Studies on modernity in China tend to examine literature, films, print ads, or urban development through traditional historiographic readings, and “woman” is the common image used to represent Chinese modernity as a nation-state in facing the West. Among different readings of Chinese women and their bodies in terms of modernity, however, scholars have neglected the footbinding practice and its implication of the transition from the traditional to the modern. The literature on footbinding positions the anti-footbinding movement as the emancipation of women. And yet this focus ignores the way women with bound feet participated in commodity culture. Though their bodies were marked, it was not necessarily in a way that alienated them from capitalist commodity culture. By rereading the literature of footbinding and contrasting it with Chinese female writer Eileen Chang’s works, this paper argues that modernity is embodied in women’s mobility, rather than the shape of their feet.

In summarizing a large research project that explores the historical representation of Chinese women’s bodies as embedded in the interplay between nationalism and consumerism, the project examines the construction of China’s nationalist discourse upon the bodies of women with bound feet at the time when the anti-footbinding movement successfully and suddenly gained popularity throughout China in the late nineteenth century. By analyzing the works of Eileen Chang around the theme of 1930s Shanghai urban life, I reveal that women’s bodies, or their foot sizes, were problematic signs in distinguishing modern and old in the nationalist agenda. Instead of focusing on the abolishment of footbinding as the sign of modernity, I propose to examine women’s ability to walk in the street as urban consumers in the early twentieth century and to challenge the categorization of tradition and modernity by using bound feet as symbol of backwardness.
For this reason, women with bound feet should be included as members of modern Chinese society, especially in discussing modern Chinese urban culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the victory of the anti-footbinding movement and the spurning of the bodies of bound-foot women, how did these women participate in or respond to the demanding trend of being modern? To answer these important questions, I take Rey Chow’s “politics of reading” as a strategic, critical re-reading of the neglected “symptoms” so as to disclose the ideological assumptions that have governed the ways things are shaped.¹ The pattern I find in the footbinding case is the exclusion of foot-bound women in the discourse of Chinese modernity, and I intend to ally with the historian Dorothy Ko, who turns the focus of footbinding studies to shoes instead of feet in her book, *Every Step a Lotus*. Ko’s focus on the shifting production modes of footwear leads me to see the potential for connecting the old custom to a new mode of communication: shopping. Modernity is not about women’s foot size, but the necessity that women must change their identity to become modern consumers, shopping in the department store, and pursuing fashion styles.

My strategic re-reading is also inspired by Walter Benjamin’s elaboration of the flâneur image. As a writer in his 1935 sketch for the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin reconstructs the flâneur figure by expanding the image of the street stroller in Baudelaire’s poetry. The flâneur is used to explore the relationships not only between members of a modern city but also between urban activity and its environment. According to Benjamin, the flâneur came into existence because of the change of the urban landscape in Paris. Modernity lies in the creation of the arcades, allowing city dwellers to stroll at leisure. As an alternative to Benjamin’s view of male streetwalkers, I propose to highlight the significance of the female stroller (the flâneuse) in discovering the relationship between women and modernity. In response to the dominant masculine figure,
Deborah L. Parsons argues that the image of the flâneuse as a writer is equivalent to the flâneur in writing about the experience of living in the city. Following Parsons’ feminist interpretation of the flâneur, this paper, in its focus on Shanghai’s urban consumer culture in the 1930s, takes a retrospective position, examining the custom of footbinding after its heyday, through the vision of the female writer (the flâneuse). At the last chapter of footbinding, women as modern subjects reconstructed the understanding of their bodies and movability in their quotidian lives in the city.

Footbinding was a custom practiced on women for approximately one thousand years in China. Originally, the binding was practiced among court dancers for an aesthetic purpose: to create a more feminine and graceful motion. After the later-developed “conventional” binding, women were said to need one to five years to get used to their bound feet, which means that they could not go out during the adaptation time. Howard Levy offers a detailed description of how to bind the foot. A typical age to initiate binding was five to six years old. Four toes were folded under the big toe so that the foot could look pointy and slender. The meaning of bound feet had changed from sexual attractiveness to a symbol of the good wife and motherhood when the bound feet became required of desired brides among genteel families.

