 1 talked about her Chinese employers regarding their behavior toward customers from China, Vietnam and Slovakia. She declared that her employers do not show as much effort to Slovak customers as they do to customers from Asian communities:

Chinese customers always come first, then the Vietnamese, because they [Chinese employers] feel like Vietnamese people have more money than Slovak people... My boss assists Chinese customers, he offers them tea, even gives them discounts. In the case of the Vietnamese customers, he also shows them around, but it is more or less just a matter of selling as much goods as possible. Then, when it comes to Slovak customers, everything is up to us, he stays in the office and barely shows up. (Participant 1, woman, 45, direct contact)

### ***Negative stereotypes and joke-making***

Although Chinese people were perceived positively, some participants declared that they have heard people making racist jokes about Chinese people, however, not in the presence of Chinese immigrants. For example, Participant 5 and Participant 9 talked about people impersonating Chinese immigrants and mocking their accent in Slovak language. Participant 18 has also seen people squinting their eyes to look like Chinese and then trying to say words in Chinese. Some participants also confirmed that they have heard people calling Chinese people "slant-eyes".

### 3.2.4 Intergroup threat

As mentioned, participants seem to have positive attitudes toward Chinese immigrants. This finding can be explained by the fact that Chinese people are not perceived as a threat. Moreover, it can also be explained by the way people view migration in Slovakia. In fact, for the great majority of interviewees, willingness to work was of special importance, especially in questions related to the tolerance of immigrants living in Slovakia. It appears that among the sample, majority members mainly place emphasis on the economic dimension of integration of migrants like regular employment, paying taxes, and the involvement in other financial and economic activities. Participant 8 argued that “first of all, they should find a job and then work on their language skills”. Similarly, Participant 12 said “they should have a job and pay taxes like everyone else and not rely on our government”. In this respect, Chinese immigrants were not viewed as a burden and were welcomed in Slovakia. For example, Participant 2 stated “they could help our economy in Slovakia” and continued that “if they came here with some good intentions, to work, seeking better conditions, whether economic or environmental, I would not see them as a threat, but rather as a benefit.”

During the interviewing process, participants often contrasted Chinese immigrants with other outgroups such as Roma people, Muslim people or illegal immigrants from Africa that were viewed more negatively and considered as problematic or even hostile. Participant 11 shared a quote he liked “you know how it is, not all Muslims are terrorists but almost all terrorists are Muslims (laugh)”. Moreover, these outgroups were associated with negative media coverage and portrayals of violence and criminal activities. To illustrate, Participant 16 shared his opinions on migration:

It really depends on *who* comes here, for example, those Muslims... I would rather not see them here. ... because of what do they do... The Internet, Facebook is full of this news, what they do to our girls, women and things like that. They would like to have everything but they do not want to do anything. (Participant 16, man, 55, extended contact)

Furthermore, the analysis also showed that the possible growth of Chinese community in the future was not perceived as a threat. In comparison to other previously mentioned outgroups, Chinese people were not perceived as hostile or aggressive. For example, Participant 18 said that “I would certainly rather see more Chinese people in Slovakia than Roma people”. Additionally, Participant 2 stated:



When immigrants, Arabs, come here, they have their Islam, and they, in fact... I mean not everyone, but they would like to spread it to the whole world. They are often, as we can see from many scenes and news from recent years, they are not really... they are not so adaptable and they really did not come here to Europe with good intentions, you know, to work and integrate, but seriously, someone had promised them some generous benefits, so they came here. They do nothing, with some exceptions, and they get hundreds of euros every month. And I don't think that Chinese people would do that. Their pride wouldn't let them just come here, do nothing, and just hold out their hands and then ask for money. So that's the difference. (Participant 2, 26, male, extended contact)

### **3.2.5 Similarity between East Asian outgroups**

Participants with only indirect contact experiences or no contact experiences reported that they were not sure whether they came into contact with Chinese people or just members of some other Asian minorities, especially immigrants from the East Asian region. They usually assumed the ethnicity of Asian immigrants based on the context or someone else's information. For example, in this way, they expected to meet Thai people in Thai restaurants, Chinese people in Asian stores selling clothes, and so on. Similarly, when their neighbors told them there were some newcomers from Vietnam in the neighborhood, they immediately thought all Asians they meet in the neighborhood are Vietnamese. Some participants automatically assumed that all Asian immigrants they met in Slovakia were actually Chinese. To illustrate:

For example, if I see someone who looks like Asian, I automatically think that that person must be from China. ... It's just that it's probably because they are the most populous nation in the world, and we, Europeans, can't tell so easily whether someone is Chinese, Japanese or Korean. They [Asians] can more easily distinguish themselves from each other. So, yes, when I see someone with slanted eyes, it automatically comes to my mind that he is Chinese. (Participant 2, man, 26, extended contact)

Similarly, Participant 6 admitted that she often goes shopping to what she believes are Chinese stores. Although she said she did not know the difference between Chinese or Vietnamese people, Chinese were somehow on default. Based on the name and location of the store she described, I found out that these stores were actually Vietnamese. Also, two other participants (Participant 2 and Participant 11) talked about a Chinese bistro in the city center of Kosice where they often had lunch. They both believed this bistro was Chinese and they also assumed people working there were Chinese immigrants. In this

case, I also found out that the bistro was actually Vietnamese. Moreover, as Participant 9 pointed out, people in Slovakia often call all Asian shops “China shops”.

