Narrator: DONNA CHEN
Interviewer: Nairi Davidian
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ND: Today is Sunday February 23rd, 2014. This is Nairi Davidian with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project of UC Irvine. I am interviewing Mrs. Donna Chen, and we are at her office in San Gabriel, California. Could you please stay your name?

DCH: Yes, my name is Donna Chen.

ND: What is your date of birth?

DCH: I am born in 1960, in city of Saigon; it was right now Ho Chi Minh City in South Vietnam.

ND: What are your parents’ names? Could you please describe them?

DCH: Ok, my father Trang Thai born in China and went to Vietnam young age of the twelve with his relative, because of the poor living condition of his hometown, and he is the older kid in the family try to find a work to help and survive the family. My mom is the second generation Chinese born in Vietnam see also have very difficult living life after her father, which is my grandfather pass away after age of thirteen.

ND: Where did you grow up? Could you please describe your hometown?

DCH: I was born in Saigon, Vietnam, 1960, and I all I can remember in my community have a lot of people doing different small business including my family. Couple thing, I still think in my mind my hometown have a lots of people selling the street food like, um--., it’s very delicious. When I was kid, I loved it so much, was like every body close to each other, and every body know each other, and the kid can run on street alone with on supervision and very safety and play with
neighbor kid is like a big family and never have to worry about any like stranger because we all
know each other.

ND: Could you please tell me about your childhood memories?

DCH: Okay, the childhood memory the one story…. one memory that I can remember like when I
was age around 5-6. I don’t, not sure around that age, it’s like one day I see someone look very
different for my community people, with the golden hair and blue eye in some black skin, was so
tall and talk different language. So, I so scare, I don’t know who’s they are come from because I
have never understood what they are talking about. My parent was explain to me that they are come
from very far is like United State “American”, and I remember like they are very friendly, so they
live around our community and to start this kind of people live in our community and very friendly
and love the kids so much and then always gave the candy chocolate and gum to the young kid. So
…emmm time run over so we started to like them so much, because every time they help us and
every time say “hello” to them and then give you the candy so all the kid go around those soild
…ee. Army liked to play with them. And then one day emmm.. One afternoon when I take a naptime,
and I heard about ee.. I head big bombing sound outside. I run outside, I want to find out what is the
problem ee.. what is going on. So I saw one of the army that we played a lot like long time, I saw
him run and with the gun and bloody ee.. blood all over the body . When he saw me, he said go
inside the house, run run run, and I was so scary I don’t remember what happen. Ok cause I was so
young, and then things that the next day next day and I don’t see that guy any more, and I was
looking, I was confused where is that guy? How come I don’t see him anymore?!! He used to give
me a lot of candy eee… then my mom told me ee.. they got shuck from the enemy, like, like I have
know idea what is that. So he passed away he is not longer there, I was so sad because I don’t see
any more and I was like always think about him at that age at that moment. So that is my memory theat I can.. I still keep it in my brain right now then I , I , I …will miss that guy, that’s it.

ND: Could you please describe any traditions of music or story about or any other culture form you have?

DCH: Ok I love music, I love dance, and singing when I was a kid, sing now, okey eemm because the like our family, my father is immigrated from China and my mom was born in Vietnam so ee.. we original is Chinese people so I my generation with combine the Vietnam culture and Chinese culture together and all my.. We lived in that community that have a lot of Vietnamese and Chinese around, so then we eee.., we go to the school emm education with Chinese history and culture, but at the mean time we need to study Vietnamese ee.. music song and culture. So I am almost like combine this to culture together.

ND: What were the main industries in your hometown?

DCH: my family running small business and ee.. that is the same as most of people in my hometown is like they have anything can be business, they just sell piece a couple of piece of candy and make a cookie ,they make a cake everybody , everybody is a business owner and a lot of them they eee but still some go to the work with the richer people family like to become a male or become labor worker. So, then I was like ee.. small business market ya...

ND: Ok, what were your neighbors like?

DCH: My neighbor is surrounded ee..., different level of the people is like richest the rich and the poor so much different. Ee..., the rich is very rich, they can have many, many saver, they can live together that next neighbor is very very poor , no food and hunting for ee..., job and the food all no long but ee..., so then mostly separate in two level. Rich people go with rich people, and the poor people hard to get along with the rich people.
ND: How did you celebrate Ted?

DCH: Ya, Ted is Vietnamese call like New Years. Eee… in Vietnam and the Chinese Ted e…

holiday are almost the same. The main purpose for the Ted is like, they are family reunion to
getting together and right now they call lunar New Years, and that’s happen to all Asian people
Chinese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese, so they all celebrating the same things, Vietnamese call
Ted but then eee. Chinese call “singer” and the other Asian call different way, but the main purpose
is like to reunion and harvest like celebration. So get together and go to temple and visit the friend
and visit the relative and then maybe like some family go out to have have a job and come back
together with that period to reunion for probably two week, fifteen day, yes.

ND: Ee.. Do you celebrate birthday party in your culture?

DCH: Eee Yes !!! eemm in Vietnam even in China they all almost the same, they more focus to
celebrate the birthday for the older, elder people like your grandpa, your mom. The kid is not to
many, is unlike here so then ee.. the birthday the celebrate birthday usually if you’re rich people the
we go to restaurant, if you’re middle class maybe eating at home and hire the food come to the
home and cook, and invite the neighbor, the relative to celebrate. If you are poor then probably it’s
just family alone!!!, themselves to celebrate for the elderly people. They usually celebrate when
they age of the sixty or seventy or eighty every ten ten ten and then the eighty is stay long life, ok
for on that moment ok! And then ee., for the kid is that they , they, they not celebrate , they not
usually celebrating the every year, but they do have to the new born kid when they one months old,
they come see as a big celebrate birthday, celebrating for the new born ya after one month born.

ND: And how about the funeral pro… ceremony?

DCH: Ok, eemm talk about the funeral, ee.., the Vietnamese and the Chinese almost the same thing
like they, most of them, they well.., have a service at home, and at home that mean like  body have
to be at home for probably two week to a month. Ya, to let, the the to let the neighbor, the friend, and the relative that walk far have enough time to come back to, to see the see the I mean to see the person I mean to dead, I mean dead parent, or what ever person that pass away, last chance before the burn them. So then, they live in the house and every night is so crowded people come from different place, come to pray and come to house, but it was one thing remem... remind me very scary, because like when your neighbor has some kinds the, the funeral service like this, after the midnight everybody gone early in the morning no, no one around, if you go to school, you walk by because they have to leave door open, you walk by and then you see the, the I mean decoration and then dead people body over there, it’s like so scary for the kids, at that time. Ya and ee... but emm that is well , was in the childhood. But then after like when I grow up more, so then that is less people doing this anymore, they put anybody like put in the hospital and then have to funeral house for people to go ee to to go pray for the respect ya.

