The term ‘social policy’ has been conventionally associated with welfare states, which are obliged to make minimal provisions to citizens, because of the failure of the market to deliver basic services to subjects, who are disadvantaged in the social structure (Clarke, 2004). Even in countries like Singapore, which refuse the ‘welfare state’ label because of its socialist connotations and fears of public dependency on handouts, State officials have instituted policies to house the majority of the population, to care for the elderly, to provide for health facilities, education and community development.

If social policy is connected with social welfare and social development, its components are neither universal nor all-inclusive. Every country has a ‘policy hierarchy’ in which some items are prioritised over others, and others are neglected. Because policy involves allocation of resources, such as funds to create and sustain agencies and services, a policy hierarchy reflects not just the resource-capacity of a given country, but also the political choices of decision-makers. In the ‘policy hierarchy’ of Singapore, housing is at the apex, in which political elite successfully wins consent of the electorate, by offering affordable public accommodation to over 80% of the population (Chua, 1991). The political stakes are high, when the recipients or clients of policies also constitute the voting electorate. Thus, social security through the Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions and health are matters of fundamental importance to the adult population (Ramesh & Asher, 2000). And for an ageing society, policies on the elderly are mandatory. In recent years, with the change of a new prime minister, generational outreach is deemed essential to win the younger population. Hence, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCDYS) is a harbinger of a new proliferation of youth policies.

When housing, social security, health, the aged, and youth receive the limelight, we tend to identify these as typical examples of the nation’s social policy. But a ‘policy hierarchy’ ignores, excludes or represses other
concerns. Sexuality is a case in point. State officials in many countries do not clearly articulate a coherent programme that deals with sex, sexual orientation and sexual identities. Sexuality forms an indomitable part of the human project of life, regeneration, intimacy, and social connectivity, and yet, sexuality is rarely conceptualised as part of social policy. Issues of sexual health, sexual reproduction, sexual recreation, and sexual self-determination are also issues of social welfare and well-being of individuals. People do not just live in flats, save money and grow old; they have sexual lives, needs and wants.

Besides the welfare function, social policy has an ameliorative role to prevent social problems. In Norway, the Directorate of Immigration runs cultural orientation programmes for refugees. Anthropologists are hired to counsel refugees who have sexual problems in the host country because of dislocation and changing gender norms. The sexual welfare of refugees is thus seen as part of a mental health effort to integrate them into a new society. Such an enlightened policy of catering to the sexual needs of the marginalised is unheard of in Singapore. Indeed, as this paper will show, Singapore’s social policies tend to regulate sexuality and social relations, rather than empower the sexual lives of individuals. Since sexuality is repressed in the policy hierarchy, I will attempt to excavate various sites to uncover sexual policies, in terms of their constituent elements and their rationale.

The first site to look for sexual policies is law. Laws that touch on sexuality in Singapore are invariably prohibitive and punitive: they do not encourage sexual expression, they do not protect individuals from discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, they do not ratify freedom of sexual association. In other words, laws on sexuality in Singapore are criminal laws, rather than civil rights laws. The criminality of sexual laws stems from the repressive model of Victorian England, where sexual codes were shaped by Christianity and middle-class conservatism (Hall, 2000). England transported these moral standards to the colonies in the form of the ‘Penal Code,’ imposed on all the Commonwealth territories. In 1991, Hong Kong removed some of these ‘sexual offences’ (except for molest and rape) from the legal statutes. On the other hand, Singapore, Malaysia, India and Sri Lanka continue to criminalise certain sexual activities between consenting adults (Laurent, 2005).

Sexual policies in Singapore can also be gauged by official statements made by the political elite, by police action, and by censorship efforts of media authorities. Relying on these range of sources, I will attempt to capture the elusive by drawing a picture of what sexual policies look