Regarding participants with direct contact experiences, all of them admitted they did not know any difference between Chinese and other Asian immigrants prior to their contact experiences with Chinese immigrants. To illustrate, Participant 7 stated “at first, I had no idea... you know, it is hard to see how different their faces are if you don’t know them... but now, I think I would be able to distinguish them but I am not 100% sure”. The quality and quantity of intergroup contact seem to play an important role in this matter. Out of all seven participants with direct contact experiences only Participant 1, someone who has been in continuous direct contact with numerous Chinese immigrants for over 20 years, was confident in her ability to distinguish Chinese people from other Asian minorities. Other participants with direct contact experiences admitted they were not absolutely sure.

### **3.2.6 COVID-19 pandemic**

In order to understand how people view COVID-19 pandemic with regard to China and Chinese people and to explore whether there is some association that might have had an impact on the attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, I dedicated a series of questions to this matter. Consequently, data analysis revealed several patterns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The most frequently recurring patterns were divided into six subthemes, namely, (1) natural zoonotic origin of COVID-19, (2) poor food hygiene practices, (3) consumption of wild animals, (4) conspiracy theories, (5) association with China and the Chinese, and (6) consequences of COVID-19.

#### *Natural zoonotic origin of COVID-19*

According to the findings, the majority of participants believed that COVID-19 got naturally transferred from bats or other animals, such as mice, to human beings and that the virus originated in China. For example, Participant 15 said “it all started in the marketplace in Wuhan, from there it probably started to spread elsewhere... animals, market and some mutations, that’s what it is all about”. Moreover, Participant 6 stated “it is all about microbiology, the virus is also a living organism like us and everyone's goal is to survive”.

### ***Poor food hygiene practices***

Participant 3 declared that “although the virus was first diagnosed in China, it could have been somewhere else even before but it certainly came from the East, from Asia, because the hygiene practices there are a little bit different”. Actually, some of the most mentioned factors that people believed played a role in the outbreak of COVID-19 included poor conditions in local open-air marketplaces in China. Some interviewees believed that such places have very unsanitary conditions and unhygienic practices, especially with regard to food hygiene, that pose risk to people’s health. As Participant 9 pointed out, while referring to TV news, “it’s horrible that someone, for example, puts meat somewhere outside, at a market, where it’s 30 degrees ... so I view this a little bit negatively”.

### ***Consumption of wild animals***

Also, participants who personally did not know any Chinese immigrants often brought up Chinese consumption of wild animals as another factor that played a role in the outbreak. They described it as Chinese people eating “whatever comes their way”, “anything that moves, swims, flies, walks, runs”, “almost anything that has legs and moves” and many similar expressions. Consumption of wild or unusual animals was also frequently mentioned with regard to negative stereotypes about Chinese people. Nonetheless, opinions on this topic varied. On one hand, some participants, mostly those with direct contact experiences, expressed their understanding of different eating habits that vary from country to country. For example, Participant 10 said “many people complain about Chinese people eating dogs but you know how it is... in India, they wouldn’t eat beef, in our country it’s perfectly fine to eat beef, so it is the same thing”. This was also confirmed by Participant 6. Additionally, Participant 14 pointed out that “there are more than a billion people in China, there is not enough food for everyone... I wouldn’t eat it personally, but it doesn’t bother me”. On the other hand, a few participants disagreed with such opinions, especially with regard to eating generally popular pets. This was confirmed by Participant 11 who did not know any Chinese people. He said that “we are already living in modern era, it must be possible for them to avoid eating animals that they do not necessarily have to eat... such as dogs, cats”.

### ***Conspiracy theories***

In contrast, a number of conspiracy theories were also mentioned, most of the conspiracy theories were coming from the Internet sources. The most prevailing theory

was that COVID-19 was intentionally created in a laboratory. Some participants believed it was engineered by the US and aimed at China or even at other countries in Europe, such as Italy. Among these opinions, the most repeated motive was a conflict between the US and China. To illustrate, Participant 5 stated that “China has a dispute with the US, so this leaves open the question whether some Americans did not leak something there [in China], to make it look like some kind of camouflage, to hide something”. Interestingly, Participant 1 and Participant 8 said they both heard the news about the US being responsible for COVID-19 from their Chinese friends, while Participant 1 did not believe it was artificially created, Participant 8 did:

I thought it was artificially created and leaked ... probably by America to China ... I was also thinking if it wasn't eventually meant for Italy ... or even for the whole Europe as such. I thought and I still think it was created in the lab, even though the media say otherwise. I don't think it was any animal. (Participant 8, woman, 44, direct contact)

In addition, Participant 16 blamed “rich people” such as Bill Gates, George Soros or the Rockefeller family, people who are often targets of conspiracy theories, to be responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. In his opinion, the virus was engineered to decimate the world's population and “to get rid of old, unnecessary, sick people”. In fact, the idea of the COVID-19 being a response to the human overpopulation was also mentioned by Participant 18, who said that “maybe someone thought there are too many people on our planet”.