ND: Could you please describe your schooling in Vietnam and what level of education do you have?

DCH: Ok, in Vietnam we have education almost like ee... like all the country. We have from kinder garden to university. My self is finished ee... high school in Vietnam, and most of the teachers was like local. Some was invited from Taiwan, so we combined Chinese and Vietnam culture together, so we studied both eheemm ya.

ND: Eee, what do you remember most about your parents or your grandparents, when you were a child?

DCH: OK!! eemm, I remember my parents, Ok talk about my grandparents first. I don’t see my grand pa, my father side was on my grand pa and grand ma was on China, so I don’t see them, I don’t know them, but my mother side, I only know my grand mom because my grand pa pass long
time away, pass away long time. My grand mom was the elegant lady, ee very traditional lady from China with the very very tiny little feet. That is simple of the rich people in China that the more you rich and more look like to show rich and then you are, you are come from rich and wealthy family, the more you your your daughter the feet have to tight to the maybe like, like as small as they can, and the lady walked like very slow and because that you don’t have to do anything, because you are, you are rich rich family’s girl. My grand mom was like that. So when I looked at her feet, I said why your feet is so little ?? Said, well… because she is not to tell me story about the, the how wealthy they’re in China and right now they have to survive with that small little feet. So and ee.. I thing it’s very interesting (both laughing).

ND: How many brother and sister do you have?

DCH: We have six in the family including me so two brother and ee..., three sister, ee..., that mean like two boy and four girls ehee.

ND: And ee… do you older than them or younger than them?

DCH: I am the second one, so I have a one older sister, I have two younger sister, and I have two younger brother.

ND: What do you know about your family name?

DCH: Yes, my family name like in the same thing in Chinese and Vietnamese tradition, you have to follow the family name, which is the last name of the father. So then like emm..., my family last name is “Trang” so all my sister brothers of course we have to go with Trang, and then so it’s the middle initial, so then we have to go by “Xuan” so, every one of us have the same middle name, yes.

ND: And are there any traditional first name or nickname in your family?
DCH: Yes ee..., the first name was like it just like ee..., they like to be mean something like spring, summer, and kind of like powerful like, like phenix giant and some beautiful nature name to using in the birth..., the first name, and ee..., they are nickname yes, nickname of course they believe in when you are little kid, when they give the nickname that mean like the nickname always like will be easy to raise you, if they give you nickname that mean like if you, you are..., they can call you a pick, they can call you e.e.e.e.. a dog, they can call you something, and then they believe eemm if they give you nickname like this, and then you would be easy to raise your life to growth up like more safety and more peace full yes ehemm.

ND: What languages do you speak?

DCH: So my family we in back in Vietnam, we speak both language, we speak Chinese and Vietnamese because in our family we speak Chinese, because my parents was from China, and my father was from China but because we, we have to, we have to, we have worker Vietnamese that hire from the, the country side, come to work first, so they only speak Vietnamese, and we have to speak Vietnamese with them. So in our family we combined both languages together.

ND: what memorable stories have your family member told you in the past?

DCH: my family member, ok talk about my grand mom because I have live with her with my family until she passed away, so I know more about his, her sides of her family my grand mom is like elegant lady with the small feet, little feet, and ee..., she was from China, and she have to born in china, and she have another two girl born in China which is my mom and little aunty. Because of the four girl no, no male, no men, no boy, that's why my my, my grand mom got discriminate for because they don’t have, born any boy. So then my grand pa have to, have to married second wife, when he in Vietnam, because they believe the only the boy can continue the family stuff you know, so then my grand pa get married with Vietnamese girl the pure Vietnamese girls. The purpose of
have a boy no life no, no, love story nothing, he just married for the to happen a boy. Ye…..,
(laughing) my grand mom was very sad, but in the mean time she has to accepted because she
cannot have a boy. He let my gran pa doing this, and they even live together in the house together
and then of course it’s not a good thin. They have many many story like fighting each other and yell
each other that all I know.

ND: Which occupation have your family member held in the past?
DCH: Ok, my, my family, my father my mother was a business, businesswomen and especially my
mom is very talented businesswoman. So she create her own business from own create from one
person to small size, middle size … business. So we have her created business and eee make our
life very wealthy on the future use, because she is making garming manufacturing. So as my father
they both running of business.

ND: How much education has your family had in different generation?
DCH: Ok eee, now back to my grand mom. My grand pa was the principle of the school and even
he is a principle, but he still believe eeem, like like I say before he need to have a boy, his son that
why he married with Vietnamese girl. He is the principle but he still has to thinking the old
traditional thinking, and eee she pass away, he pass away age very young probably,… I don’t
remember the age but he was young that, that time my mom probably only twelve or eleven years
old, but because the whole family will rely on him, the income rely on him, so after he pass away
the family get in the broken I mean in poor condition likes my grand mom cannot work because he,
she have a small feet she cannot do anything, then my mom and her little sister which is my aunt
had to stop to go to school because like they have to make a living to survive the family to specially
my mom and she have to start to go out side and work for somebody with take care with her... her,
his, her sister and the mom. So he stopped, she stopped school but still she have nighttime school.
They go to nighttime school emm probably ee... elementary that’s it ok? That is my family side, but my my generation, we were very lucky because my mom is a business women she know education is very important, so she try to the best to, to like create her own business... so we are lucky our generation is like emm... we finished high school in Vietnam, and then on Vietnam, they also believe the girl don’t need to have to much education. After high school you’ve done you marry and then you create your own life and then all the believe by family my mom doesn’t think that way, so my mom even the girl still go to higher education that’s why we finished ee.. high school there and then I continue college in United State.

ND: In Vietnam or America, does your family hold any annual gathering?

DCH: Yes, like most the time is the new years, ee..., and the , the memorial of the old like grand pa, grand mom what ever family member pass away. The day they pass away they call memory all the all the..., have to come together to pray together ya... ehem.

ND: DO you have children?