Footbinding was the rite of passage for a girl to become a woman. By custom, the girl’s mother or other senior female family members bound her feet for her. As Levy notes, pain is the shared memory among these women, especially at the starting stage. For most women, the pain receded as time went by, because the feet were “dead”: the bones were broken and the feet were numb. By that time, women were able to do the binding unaided and walk unaided. Nevertheless, the fact that women could walk “without undue difficulty” if the feet were bound well was not a noteworthy aspect in the anti-footbinding discourse.

From the erotic implications to its nascence as symbol of chastity, footbinding became a
complex mixture of signs as it reached the final stage of its popular existence in China. Suddenly and drastically, footbinding signified a despicable image for Chinese intellectuals advocating Westernization and modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Simply put, bound feet transitioned from a source of pride to a symbol of national shame.

What can be discovered about the old, traditional, seemingly patriarchal practice in a modern and progressive city? Did women with tiny feet equate with savageness and backwardness for the entire society? Were these women destined to be cast away in the onslaught of modernization? In response to the questions, I tell the story of footbinding in Shanghai in the 1930s, through the lens of Eileen Chang’s writing at a relatively remote distance. The distance in time is both strategic and dangerous, “for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”

My strategy of reading Chang to search for a different reading of the image of Chinese women aims to locate an alternative site for examining the nature of desire and fantasy in relation to modern consumption modes. Eileen Chang (1920-1995) became famous in the 1940s; however, her popular works were mostly embedded in the China of late 1920s and early 1930s. With war as a backdrop, her novels focus on Shanghai’s everyday life, urban fashion, and men’s and women’s clever calculations about marriage, love, and sex in the convergence of new and old worlds. Born in Shanghai in 1920, Chang was proud of being a Shanghai “petty urbanite.” Although Chang did not address directly the theme of footbinding in her works, finding the fragments of the “truth” about footbinding in her writings is the method of “politics of reading.” By comparing and contrasting Chang’s accounts of footbinding, I take a different position to tell the story of footbinding against the conventional perspective.

In the early twentieth century, Shanghai began to grow into China’s biggest and most
cosmopolitan city. Unlike Leftist writers in the 1930s, Eileen Chang’s childhood and adolescent experience were thoroughly urban, and her urban mind drew her writing to diverge from the urgent nationalist tone popular during her time. There was no hurry to replace the old by the new culture, for her; traditional Chinese encountering the modern, high-pressured urban pace was city dwellers’ everyday practice. New and old, Western and Chinese, civilized and rural were intertwined in Shanghai and constituted the “natural” urban scenery. As Xudong Zhang comments on her, Eileen Chang observes the city based on the assumption that “every modern Chinese is technically a Shanghaiese” (142). Shanghai, thus, was the dream world embodying Chinese modernity, both geographically and imaginatively. Surrounded by those loud voices concerning the fate of the nation and the criticism of extravagance, Chang’s Shanghai is feminine, exuberant with joy after the rise of capitalism and consumerism.

Chang’s Shanghai in the early twentieth century resembles Baudelaire’s Paris in the nineteenth century. Both cities are filled with decadence, desolation, and delusion. In Baudelaire’s poetry, the image of woman and the image of death intermingle with the image of Paris. Walter Benjamin comments, “The Paris of [Baudelaire’s] poems is a sunken city, and more submarine than subterranean” (105). The image of woman is also an important element in Chang’s works, but instead of the image of death, Shanghai is mixed up with the image of woman, and that of life, a desire to survive in the hurried march of modernity. Whether the image of death (Baudelaire) or the image of life (Chang), an ambiguity is created between the present and the past. In this sense, Chang’s Shanghai catches what Benjamin terms the dialectics at the standstill of the image in the ceaseless history. The dream image of Shanghai is fulfilled with commodity fetish, alleys and side streets, dark attics, and passageways of public and private spaces. This is the other face of modernity. The rhythm of life in Chang’s works seems to be
disparate from the fantastic portrayal of a modernized, progressive nation, but the distance from
the mainstream reveals the gaze of the novelist, the gaze of an alienated flâneuse. The Paris
flâneur is the city traveler. “He seeks refuge in the crowd” (Benjamin, 104). In Shanghai of the
1930s, the flâneuse Chang traveled to know her geography. With her pen, she tells us the stories
of many other invisible women in the crowd, including her own mother, who was a city traveler
in Chang’s eyes.