On the other hand, some participants believed it was engineered by Chinese scientists in a laboratory and it was either intentionally or accidentally leaked when trying to find new cures to such diseases as cancer. Participant 14 commented that “it was artificially made in China and it was accidently leaked”. Similarly, Participant 4 said:

I personally also incline to the possibility ... that they were trying something, whether it was released on purpose or it was unintentionally released into the air, well... I don't know and it doesn't really matter. I don't think China was interested in killing all of us here. (Participant 4, man, 25, direct contact)

Interestingly, according to the findings, this information did not only come from the Internet but also from some Vietnamese immigrants in Slovakia. For example, Participant 1 stated that “from our Vietnamese customers we often heard such allegations that Chinese people actually did this to us”.

Some of the other mentioned conspiracy theories also included Ozzy Osbourne spreading the coronavirus by eating a bat at his concert and a possible connection between the COVID-19 and the fictional virus in a popular video game called Resident Evil. However, none of the participants actually believed in such theories. Participant 5 commented that he noticed these theories on YouTube and Reddit.

### *Association with China and the Chinese*

Findings showed that almost all participants associated COVID-19 with China. The most common argument was that China was the first country to report several cases of a novel coronavirus. Also, it seems that media coverage of the outbreak of COVID-19 played a significant role in this matter as interviewees noticed a great increase in a number of news related to the outbreak in China. But majority of participants viewed this news as neutral and informative, thus, not noticing any major impact on their perception of China or Chinese people.

When asked about opinions on China and Chinese people being blamed for COVID-19, most participants commented that neither China nor Chinese people should be blamed for COVID-19 because according to them, it was just an unfortunate coincidence. Participant 3 also commented that “maybe [the virus] should have been left to be diagnosed by someone else... let's say... the French and then the French would be the biggest culprits”. Participant 17 said that no one should be blamed because it all started due to a great migration of people and she stated that “maybe some Chinese guy caught the virus somewhere else and brought it to China from another country, who knows ... no one really knows where it all started so why should we blame someone?”. Additionally, Participant 7 said that blaming China for the COVID-19 pandemic is just a part of some political propaganda against China. Although it is important to mention that throughout the interview, she repeatedly showed support for communist regime and Russia, and simultaneously showed signs of Anti-Western sentiment.

I don't blame China, I don't even associate it with China, because it's just politics ... a political propaganda against this great power, propaganda in Europe against China, against Russia... I don't think that China created this virus but even if they did, then America can and China cannot? America makes many biological weapons, they certainly keep them as a secret... and I wouldn't blame the Russians either, these are the great powers that have to make defense policies... they don't have such allies as America does. (Participant 7, woman, 67, direct contact)

On the other hand, some participants blamed Chinese authorities and Chinese government for covering the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan. This was confirmed by Participant 2 who said that he sees a problem “in the fact that when the virus started to spread in China, at the end of 2019, the authorities and the government were silent”. Participant 15 confirmed this by stating “the real problem is in how China approached this, the government, the leadership... From there, the information about new virus did not spread quickly enough, there was a time lag”. And Participant 9 declared that “China should have closed the borders right away”. Additionally, only one participant blamed Chinese people for the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. According to Participant 11, “the population is to be blamed, mostly for not trying to get away from eating such food as animals, animals that should not be eaten”.

### *Consequences of COVID-19*

According to the findings, COVID-19 was perceived as a realistic threat by a majority of participants. Some participants reported higher levels of distress and lower levels of well-being during COVID-19 pandemic mostly due to the virus, its media coverage and social isolation. In a few cases, the association of COVID-19 with China and Chinese people was linked to a fear of contracting the virus from Chinese people. Consequently, it affected behavior of some participants and resulted in a greater avoidance of Chinese people or even Asians in general, mainly at the beginning of pandemic. To illustrate, Participant 2 admitted he had witnessed people avoiding contact with Chinese people and he also shared his own experience:

It has also happened to me, at the beginning [of pandemic], when a group of Chinese people or rather Asians was walking down the street, because I can't tell them apart ... I already saw them from a distance, about 30 meters away, and since it was a very narrow street, I couldn't possibly avoid them or go around them so I just changed direction and walked down the other way. ... At that time, only Chinese people were transmitting the virus, it was not so widespread. Now it doesn't matter, everyone has it, regardless of nationality. (Participant 2, man, 26, extended contact)

Participant 10 stated he would have definitely avoided contact with Chinese people if he had met them on the street. Participant 15 avoided contact with all foreigners carrying luggage on the street. Moreover, Participant 5 and Participant 9 also witnessed a few cases of people avoiding Chinese immigrants or acting cautious around them.