DCH: Yes I have two boy, lucky I have two boy, yes then I eeen... raise here, my older one is 22 now in UC Irvine. My younger one is 19 is like also UC Irvine.

ND: And do you talk to them about your history?

DCH: Yes I talk to them my history, because my generation is like the first immigrant of to, from Vietnam to United State after the world, and then we go to a lot of stuff that’s why I told him when they aaaa...at the age very young so ya the, they know most of the my generation stuff story ya.

ND: Ee..., does your family have any special saying or expression about the culture?

DCH: Emm, my family is like Buddhism for long long long generation. Eeee on that generation looks like they have no choice, they have to rely generation to generation what ever your family religion is you have to just follow it, and but up to my generation is little bit gap because like eee, in
Vietnam we have different world of different country involve by force like American, so that they started to have Christian and different religion in my generation so, ya… they start to have different generation in that moment.

ND: So are there any special family traditional custom or food you have?

DCH: Eeee… yes the ee…the, the…, normal food that we believe in our family like each meal family you should have top rise soup, fish, vegie and meat that is like like like simple that you are , you are can , can have the ee..eee, this do it food for, for, for, for , for the mean food that you are wealthy normal and then you can you you specially and then in New year. Each of the meal is simple meaning of something so then special have to have a rice.

ND: And has your family created these all by itself or others?

DCH: Ya my mom even though we have someone help to cook at home that my mom and my family have to, have the own because like the eee… you know we from, my father from China but China have 56 town my dad was come from Chewjaw then on that food most favorite under Chewjaw stile that mean like, is like they bringing for the own town to here. So my mom have to know how to and, and, and, and cook for herself for those like traditional know stuff.

ND: And what religion do you have right now?

DCH: So right now Iееееem.., my family still Booda my father mother and most my brother, sister they are Booda. Eее, my kid some Christian some is like ee.. yaa Christian go for Christian school, and then myself I am eee. Can say I am both I go to the temple; I go to the church, so I am between, I am ok.

ND: How did the war in Vietnam affect your family and community?
DCH: Ya we lived in the city, the capital city in Vietnam, so the war is actually, I… is affected us the more in 1975 when Vietnam like ee… like turn in to the communism, but I remember the war yaa that’s effect us…. yaa I remember the time grow up even though in a living city but I always hear the bombing around my community my area to the point I get used to it, because every night every night time, I heard the bombing around, around but, I don’t see any ee.. real war until ee.. the 1975 oh no I take a back. So, I have we, we have one war called night time probably less that ten years old. That was a New Year dead. It was the war that attacked eee.. ee.., uncertainly for the Vietnam north, Vietnam people and American solders, they are fight together on the New Year, New year day, because New Year day nobody daily working they just celebrate the New Year eee. It was sad day that war come out every body have to have to survive, … survive and then run to the, run to the hospital to avoid the bombing. So, yaa, eee.. I was very unsecure when the, when the childhood, because you don’t know what happen tomorrow. You might, you might got lost your family member, you might got lost your friend and even your self, you know…., you don’t lost … we live under the unsecure eee…, unsecure war, you know ya…ahaa.

ND: Where did you live during the war?

DCH: I lived in eee… [Giang-long] which is like the capital Saigon, ya.. I lived over there ahemm.

ND: And what occupation did you have during the war?

DCH: I was student, eee.., so I .., ya I was student in the [howe tinatown].

ND: how were you or your family members involved the war?

DCH: My family is a business women…eee.., I mean sorry my mom is a businesswoman. Eee.. I remember like in one period, I don’t see my father. So, for long period couple year, that’s why I always remember my mom, because my mom raised us, six of us, and then, and then, … I find out like after that so that period my father is disappeared because like he have to go some place else to
involve to the to the war, to, to, to get his mission complete to save his people. That is my mom told me, I have no idea at that moment, but then all and know, we have to get specially the, the, the boy on the family. If you reached to the age sixteen and seventeen is mandatory you have to go, to the to the army to fight with the enemy. So, then in Vietnam at that moment even now is the, the, the, the boy, the man is less publication than the girl because most of them die in the world, To avoid that the, the, the boy have to try different way to hidden not to go war. So then they have to be someone else single son, even you are a single son on the family, you don’t have to go to the army, they have to adapt by other family that don’t have kid. They have to be pretend, I mean separate for the family, and otherwise, it is very terrible they have to be a disable person to not involve to the war, because when you go to the war, you die for sure. So, then some family don’t want the children go to the war, so they think about different way to hidden the from the war, so by hiding highly for the case, hiding from each family, my… I remember my house. We have many secrets case, secrete stuff for the people, for the, for the neighbor the relative son to hidden, every time when they, they go check the eee, family , e.. to see is any young people inside then that is those case is under the water, many place to let the hidden young people hidden in there, eee, to, to ,…. not to the caught. If they got caught, they immediately bring them to the army to fight with the…ee, to fight with the war. So, then my house, I remember there of some couple of my relative living there for so long, they can’t go out they have to live inside the, the, the, the, place no one can see them, otherwise they gonna get in trouble, ya. If they..., if the neighbor know, if the, the , the government people know that you have to young guy young boy, or young man in the family then for sure, they gonna arrest them and bring them in to the, to the war.

ND: Were you ever captured or held by enemy forces during the war?

DCH: eeeemmm…..
ND: Or any member of your family?

DCH: To arrest, eee....., yes my father!!! (Laughing). Ya .., my father was like ee..., like,.. after he wanted to support his mission and some time ones a while he come back to visit the family eee. I remember one time he come back and he got arrest from the, from the government because the some of the problem that he has, support some, some kind the community, and it was like probably twenty years, no 10 years they put my dad to the jail. That’s why I don’t see him a lot, eheem.

ND: And how did you feel?

DCH: I feel, I feel sorry for my mom, and I feel ee..., I feel bad for my dad because like one time my dad come from the jail and come out to visit the family and he almost like, like whole body almost swamp, because he got abuse like hitting from why he on the jail. That’s why my mom, and after he visit, and then he go back to the jail and then they changed the jail all the time, they don’t know..., you don’t know !! they they gonna send them, you don’t know how to find them , find him and then my mom have to raise six kid , and my mom have to go fight to see his, and then have to go under the table keep the money to the , to the eeee..., government to , to have to right visit them to protect him, otherwise I think he gonna get in trouble (with smiling) yes.

