ABSTRACT: In the literature concerned with the globalisation of gay identities, non-normative sexualities in Asia have come under increasing attention as evidence countering universalising Western assumptions of what it means to be a global gay or lesbian. As part of this emergence of a ‘queer Asia’ critique, ethnographic monographs on female non-normative sexualities have appeared in Japan, India, Indonesia and Thailand for instance. But the case of Singapore has been significantly missing. By examining the cultural artefact of a Singaporean lesbian documentary, I suggest how taken-for-granted images of local middle-class lesbians can appear to be ‘just like’ the hegemonic Western queer, a thoroughly globalised version alienated from her indigenous region. Are ‘modern’, middle-class Singaporean lesbians merely another instantiation of the homogenising global gay identity, and hence ineffective as material for the ‘queer Asia’ critique? How might we understand the sexual specificity of women who love women in Singapore? I turn to postcolonial theory and feminist sexuality studies for conceptual tools to move beyond the edifice of problematic binaries of global/local and modern/traditional underpinning persistent postulations of same-sex subjectivities as originating from, and oriented to, the imperial West. My aim is to resist the theoretical impulse to refer to antecedents in North America or Western Europe when thinking about same-sex sexualities in Singapore as this holds real-life implications for non-Western sexual subjects trying to live up to idealised images of what being gay means.

BIO: Shawna Tang is a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She completed her PhD in 2013 with the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney. She is currently writing a book manuscript titled ‘Queer? I am not weird!’ Re-thinking global sexualities in a postcolonial study of Singaporean lesbian identities’. Her research interest is in the convergence of postcolonial theory, critical feminist studies and queer theory in engaging questions of sexuality, gender, modernity, globalisation, state, nationalisms and identities in non-Western contexts.