Nonetheless, a vast majority of participants did not report any change in the attitudes toward Chinese outgroup members nor people in China. Participant 5 argued that “Chinese people have also suffered a lot”. Only two participants, Participant 2 and Participant 11, pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their feelings toward Chinese government. Moreover, it appears that the feelings of participants were not affected by personal COVID-19 infection.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the intergroup contact between Slovak majority members and Chinese immigrants from the perspective of the majority group, the attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, and the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of its association with China and Chinese people on attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup in Slovakia. In this closing section, I discuss the findings in more detail, while focusing on the 6 main results and hypotheses. I also address the limitations and present answers to the research questions.

### **Prevalence of positive intergroup contact**

Regarding *Hypothesis 1*, I proposed that positive intergroup contact is more common than negative intergroup contact. As expected, the findings showed a greater prevalence of positive intergroup interactions. This is in line with previous literature studying valanced intergroup contact effects (for example, Graf, Paolini and Rubin 2014; Arnadottir *et al.* 2018). Despite the low occurrence of negative contact, it was found that negative contact was neutralized for participants with many prior positive contact experiences. This is in line with the findings in Arnadottir *et al.* (2018), who discussed the buffering effects of higher than average levels of positive contact on the effects of negative contact.

On the contrary, positive contact did not have such a strong effect for a participant with only extended contact experiences, which resulted in less favorable attitudes toward the whole Chinese outgroup, higher levels of intergroup anxiety and reduced intentions for future interaction. This finding seems similar to findings in previous studies examining attitude generalization (for example, Meleady and Forder 2018; Brylka, Jasinskaja-Lahti and Mahonen 2016) and negative extended contact (for example, Wolfer *et al.* 2017). However, further research will be necessary to confirm this finding.

### **Intergroup anxiety as the main barrier to intergroup contact**

Among a sample of participants in the present study, intergroup anxiety was identified as the main barrier to intergroup contact with Chinese immigrants. Drawing on previous studies on intergroup anxiety (for example, Stephan 2014), I have identified four potential causes of intergroup anxiety, namely, communication barrier, lack of prior contact, lack of knowledge, and negative contact. Communication barrier is defined as a situational factor, the later three factors are related to personal experiences (Stephan 2014).



It should be noted that personality traits and personal characteristics are also important. In addition, among the sample, intergroup anxiety was found to lead to affective and behavioral consequences, with the feeling of embarrassment and outgroup avoidance being identified as the most frequent negative outcomes.

Furthermore, participants with no prior personal experience with Chinese immigrants reported feeling more anxious about future interactions than participants with direct contact experiences. This finding could indicate a positive impact of direct intergroup contact on intergroup anxiety, it is in line with the findings in Voci and Hewstone (2003). Unexpectedly, people with extended contact experiences felt more anxious about future interaction than people without such contact. This finding is similar to findings in Wolfer et al. (2017) and it can be a result of “over-interpretation”, which can have a negative impact on attitudes and, as in this case, lead to intergroup anxiety and avoidance of future contact. Future research could further study the causes and consequences of intergroup anxiety toward Chinese immigrants and address which form of intergroup contact is most strongly associated with intergroup anxiety and avoidance of future contact.

### **Prevalence of positive attitudes**

The findings also showed a greater prevalence of positive attitudes toward Chinese immigrants. Participants reported positive attitudes not only toward individual Chinese immigrants, but also toward the whole outgroup of Chinese immigrants. This finding supports *Hypothesis 2* and it is in line with previous research studying generalization of contact effects (for example, Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Although among the sample, there were no signs of prejudiced attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, some participants have witnessed negative stereotypical comments and racist jokes about Chinese immigrants, such as impersonating Chinese immigrants and mocking their accent, mocking the physical features of Chinese people with the slanted-eye gestures or calling them “slant-eyes”. Such jokes and actions can further reinforce racism and negative stereotypes.

Moreover, the findings showed that despite some exceptions, Chinese immigrants appear to be in the moderate to high warmth and high competence quadrant. Interestingly, people with more personal ties to Chinese immigrants defined Chinese people with predominately warmth-related traits, while people without personal experiences defined

Chinese people with predominantly competence-related traits. It seems that intergroup contact affected mostly the dimension of warmth. Similarly, Froehlich and Schulte (2019) found that people from China were perceived as high competence and moderate warmth in Germany, same as the ingroup members.