ND: And were you or anyone you know ever in a re-education camp?

DCH: ee... can you say it again please?

ND: eee. Were you or anyone you know ever in a re-education camp?

DCH: Re-education camp in Vietnam?

ND: In Vietnam?

DCH: You mean at school.

ND: Re- education camp?

DCH: I don’t know what is the re-education camp mean.
ND: Ok, did you have any disability or injury you or family members suffered as a result of the war?

DCH: Eee, yes I have some of my relative that they die from the war, pass away from the war because of the so… I mean the young life, and they have to go to first to the war, and then also like the uncertainty bombing the you don’t know where go into ee, hit you, because like its unpredictable. That’s why ya we do have couple of the family that like, like is a victim on the war, ehem.

ND: Where were you during the last days of the war?

DCH: I was in the ee… Vietnam Saigon 1975, at the last day of the war. I still… there at the age of fifteen.

ND: And what were your memories of those final days?

DCH: It was terrible (while she was laughing)… ok. I can remember is like my family and all friends that we ask to stay inside the house not to go out because the impact coming. So then all, all ask…, all listen to the radio, and then on the radio, we heard about the government is on the TV, we saw the government building get, lost of people get inside and then and …. Eee. And, eee … still run and still stuff and … you know eee, eeee, is very confusing over there, over that time, and then we, I , I , I heard about some of the friend and the family went to trouble run from Vietnam because that time the government solider on the street, they are, they take of the solider clothes, because they worry about something to get caught, is very very confusing because like I was 15 years old, but I were looked at in the street but all were mess. People were running, solider take off the the solider clothes, and then, then eee …, the store every where is fire, and then people try to grab the stuff and then like like, eee, still stuff and then, then run away and then…. , aircup……, helicopter because the American try to get out, and then they try to bring out the many people as
they can, and eee, some people just like crazy already, they just grabbing to the helicopter to the point that, eee, they don’t know, they gonna die because the helicopter can not come out to the helicopter, so they have to, have to run people come out to the helicopter and helicopter keep flying, and they were jumping from the sky. That is one day horrible and same thing people trying jump to the boat, and then because the American people have to leave so then, of course they took a solider, and solider family, but then around people try to go to, so then of course they can let them do it. So, all the mess yaa … all the mess, and then as me student I don’t know what to do. I just have to stay in the home, and then to see what is the next thing coming up!! Ya.

ND: And what was life like after the war?

DCH: Eeee.. for 1995 is end of the war, and from 1995 to 19ee… ah so 1975 to 1978 that was three year. I was living that we call after the war still the mass. Why I said that? Because of course eee, we…., we got to …, we talk about school as a student. The still on the school we forced you study eee, we forced study Vietnam language only, because they don’t study the Chinese any more, and we forced you be study all the all the all the material is all about the communism. Then every thing we forced to be like eeee, member of the communism after young age. If you don’t do that they gonna send you to …eeem take you hard time, they gonna give you hard time, they gonna send you some place like to become of a farmer…, to do a work in the farmer. You know, you have to, you have to have meeting every night on local to listen to them, eeeee, to the mission, to tell you what you to do that is the student, even though on the school, every where only one mission you can have not only your own thinking , you have to follow, and then on the family side, because like we are wealthy family, the communism people do not like wealthy people so they have to take away your eeee, your asset. The one you donate to back to the country that to a communism country, because they believe every one is in one level. Ok so, on the family from the point,
specially the first time, they’re changing all the currency the money ok. So they don’t, don’t you let you using the old times money, and then you have to using your old times money to all, all government money to exchange the new money. Then at that time my mom is getting crazy, because all the all the all the money, all the asset becomes junk in over night, so he cannot, she cannot safe it , so she have sick and she have to go hospital, and then aaaa, and then aaa, now from the wealthy family, we have to jump out to , to , like every body else, we cannot have , we cannot have people save us people have to equal like every one, so then we have to line up to the, to the , to the small place to get our food like every day they give you ….., head family…… if family have five children and two adult, they gonna give you much of the food. You know every thing is got under the control. So your money become useless. You cannot use anymore to buy stuff. So it was a messed. Of course at that time, we as a student, we cannot go to school any more because like eeee, like, eeeee.., every thing, every day, they’ve changed. Every day they have different, different kind that happen to your family and to yourself ok. Probably your friend disappear probably your family member disappear, disappear maybe they run away, they, they run out side, and maybe they pass away, they got arrest for the, for the communism e,e,e,eeee,… people. You know, so is like even though my family have to sell higher stuff like god, jewelry that they had before, they have to sell under the market to buy under the market survive the family, because the more wealthy you are before now, they go and give you more hard time. They want you to feel how poor people live like, they want to taste and then, they want to go to the farm to do the farming work. They want to feel how farming people live, and then it just like important they have to sent to the farm like all the whole summer, eeee….., at least once a weak because we live in the city, you have to go to farm to do farm work., which we don’t know what to do, ok.

ND: And what was it like leaving your home and country?
DCH: ok, …ok, I was…., when I was at the age of 18 I don’t know what is the day anymore, because like, I don’t feel that is my country, I feel like that is some place that I….., myself ok!! I don’t have freedom, I scape from people every where I go, I cannot talk about something bad from any body, I cannot buy any thing I want it even though I have money, I cannot complain anything, because all around your people are because you say something then you know you gonna get in trouble for the next day. So then, my friend is leaving that country every day, because people running out of the country, so I feel like maybe is a time for me to leave the country too, because like this country to me is like any I don’t have any reason tool to stay specially my father go in to the jail again to for some reason, so then I believe then is the, the good thing for me is like leave the country and then go find a new destiny.

ND: And why did you come to the United States?