Chang’s mother was a tiny-foot woman. In Chang’s posthumous autobiographical novel
*Little Reunion*, her mother is portrayed as a romantic traveler around the world. Born into a
genteel family, Huang was married into the Chang family of equal standing; however, when her
husband planned to have a concubine and took up opium smoking, she left the home. With her
dowry of various antiques, and after giving birth to two children, she accompanied her sister-in-
law to study in Europe, and then divorced her husband when Chang was eight. Her freedom was
achieved at the cost of her family, so the relationship between Chang and her mother was aloof,
and descriptions of her are fragmented.

What can be imagined from the fragmented pieces is a roaming female figure. She had a
pair of bound feet, but she was able to ski at the Alps. She had several love affairs after her
divorce. In the intervals between her trips to Shanghai, Hong Kong, Europe, and Southeastern
Asia, she temporarily lived with Chang, and in the end passed away in London. Her genteel
background and rich heritage facilitated her enjoyment as a modern consumer. Her bound feet
did not constrain her from the public, the street, or the urban entertainment.

What is modernity to women in the 1930s? Lady Huang’s image as a bound-foot woman
is different from the dominant discourse at that time. Her story shows that women with bound
feet did not always stay at home, or act as the submissive victim in the traditional patriarchal
system. It is evident that women with bound feet were subject to the nation-building and progressive atmosphere, as well as being a symbol of savagery, backwardness, and unintelligence, but this does not mean that they could not actively participate in shopping for modern commodities or enjoying modern urban activities. In the memory of her childhood, Chang (Julie) recalls a scene of going shopping with her mother (Rachel) in *Little Reunion*,

Rachel took her solely to meet Mrs. Chu at Ching-Mei [western coffee shop]. Before the afternoon tea party, they went to the department store first. As usual, the clerks piled up the commodities on the counter to show Rachel, and they moved two chairs from the inside room. Julie almost fell asleep while sitting on the chair. She was nine years old. After strolling around several departments, they went out and waited to pass the crossroad… Rachel, as if she suddenly realized the necessity of holding her daughter’s hand, paused, and grabbed Julie’s hand. The grab was too tight, Julie didn’t know her fingers were so fine, like bamboo sticks on her hand, feeling complicated. They went through Nanjing Road. As soon as they walked onto the sidewalk, Rachel loosened her hand. (91)

It was rare that Chang and her mother physically spent time together. This paragraph describes a strange, unfamiliar mother-daughter relationship due to the previous separation in time and space. Furthermore, the shopping activity is related to the prosperous commercial culture in Shanghai while strolling in the street is related to the new urban woman’s image as a consumer. According to Walter Benjamin, the department store is both a landscape and a room for modern men to promenade. In Shanghai streets in the 1930s, women lingered with their bound or unbound feet, singly or in company, in pursuit of fashion.

Fashion is essential to the world of modernity. In the traditional world, women produced
shoes and clothing. To be fashionable in the modern world, people shop, creating a way for them to approach the objects, the spirit, and the atmosphere of modernity. Shopping involves traffic, locations, and women. Women thus mediate modernity as both subjects and objects. Women become consumers, and women who can shop are considered modern. By stating this, I do not mean that the transition from producer to consumer is a positive change for women, but that it is problematic to use women’s foot sizes in distinguishing the modern and the old.