### **Not a threat, not a burden**

Whereas Bozoganova (2020) found that Slovak attitudes toward immigration in general are rather negative and immigrants are viewed more like a burden, the findings indicate that among the sample, Slovak attitudes toward Chinese immigrants were rather positive and Chinese immigrants were welcomed in Slovakia. Although Chinese community was perceived as a very closed one, participants did not feel threatened. Additional data analysis also revealed that many participants reported rather negative attitudes toward other outgroups such as Muslims, Roma people, and illegal immigrants from Africa. These outgroups were marked as the most problematic. They were also associated with negative feelings such as fear and mistrust. The question is why do participants tend to have more positive attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup than toward these “problematic” outgroups?

Drawing on previous studies on intergroup threat (Stephan and Stephan 2000; Stephan and Renfro 2002; Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009), the findings suggest several explanations. First, a great majority of participants place an emphasis on the economic dimension of integration of migrants and involvement in financial and economic activities. Simply put, they want immigrants to work. In this way, Chinese immigrants are viewed as very hardworking, thus, they fulfill this criterion. They are not viewed as a realistic threat to people's resources and welfare. Second, “problematic” outgroups are often associated with negative media coverage and portrayals of violence and criminal activity. In contrast, Chinese immigrants are seldom associated with violence and hostile behavior. They are often portrayed as hardworking. They are not viewed as a realistic threat to people's personal security. Third, “problematic” outgroups are also associated with a certain religion and different values, beliefs, and social norms. On the other hand, participants reported a lack of knowledge about Chinese immigrants and they did not associate them with any particular religion or social norms. Chinese immigrants were not viewed as a symbolic threat to people's religion, values, or beliefs. Future research could consider further exploring these findings with a larger sample size.

### **Similarity between East Asian outgroups and secondary transfer effects**

Interestingly, according to the findings, many participants were not able to differentiate between various East Asian outgroups. It was also found that very often people assumed that the majority of Asian immigrants they met were from China. However, people with direct contact experiences were more confident in distinguishing Chinese immigrants from other East Asians than people without such experiences. Moreover, the quality and quantity of intergroup contact seem to be important in this matter. Studies have shown that positive intergroup contact can generalize even to outgroups not involved in any previous contact, the so-called “secondary transfer effects” (for example, Pettigrew *et al.* 2011; Tausch *et al.* 2010). Moreover, some studies have found that outgroup similarity can significantly strengthen these effects (for example, Lolliot *et al.* 2021, as cited in Boin *et al.* 2021). I believe that this finding could possibly be one of the explanations for why participants who have never interacted with Chinese immigrants reported having positive attitudes toward them. Additionally, in real life settings, the positive effects of intergroup contact could more easily generalize to other Asian outgroups because of this inability to tell them apart. On the other hand, the same logic can be applied to negative contact experiences as well. Without knowing more about the background of immigrants, negative contact with any similar Asian outgroup could negatively affect attitudes and expectations for future contact with Asian outgroups not involved in the original interaction. However, more research is needed to confirm these findings.

### **The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on behavioral intentions**

With regard to COVID-19, the virus was perceived as a realistic threat. Most participants believed in the natural origin of COVID-19. However, there were also participants who believed that COVID-19 was created artificially in a laboratory. Regarding *Hypothesis 3*, COVID-19 was associated with China and Chinese people in Slovakia, which is in agreement with the findings in Turcsanyi *et al.* (2020). This association was mostly based on the news of China being the first country to report the first COVID-19 case, and it was not associated with China being the one to be blamed for the pandemic situation. Moreover, the findings showed that this association did not have a negative impact on attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup. Personal COVID-19 infection also did not seem to play a role in this matter.

However, some people perceived Chinese people as a realistic threat due to their association with the virus, which resulted in higher levels of intergroup anxiety and avoidance of contact with the Chinese outgroup, similar to the findings in Armutlu *et al.* (2020) studying the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the Turkish behavior towards Chinese tourists. Although among the sample studied, there were no reports of negative attitudes or xenophobic reactions, future research should study the effects of COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of Chinese immigrants to confirm this finding.

Contrary to expectations, I did not find any significant differences between individuals with a lack of personal contact with Chinese immigrants and individuals with previous personal contact, and in their responses to change of attitudes after the outbreak of COVID-19. Thus, there is no support for *Hypothesis 4* and the present study does not provide conclusive explanations for the causal effects of intergroup contact on attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it seems that media coverage might have had a significant impact on the beliefs and feelings of people in Slovakia.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations to the present study that need to be acknowledged. First, a more general limitation of this study concerns the generalizability of the findings. The findings presented in this study reflect the views and attitudes of a small number of majority members residing in Kosice Region, Slovakia. Second, it is also important to address a small sample size, which consisted of 18 participants, and the sampling strategy, which was not based on random selection of participants. No additional participants were considered for the study once I reached data saturation and there was no new information emerging during the last interviews. Third, it should be noted that the present study relied on self-reports, therefore, participants could present themselves in a socially desirable way, therefore, the so-called social desirability bias needs to be acknowledged.