DCH: Emmm, I was a boat people I was a refugee, like I say, ok we have to pay and go, to go, go, to the people to take us run away from Vietnam. And why I come to the United States, because like when we try to run away from the country, actually at that time we don’t know where is our future. We don’t know what country we are going to accept us, we just first thinking leave the country ok, my family we separate in three group me and my brother and in one group, and older sister with my to younger brother in other group, and other sister in one group. So, six, six, us of our family separate in three groups to run away from the country. Why we do that? Because we don’t want to stay get together and every body if we have problem, every body die together, there is no one no hope any more to bring ee, surviving person run out. That’s why we run in three group. My group is good luck when we through about my sister because they failed, because he…eeeee, she got some secrete and arrested back for Vietnam and my sister on the jail for a years, because like arrested for the government.me and my younger brother is lucky that we run out, and then we, we, we, take a
boat and we arrived the refuge come…. refugee camp in Malaysia. Talk about why I, I, why I come in the United State? When you refuge come, come, came is like refuge camp is like many many country come to interview us, and to qualify us to take us to other country, and most country they want different type of the immigrant, the, the, refuge, and then but most of the country like to have the family together and then only the country that can take anybody is the United States. Most of the country don’t like teenager like me and my brother because we are in young age, we might get in trouble, they thing we might be in trouble when we go to the country might become a problem. So, I…, they don’t take us, but to the that time United State American they said ok what ever people you don’t … you, you, you …, that country don’t want, then we take you so then how I qualify, and my brother qualify to immigrate, I mean, to the United States.

ND: And do you remember what kind of possessions did you bring with you?
DCH: Nothing! When we was run out off eee…, all we have its not even piece of clothes, because we can’t afford to bring anything, because ee.. Imagine trying to 250 feet on the boat, you have to feet 250 people, 250 people is now maybe normal is like 10 people only, but we have to feet 250 refuge, every body just have one space to sit, there is no lockage, no stuff nothing to bring, so eee…, we … I don’t bring anything, eeee., and eeee…, just like not, not even yaa…, I do bring the ring , we have, I, I do ring, the gold ring, because like we lucky that I bring ring , I have from some place I did caught from the gold ring, so then that ring , I have to first to sell it when I in the refugee camp because we have like no food, we first arrived the refugee camp, we have no food, no place to live, because we have to sell the ring to exchange some food ya.

ND: And could you please explain the condition? I mean what was the journey like in the boat?
DCH: Ok , aeemm.., remember like we eee, like I have 250 people in the boat, and it was five day journey from Vietnam Saigon to the refugee camp at that time we don’t know where we go. There
is no direction there is no focus. It just luck, It just like we, how we like in the ocean that people the big ship can see us and arrest us, ok I mean not arrest us, save us ok, we don’t know, don’t know how the direction, we just have to place eee…, that big ship to take us. Ok but then aeeemm…, on the Friday, I can remember is like the big wave attacked in the second night, big wave is like storm. The storm is like so high, is like almost like six door is high, and the boat is like wood boat, is like 250 people. Every body was down because like not down like like…. ee.., fail because like fail down because can not , can not taking those big wave ok. The storm coming out then, the storm is like, like drop the ship from the high to the down, and then every body got though it out and then know anything ok and then lucky that the boat is nothing, nothing, because like eee…, the person that take, I mean drive the boat is very experience, it just like leave the machine, don’t turn on the machine and let the machine, let the boat like go, go with the wave. And then, and the next morning then we wake up we don’t know where we are is the middle of no way that’s all around is the water, there is nothing, and then we have to continue, continue we just let the boat go, we don’t know where to go, and then aa…, we saw the, the , how do you call that …., the other boat from the island the fish boat , the fish boat the like, like around us we try get the direction how to get to the….., we try to find where we are, then we find out that we are very near the Malaysia boarder line, so we got the direction and the boat, like, like try the direction to the to the Malaysia eee., refugee camp. During the journey is like one baby aemmm, one new born baby aem… die because like cannot survive because the, the, the storm, so then in our boat the new born baby like couple day old, and then, we people have to down the baby back to ocean because like we don’t know how long the boat will continue. That why the dead people cannot be on, on, on the boat so they have to down new born baby to the ocean that is the journey that I’ve been, I’ve been in past.
ND: And did you have any food or water?
DCH: OK, eeee…, no! we, eeee.., we don’t have food, we don’t have water because like the all around the no space for food no space for water, its just all people, al, all, all, people like people around us, is like everybody there and we, we have own food … own food like bring some like cookie and stuff that give us survive the couple day like, like we have some special candy like when you are in ocean maybe you eat little bit and then enough for you to survive some energy pill few stuff like this, I am talking myself, ya we have cookie and then aaeee, aeee…, lucky that when the day we run out we have cookie and water and then we find the land, so we was the lucky one.

ND: And were you in a refugee camp?

DCH: Aham, yes.

ND: And what was the experience like?

DCH: Ok, at the refugee camp, it was the refugee communication is the [Polothanga], actually that was a sophisticated Island for the Malaysia people that time but because they were very exclusive the ocean, I mean Island that’s only individual Island around is all water, I think the perfectly put the refugee come there for the people not to related to the Malaysia people life, so we was on there.

The camp was beautiful, beautiful, white sand beautiful view, but then we don’t know what’s the beautiful at that time, all we know we are the we are the boat people the refugee. We, we, we, we don’t know how to enjoy island, because we don’t have food, we don’t have food so the even though the refugee has the Red Cross, American Red Cross there to help refugee when the refugee first arrived, but because of the Malaysia solider is like , like very snick and they … they took all the food, we’ve forced sent them to us and then I have to sell gold ring , how to sell gold ring to the exchange the rice the food, and the place to sleep not the how its just like the , the, the, is like the, pass the camp its not even the house pass the camp, and then you have to exchange the gold ring to, to, have one, one place to sleep, and then aaammm….and then aaammm…., even though we were
whole the safe like, I mean the war, I mean the country, every country gonna take care us, but because remember, I told you people Malaysia people, took every thing so we don’t have any thing, we don’t have food, so then is like in the beginning was taught then my brother have to go the other Island to find some pieces of wood, to, to, cook the rice and then to each something like, like, fruit stuff because we don’t have food, but that is just for, for a month and then, I think change because the Red Cross start to have the own people to control the material. That’s why after that time then we have every thing like cane food, we have like enough water stuff, and only, the only waiting the, the is like every time, every day waiting for different country to come to interview us to see what country going to, to take us, to the country for the permanent living. So, I was there for six months, I was the lucky one too because some of my friend stay there more than a year, still no county took them, ok!! For some reason, it just like, I stay there for five month and leave in a six month, so I, eee…, eee….. United State Red Cross sponsor us to yee…

ND: So, you stayed six months in the Mala…, Malaysia camp right? And what were some of your first impression and early experience in this country?