The evidence of foot-bound women’s active participation in modern consumption as members of urban culture requires a careful reading of fragments in the existing text. Eileen Chang remembered that she glanced at her mother’s shoes one afternoon. “A pair of white snake leather half-high-heel Mary Jane with black scale lines was in the bathroom, so small as if they were Cinderella’s lost glass slippers” (87). Whether they were tailored bound feet shoes or so-called modern shoes, all were commodities.

In a photo shot in 1930s France, Lady Huang wore a white dress, a black necklace, a long shawl casually hung on her shoulders, and a pair of Western white medium high-heels that were revealed from the hemline. This is a portrait of a modern woman in the 1930s. Judging from the photo, no one would detect that this woman had a pair of bound feet. Through shopping and fashion, women obtain new identity as modern consumers and thus gain the voice to interpret modernity.

Tiny-foot women’s participation in the fashion battle was found in the patterns of lotus shoes: lotus, butterfly, pomegranate, double coins, goldfish, peach, and bird were popular at different times. Although the footbinding custom declined, shoe-making became a profession outside the household and the skills of designing and assembling shoes for bound feet resulted in prosperous competition among seamstresses and shoe makers. From the 1890s to the 1930s, the
styles of lotus shoes were very inventive. “Western chic” lotus shoes were produced by local factories or imported from Britain and sold in shops, and the popular styles were Mary Jane, Leather, Oxford, etc. Like their natural-foot sisters, bound-foot women were targeted customers in the modern capitalist market even as their bodily marker labeled them as “backwardness.”

Traditionally, as the buyers, women waited for shoe sellers to come to their homes, and the transaction might happen at a household when the vendor was called and invited inside. When women were able to leave the home in order to shop, the mobility of women’s bodies in the city and in the department stores, thus, is the disruptive moment in the history of Chinese modernization. Walking to shop became the new method of consumption for modern women. Just looking is the modern gesture for living in the city. In her essay anthology, “Gossip,” Eileen Chang describes the experience of a window shopper in the winter evening Shanghai streets:

I still look at the hat, admiringly, my neck quivering from cold, hands in my pocket. We gesticulate with our nose tips and chins. The warm breath spurts thin, white flower on the cold glass. (62)

This is the portrait of a modern woman, fantasizing the commodities that may fulfill her desires and dreams.

By re-reading Chang’s work as shown above, I articulate several seemingly irrelevant elements to construct the footbinding story. Benjamin’s image of the flâneur is borrowed and expanded so that the wanderings of Chinese women can be viewed as the flâneuse in the modern city. By focusing on women’s ability to walk and shop, I compose a different picture beyond the conventional footbinding history. In its long history, footbinding caused mental and physical suffering to women, and the brutal language and criticism of the practice at its last stage worsened the mental torture to the foot-bound women. It is undeniable that activists’ intervention
accelerated the decline of the practice, but this do-gooding moral imperialism often had the
effect of deprecating local culture and ironically abused the subjects they wanted to save in a
way as violent as the previous persecution.

To challenge the orientalist reading of footbinding, I steer the focus away from the size of
women’s feet, and search for women figures in the early twentieth century urban setting. The
portrait of Chang’s mother is an example of the modern woman’s image. The wanderings or non-
 wanderings of female characters are framed and located within a map of the city and memories
of the past. Physically, they operated in different social areas, but they shared a time period. I
argue that, although in different geographical locations, women in these stories imagine
modernity through the image of Shanghai, the urban modern dream world. Shanghai was the
synonym of modernity and fashion, and material abundance was part of women’s fairy tale
illuminating their uncertain future. Fashion is a showing-off gesture, a ceaseless battle, and
women are the daunting troops in interpreting modernity.

Modernity does not arise from the size of one’s feet. Modernity is the freedom of walking
in the city day and night, as a consumer, as a city walker, without shame for one’s material
fetish. The practice of seeing the world and writing based on observances through one’s own
eyes is the individual’s victory, and also the Chinese foot-bound woman’s victory, even though
the body of these women remains subject to various ideological oppressions.
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Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, V.

In *Little Reunion*, the character Rachel is considered Chang’s mother, and Julie is the author herself.

Chang, 2009.