### **Answers to research questions**

To sum up, this thesis aimed to explore the impact of intergroup contact on Slovak attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup and answer three research questions regarding (1) the intergroup contact between Slovak majority members and Chinese immigrants from the perspective of the majority group, (2) the Slovak majority members' perception of Chinese immigrants and their attitudes toward Chinese immigrants, and (3) the

association of COVID-19 with China and Chinese people and its impact on attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup in Slovakia.

First, the results of this study suggest that intergroup contact between Slovak majority members and Chinese immigrants is rather positive from the perspective of the majority group. Participants reported significantly more positive than negative intergroup contact experiences with Chinese immigrants. Moreover, intergroup anxiety was identified as the main barrier to intergroup contact, caused by communication barrier, lack of prior contact, lack of knowledge, and negative contact, and resulting in affective and behavioral consequences. Extended intergroup contact seemed to be associated with intergroup anxiety more strongly than other types of intergroup contact.

Second, the results revealed that Slovak attitudes toward Chinese immigrants are positive and Chinese immigrants are welcomed in Slovakia. They are not viewed as a threat nor as a burden. Chinese immigrants appear to be in the moderate to high warmth and high competence quadrant. The results also suggest two possible explanations for why all participants, even those with no direct contact experiences with Chinese immigrants, reported predominantly positive attitudes. Namely, the secondary transfer effects strengthened by the effects of outgroup similarity, and prevalence of positive indirect contact through mass media.

Third, the results showed that COVID-19 was associated with China and Chinese people in Slovakia because of the news of China being the first country to report the first COVID-19 case. People did not blame China and Chinese people for the pandemic. Moreover, this association did not have a negative impact on attitudes toward the Chinese outgroup but in some cases, it led to higher levels of intergroup anxiety and avoidance of contact with the Chinese outgroup.

Lastly, I recognize that the present study is context specific and with a small number of participants, therefore, these results may not apply to other people living in different regions of Slovakia and having different opportunities for intergroup contact. However, this study aimed to look in detail at how selected participants experience intergroup interactions and how their attitudes toward Chinese immigrants might have changed after the outbreak of COVID-19. Therefore, I believe that the findings of this study may be seen as starting points for future research on intergroup contact and intergroup relations between Slovak majority members and Chinese immigrants.

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## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A:** Participant demographic information

**Appendix B:** Interview Protocol

**Appendix C:** Asian Population in Slovakia

**Appendix D:** Distribution of Chinese immigrants in Slovakia

**Appendix E:** Asian Population in Kosice Region

## APPENDIX A: Participants demographic information

Name	Gender	Age	Education level	Region	Type of contact
Participant 1	female	45	vocational secondary school	Kosice Region	direct
Participant 2	male	26	bachelor's degree		extended
Participant 3	male	50	vocational secondary school		extended
Participant 4	male	25	bachelor's degree		direct
Participant 5	male	18	primary school		mass media
Participant 6	female	19	secondary grammar school		extended
Participant 7	female	67	doctorate degree		direct
Participant 8	female	44	vocational secondary school		direct
Participant 9	female	25	bachelor's degree		direct
Participant 10	male	39	master's degree		mass media
Participant 11	male	24	secondary grammar school		mass media
Participant 12	male	25	bachelor's degree		extended
Participant 13	male	24	bachelor's degree		mass media
Participant 14	male	26	master's degree		extended
Participant 15	female	50	secondary grammar school		direct
Participant 16	male	55	vocational secondary school		extended
Participant 17	female	23	vocational secondary school		direct
Participant 18	male	28	secondary grammar school		mass media

## **APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol**

### *Topic 1: Intergroup contact with Chinese immigrants*

- 1. Have you ever come into personal contact with Chinese immigrants in Slovakia? Are any of your friends and good acquaintances Chinese?** If yes: Please describe your contact experiences/your relationships. If no: Next question.
  - A. *Where and how often have you met / do you meet Chinese immigrants?*
  - B. *How did you feel during these interactions? Would you consider these interactions as positive/negative? Have you faced any challenges?*
- 2. Do you have any friends who are friends or good acquaintances with Chinese immigrants?** If yes: Please specify. If no: Next question.
  - A. *How do you feel about their relationship?*
  - B. *Have your friends shared any details or stories about their relationships with Chinese immigrants? If yes, please specify.*
- 3. How would you describe Chinese people in a few words? Please explain why.**
- 4. Do you know any stereotypes about Chinese people?**
- 5. What is your main source of information about China and Chinese people?**
- 6. How do you feel about Chinese immigrants in Slovakia?**
- 7. In a hypothetical situation in Slovakia, how would you feel if you were the only Slovak among a group of strangers all of whom had come from China? How would you feel about possible growth of Chinese community in the future?**