DCH: Oh…, Ok!…, when I come this country, the first experience this like I have to take two to three day ever from Malaysia to Miami, why I have to take so long, probably is chance for flight. I always this is the first memory for me, is like why I have to almost two day in the air, in the air, I have to chance to be this state, that state, this city to that city. But I am still very happy because I can come to the, to the, to the country then, I am gonna live and I will be come, and then my first stop it will be in the Miami. So when I first come then I arrived the Miami the Red Cross is like ready there have people bring us to the sponsors family for, for us to temporarily live there. And Miami to me is a new place highly Miami is my first come to the United States my new place and I have a tough life over there too, because like for some reason I did not get too much help after the
Red Cross bring us to the family the sponsor family. So, I have to go find a job after one week that I arrived in the United State... yaa..., and I ... because passed the age to the high school, so then I can not go to the high school my brother my little brother still go to the high school, and I have to work like very, very low salary, and to make a living, and I did not get of any help , financial help from the government at that time  ehemm..., yes.

ND: And how log did you stay in Miami?

DCH: One year, ya after I stay Miami for one year with myself then I found the school over there by myself, because I don’t satisfy my life to be like that, because I only 18- 19 years old, so I found school over there and then go school at that school. At that point I know how to speak in English, then I......, I, I, try to contact other friend in United States which is in California. So, after one year in Miami, so I come to California to see if place for me to stay, ehee, ya.

ND: And when you first arrived, did you receive any financial support from any organization, church, or any individuals or family that support you?

DCH: Yes I’ve received the couple hundred dollar from Red Cross, when I first, first come to, to buy me some necessary living, like necessary thing clothes, blanket, jacket..., ya couple hundred from the Red Cross, and then things then I stay with one family which that family is my neighbor in Vietnam, and they have very tough life working to survive in American too. So then I live there probably for one month and then I and my brother moved out to have our own living, so we have to work and work and work, and go to school to survive our.

ND: And how did you make a living after resettle... resettlement?

DCH: Ok, me my self, I worked in the restaurant as a [....], then I work second job as the cashier, and I worked...., and then I go to school in the evening and in the morning. That take me for a year that I, I worked to survive myself. And after I come to California couple friend help me to find a
job, so I go to the college here then I worked three jobs because I have to save money to send back to my family survive over there in Vietnam, so then I worked two full time job, one part time job and then go to school. That is my life … in the beginning …, in this country, yes.

ND: How do you feel about your decision to come to the United State today?

DCH: Good decision, very lucky I think this is the place that belong to me, because like free of the speech, free of the thinking, creative that is my, my, my goal, and then is my self then I like this kind of the life, because like…., you can , you can , you can, say what ever you want because free of the speech ok, we don’t care, we don’t, we don’t worry about that we get arrest, you know because one word is wrong, and then creative, ya! I like create so that’s why this country is very doable to myself, my personality so I think aaamm, I think aaammm, I make a right choice to stay here ya.

ND: What were some of the challenges you experience in staying a new life?

DCH: hmmm…the language! Ok… hmmm…. You know hmmm, I study Chinese and Vietnam in Vietnam. Even though we have basic English in Vietnam but it is not going to work when we come to the United States. So the challenge is the language and the skill. So, hmmm… I understand that and that’s why I insist that I want to have some education done in the US and then I believe that hmmm…if I can have my goal and my self…because I believe this is country is a hard, is a hard for a 19 years old like me at that time. If I have the right, thinking I have to claim and learned the language, I have the direction I believe that I can reach my goal. That’s why I insist go to school and learn the language and then hmmm… and then even though at that time I was working low labor stuff like I was cleaning a table, cleaning a toilet, working in a
restaurant, I still, I still have goal that I will challenge myself to a better life and better education and better job. So hmmm… I think hmmm… that goal is like take me long time to reach but still I believe that I can do it that’s why I learned the language here and tried to get into the life with the American life. I cannot just like stay in the old time and I have to look forward in the future yes!

ND: Who helped you to find a home in the United States?

DCH: hmmm…you mean the home that I first lived in the United States or the home I buy?

ND: Yeah…You mentioned that you were in Miami, and after that you moved to the California. So, in the both places who helped you to find the home?

DCH: Ok hmmm…. One of my relative that live in California Hmmm…. Find me an apartment to rent near the school. So I can have walking distant to the school, which is East LA College and then my apartment is just like couple block from there so there is my first apartment that I moved to California.

ND: How did you find a job?

DCH: I find a job too many ways. I walk into the store and ask for a job because I need it. I tell them that I need a job. Hmmm….., even though my broken English is like hmmm…. Maybe they didn’t understand and most of the time I myself walking into the store and at that time I don’t know what resume, don’t know resume is. Everything I walk to the store and ask for a job. That’s my first job, my second job, third job, and after that…after education, so then I know the job opening and then hmmm…some of the friend referral hmm… then go to interview…newspaper and then its how I find my job.

ND: What are some similarities and differences between your old community and your new one?
DCH: My old community in Vietnam and right now right? Big different! Because like hmmm…my hmmm…. the different because remember in Vietnam we are doing business OK? So that is a small business So then …so hmmm no rule…so you just very like create your own business and then you can survive under even the small or big business… but here you need education. You need to know the language, you need to know skill to be able to…to survive and be a better….better …better life. It’s a big of different…hmmm… Yeah.

ND: Have you ever encounter racism in your neighborhood or in your work place?
DCH: You mean hmmm…
ND: Racism…Did you have any experience about the racism?
DCH: Oh… I got it! I see…Yeah! In Miami…talked about Miami. In Miami…not too many Asian faces there. Then hmmm…very racist… the Asian face…. Hmmm…I remember when I was working as a cashier… I don’t have car, so I have to ride my bicycle to the market…to work and after hmmm…and after night time, so I have to ride my bicycle back home so then I have to ride my bicycle in small streets and community and then due the racist. The people over there they didn’t welcome us. So on purpose they put the dogs outside of the house to chase you… to give you hard time, not to ride the bicycle pass the house, like. Hmmm they thought like probably that is hmmm some hmmm some to low the house value I am not sure! To for the people to ride a bicycle with Asian face and look poor and ride the bicycle to the community, something they did not welcome so they put the dog outside the house and so try to stop us not to ride a bicycle to the community. That is a very , very bad feeling. I got cut couple times from a dog and I don’t know what to do and people come to save me from the dog. Hmmm…. A big dog… I am so sad at that time, why this country..., that this country hmmm… I think my
permanent life living here people are not welcoming. That is only in Miami. This is the reason I Decided not to stay there. I tried to find some place maybe belong to me and welcoming.

ND: And basically you didn’t have any this kind of experience in the California right?

DCH: Yes. I did

ND: You did?

DCH: yeah hmmm…but not that bad. When I come to California. It’s a year in Miami. That’s the second year I am in California. Yes I did, because hmmm…When I walking manufacturing…the labor work so then same position, the same work with other different kind of racist. And I go hmmm… I got different treaty because like I can not take break time and then when I enjoy myself at work I just have to stay home and think of pay. That is like individual problem… I think that’s the companies problem…the problem overall…I did get some racist and then Yeah… hmmm…. I year…hmmm oh…this experience put me until today that I can my job racist because one thing I accidently walked into the hotel and then hmmm… in Los Vegas and hmmm… many people have party there…like hmmm…not our…hmmm many big party there…and then…. hmmm…not Asian face …there are different people and I was accidently work into the bar room, and then I said oh what happened here…how come people are so happy here…they are signing…they are drinking and then couple of guy come up here and give me a nasty face say like… Girl! You not belong to here. That is high cost party. You don’t belong here, you should go back where you belong, something like that, and then I was so sad. I said what do you mean by I am not belong to here. I am here I am Citizen. So then hmmm….., because I am poor and I am Asian looking so that’s why not welcome me into the party. So then by that point I said Ok! See One day I will be here. Yeah… That is another experience that I have passed. I have go through… Yes!
ND: And after all this experience do you have any none Asian friends?

DCH: Yes, I did...hmmm... I have hmmm... because I am working on the ... right now I am at insurance agent... I am the financial agent hmmm... hmmm... working in insurance company and of course I have bunch of the non Asian friend. We have a meeting every time I meet a lot of people. They are non-Asian. Yeah!

ND: Ok! How do you identify yourself in America society?

DCH: I think...hmmm... I am the typical American people life and enjoy my life. Get into community and then hmmm... share work, share my, share my, share my experience, and volunteer to the community and hmmm... I am so happy that my life right now is like hmmm... independent of myself and living in a good life. I consider that now is a good life for me I can almost like ..., like do ... do better that I lost people. So I consider I am succeed myself.

ND: So your children don’t get married right?

DCH: My two boys are still young. They still in the college and they are about to graduate.

ND: So basically they are single!

DCH: they are single. Yes!

ND: Ok. And what do you think about the interracial dating or marriage. I mean do you think maybe someday your boys married with other non-Asian girl?

DCH: That’s fine with me. Remember, I would tell my boy your life your choice!

Hmmm... ok... Its ok. If you feel happy you go head and I am ok... no problem.

ND: Do you have any funny or memorable experience of culture shock when you arrive in the U.S?

DCH: hmmm... Yes... Hmmm... ok like family stuff... OK... they like... In our tradition we have to... ok hmmm ... at the dinner table before we eat we have to ask for parents to eat down and say
ok! Father eat! Mother eat! Do this kind of thing in the family dinner in American they do not do that. If they are religion they all pray, they eat dinner after they pray. Hmmm… In my culture hmmmm in our culture there … we sit down and we don’t eat until the parent eat. So that’s so different between these two culture.

ND: You said you are citizen right?
DCH: Right!

ND: What was the reason you decide to be a citizen?
DCH: I feel like, this is my home, my only home here. I have no more home, I don’t feel like Vietnam is my home anymore and I feel like America give me a new life, is my new parents, and then therefore why not to be a citizen so this is our home.

ND: What was the process like? Did you get any trouble during the that you want be a citizen?
DCH: No, not at all!

ND: Do you vote in the U.S elections?
DCH: I did

ND: Eeee, and Why?
DCH: Ok because if I am the citizen, of course I have my, I have the right to, to vote, to, to share everything from this country, I even involve in some of the political action community, and then to improve and then the help to improve for my the community and help my people also.

ND: You mentioned about the political community. Do you volunteer or donate to any political party?
DCH: Yes I did…, I was…, I am right now is one member of the Eye-PAC is like eye community Chinese action pack which is like this community is helping the Asian people to
understand voting procedure and how to resist a vote and how to understand political and the right for the citizen in the United States.

ND: How do you get news and any other information? Are you reading the newspaper or following the internet or TV?

DCH: Right now is the TV and internet.

ND: Is it in English or Vietnamese?

DCH: English

ND: Do you keep in touch with family or relative from Vietnam right now?

DCH: Yes, I still have my older sister still in Vietnam. So, Yeah we go visit her like couple years ago. Right now, she is immigrate to the U.S. already. Beside her there no more relative in Vietnam.

ND: When you go to Vietnam what is your experience like?

DCH: Hmmm…. the big experience is like hmmm…. I go visit the house and school that I attend before, and everything looks so small to me. It was big to me at that time but now I go there how come everything shrinking…, so small probably because like here over here is like everything so big that why compare there is so small. And then I, I…not get used to it anymore, because of the traffic and then the traffic and then the weather. I think like after hmmm… 30 some my years here…so I have…, I need…, there is not any more that I can like, like, like… I need some time to get back to get suitable for the weather over there, but then the bigger different is like, right now and before was different… because when I lived in Vietnam was the mass, because every thing remember when I live before was so messy and when I go back I think everything is different because like the government start to change and lots of tourists over there… and know
realize then right now it’s a different world. Different century. They need to have a change, otherwise, you know, you can not catch up with the…, outside world.

ND: And what do you do while you are in the Vietnam. I mean did you travel inside the country, the other place?

DCH: When I am at Vietnam When I come go back as a as vis…..,?

ND: No as the visitor.

DCH: I was go with a tour. Visit the whole country from North to the South, and stay with my sister for couple day and then, and then back to the U.S.

ND: Are there any songs, images, or even pictures to remind you Vietnam?

DCH: Yes… hmmm…When I was at Vietnam… remember I was…, like singing and I like dancing. Right now even I still keep the tradition, culture stuff. I have my own organization here called Asian Art Talent Foundation that is because I love culture, I love everything from old time that can carry to my generation to generation. That’s why I am the president of the Asian Art Talent Foundation right now. So I have a lot of song, culture., dancing that I am doing here in the U.S with all the Asian Vietnamese, and Chinese together.

ND: What tradition or custom have you made and afford to preserve?

DCH: You mean the food or…?

ND: Anything about Vietnamese tradition, custom even!