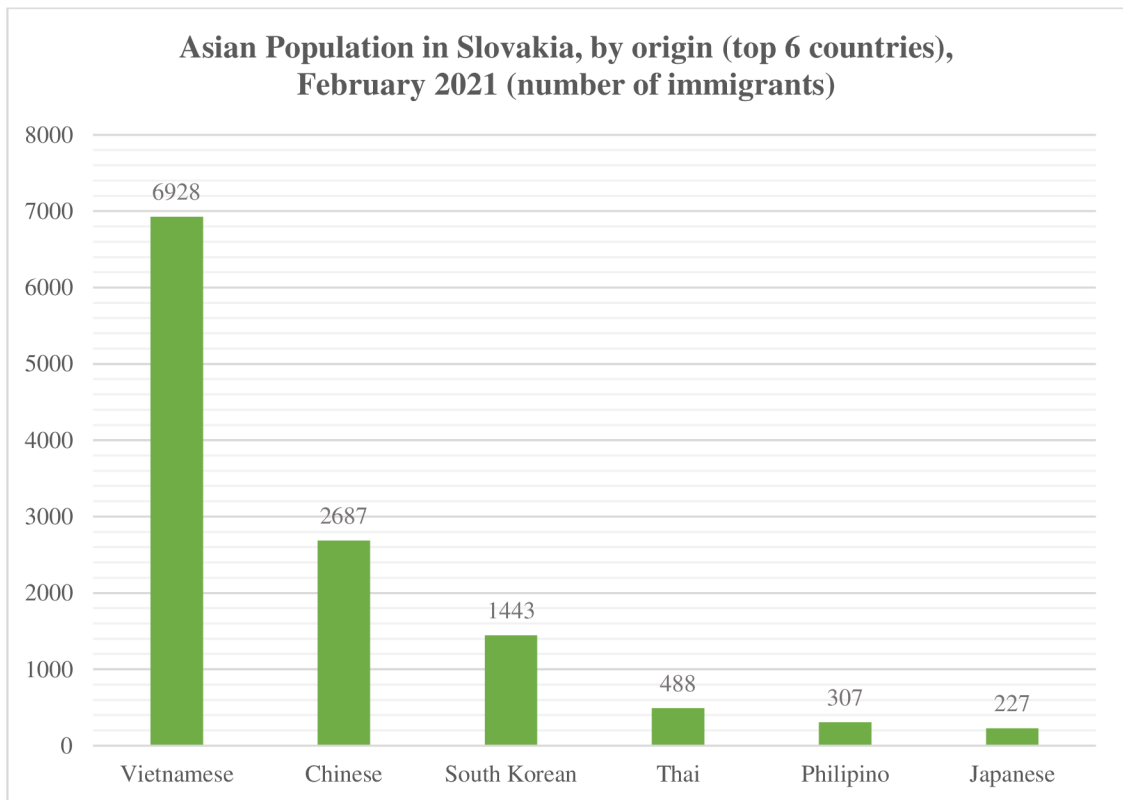
### *Topic 2: Migration in Slovakia*

- 8. How do you feel about migration in Slovakia?**
- 9. What do you think are the main criteria for successful integration of immigrants?**
- 10. Have you ever had negative encounters with immigrants/minority members in Slovakia?**

### *Topic 3: COVID-19*

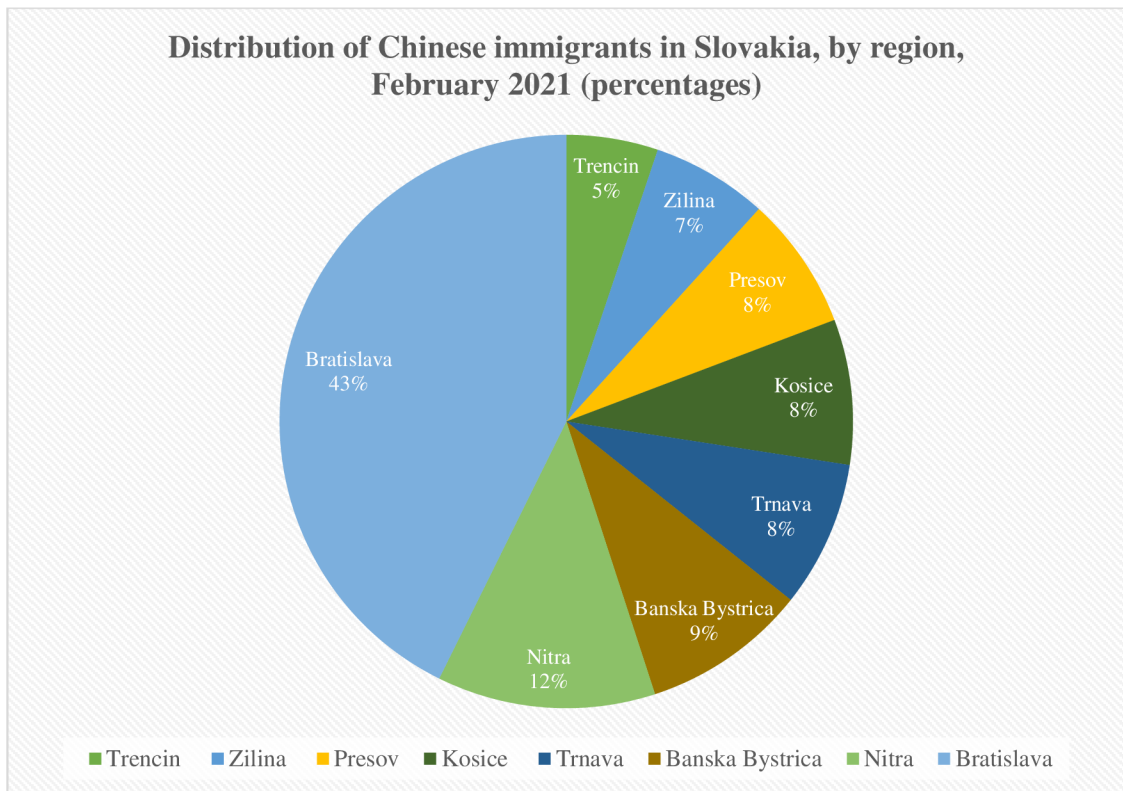
- 11. Slovakia as well as other countries all over the world have been affected by COVID-19 pandemic. Have you been somehow affected by COVID-19 pandemic?**
- 12. Have you been watching TV news and/or reading newspapers on topics covering COVID-19? Have you noticed any news related to China? Was it positive/negative/neutral?**
- 13. How do you think it all started? Where did it originate? Who do you think is responsible?**
- 14. Do you feel like there is a link between the pandemic and China? If yes, why?**
- 15. Have your attitudes changed in any way after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, how?**

## APPENDIX C: Asian Population in Slovakia



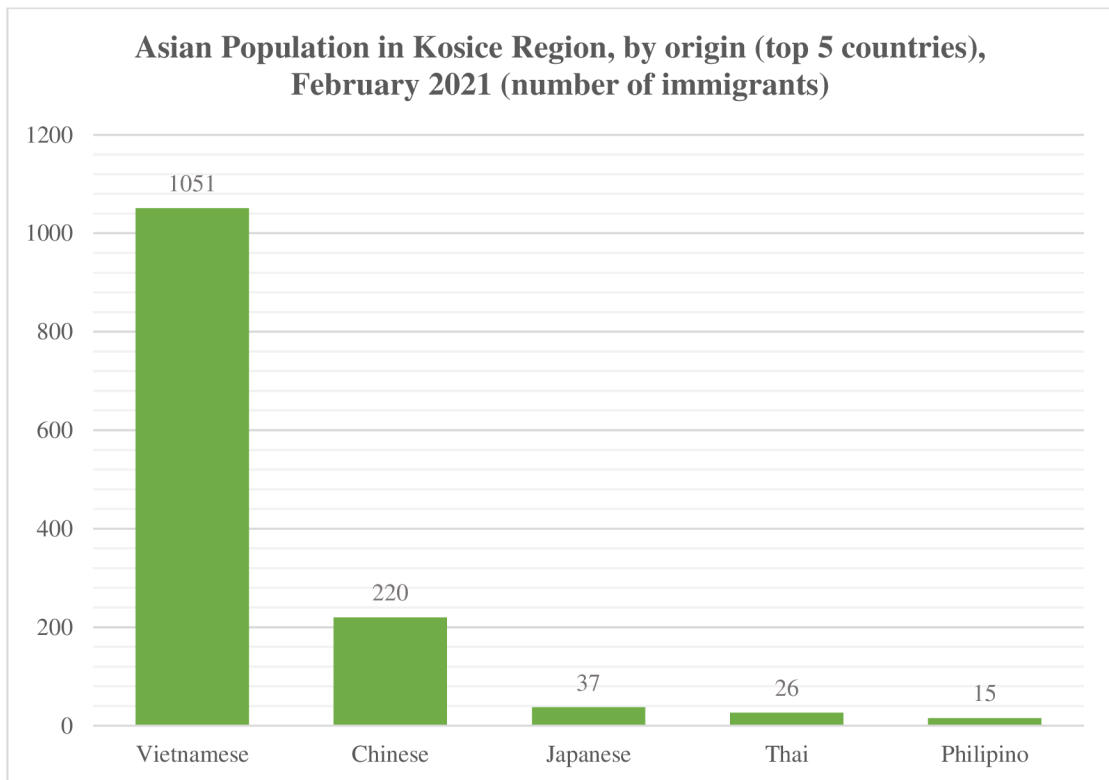
Data from Bureau of Border and Foreign Police of the Presidium of the Police Force (2021).

## APPENDIX D: Distribution of Chinese immigrants in Slovakia



Data from Bureau of Border and Foreign Police of the Presidium of the Police Force (2021).

## APPENDIX E: Asian Population in Kosice Region



Data from Bureau of Border and Foreign Police of the Presidium of the Police Force (2021).