DCH: Yaaa,.. in the Asian Art Talent foundation, all we do is tradition dance, sing, play tradition instrument bringing from Vietnam. So like even now in the Yew Years, Lunar New Year, we like to wear tradition customs to celebrate the stuff. Like Vietnamese they wear and then Chinese they wear Chinese style tradition to celebrate for the big event, holiday ya.

ND: In your opinion what will become of Vietnamese culture in America?
DCH: Can you repeat?

ND: I mean did you bring any specific culture, or any specific tradition from Vietnam to the America??

DCH: I think hmmm…the most tradition is like hmmm… ok…my kid…myself like we like to keep tradition like, respecting the older people, like the new years we give red envelope money, red envelope, inside is the money to our parents and then we give to the younger the unmarried single one. We want them to know to the older people respect them, because they are getting old now, and they need to take care, you show the respect, you show the love and you give them the red envelope to them to buy anything they want. Now, you take care of single, younger ones because they are unable to, they still young they still need you to take care. You give the red envelope to the young kid, because you love them, you want them to have memory the good time in new year time that now my kids they love New Year so much because every time in new Year they feel they are rich they have lots of gifts and money. This is one of the tradition that I think its funny and it is like reunion together, eat dinner together in the New Year Eve, and then always like say good things about hmmm… it doesn’t matter how bad but it’s a good thing to believe hmmm… when you day good thing in a new year, then its going to be a good thing for the whole year.

ND: And do you thing that the Vietnamese community has changed in America?

DCH: I believe so …hmmm yes! Most people, Vietnamese people come to America because most of them because of the war, they want to have peace life here so when they want happy life here, they have to get into community here, they have to change themselves, to feel themselves in the community, So then…, I cannot say 100% but almost 50% of them will doable and change in the US.
ND: Are you involved with the Vietnamese community in the US?

DCH: Yes I did! I involved to some of the Vietnamese community like we hmmm…. Like the Ted, New Years that we go to perform, bring the students around the Vietnamese community and Vietnamese people, we celebrate together, and then we perform and have our culture together.

ND: What is the reason for you?

DCH: The reason ….hmmm…. because I believe culture is always good for the generation. You know your culture, you know where you are from, you know what is good what is bad. Good you keep it, bad you do not take it to combine the, the new country here. I think it’s good to have…., to know your rule.

ND: Are you involved in local organization?

DCH: Yes, I did a lot!

ND: Could you explain one of them?

DCH: Yeah because I believe give it out volunteer that is my mission. Hmmm…if people do not do this I wont be here today. Because of the people like Red cross people under voting, willing to share, to donate their stuff, to volunteer their time, to worry about the war the people and world. That is why I am here today, and I have to give it back.

ND: How do you know them? I mean did you research by yourself and get some information from them or somebody…?

DCH: Some of them but some of them I create myself the organization find myself it dong this.

ND: What do you do for your entertainment?

DCH: hmmm…. beside the working hmmm…. I enjoy vacation. I make myself at least 2 times vacation for sure to release my stress from work by go to sky I go to other country to get to know
different country and different culture. That is my vacation purpose. And then…, hmmm…, in the locally, I am doing dancing, I teach the culture dance, I sign, and .., hmmm… Yeah! I watch movie, that is my activity beside work.

ND: Did you visit little Saigon in Orange County?
DCH: Yes I did. I even have the office over there with a community, Vietnamese community in West minister.

ND: and what do you think about that?
DCH: They are like other Vietnam city…hmmm… people over there hmmm…. They have Vietnam food, and clothing, and sell many Vietnamese stuff, quite interesting ya.

ND: What are the most important things that future generation of Vietnamese/ Americans should remember about their heritage?
DCH: like to respect older and love the younger. And then…, they keep the reunion and the language…because I believe hmmm… the language it doesn’t matter is good for you, you know more is good for you, to speak a lot of language is good for you. For your own good and to keep the community and your communication with your family much better.

ND: Are there any memories or stories you would like to share?
DCH: Ok…. Yeah! One story I really want to share is like back to the, the,.., Vietnam, we try to escape country together. There is 2 person that is my friend, they have died on the ocean and that was the memory I still memorize them at that moment, because like hmmm… they are my two best friend and we say goodbye before we run out to the country with different boat. I and my brother go to the other boat and they this 2 best friend go to the other boat and hmmm…and then when we get in to refugee camp then couple days later I heard about my 2 best friends, is,…, passed away because they…, it’s a sad story, they get into the storm that we have on the ocean
and the half boat people fell to the ocean and die. And then one of my girl, I mean my girl friend was one of the people that drop to the ocean and my other friend that is her boyfriend saw that happening and tried to jump to the ocean to save her and they both died together. I heard about that that the girl,…, after then the girl come up because like someone saved the girl and then the girl the girlfriend heard that the boy friend jump to the ocean because of her and then even though she get saved she tried to go back to the ocean and suicide. And then both die and that is like my 2 best friends that I always remember them until now, It is a sad story you know, yaaa…….

ND: What do you think about your life without war in Vietnam?

DCH: Without war in the Vietnam?

ND: Yeah! If you think there wasn’t any war in the Vietnam, how you can imagine your life in the Vietnam?

DCH: Good life…because we live very simple… like I remember,…, we have good childhood and the place is like, …, and everybody is so innocent, we not have too much of the of course there is no war, it might be some different way to improve the country because like some small countries right now they do not have war, they still very happy and live with the happy life. So I think war is the bad, very bad thing to a country, if the country no war, then will not have many people die, and then sad story and then bad memory stuff like this.

ND: After this all that you have happy and sad memory during your life in the Vietnam or when you came to the United Stated as a immigrant, did you make a piece in your mind?

DCH: like hmmm….right now do I still thinking about in the past?

ND: Yes!
DCH: I have to! I used that as my life. Hmmm…to make my life go strong, stronger and motivated ok!..., to see like I am the lucky one. My past, the sad I have to memorize them because like it is my friend and family over there…but motivated me because like I am the lucky one because I survived today in this country, so everything when I, when I in United State every time if I feel down or sad… I said what the hell!!!..., your life is succeed life here. You’ve been past so many difficult tough time that you can survive how come now you can not get to it ?! So, is the key, the point, the power, that make me think normal and balance myself that is the life is like that. It is not going to be difficult if you want to, want to, want to go forward.

ND: Ok! Thank you very much Mrs. Chen for allowing me to interview you.

DCH: Oh you are welcome…my pleasure!

ND: Than you!!!