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To Die or to Survive: Evolutionary Aspects of Cantonese Opera Plots

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Ever since the alleged “racist” overtones of Darwinism have been vindicated by researchers who unveiled Darwin’s emphasis on morality of human beings as a “selective advantage” in “natural selection”, a revival of interest in Darwinian evolutionism has been seen in the past two decades. Many psychologists and a number of musicologists have borrowed ideas from Darwinism in their research, and the two new disciplines “evolutionary psychology” and “evolutionary musicology” have been founded.

In one of his best-selling books *How the Mind Works* (1997/1999), the evolutionary-psychologist Steven Pinker “reverse-engineers” (i.e. deconstructs) the pleasure-technology of drama in terms of “goals” (1999:54). Pinker believes that a good drama triggers pleasure among its audience by deploying the characters’ goals to create conflicting situations (1999:543). Despite the fact that there are many goals that a protagonist desires to achieve throughout a plot, Pinker points out that the underlying goals are to “survive” and “reproduce” (1999:54 1); to this, *I* suggest Darwin also regards “mating” as another underlying goal.

In studying the plot of the Cantonese opera play *The Floral Princess* (《帝女花》), created and premiered in 1957, Hong Kong), it is obvious that the three underlying goals “stand out” (or “fall back”) as the primary force that deploys and unfolds the immediate goals. In the climactic finale of *The Floral Princess*, the two protagonists who respectively play the princess and prince of the royal family of the Ming dynasty, commit a double suicide in the royal garden now occupied by the Qing regime. They thereby voluntarily surrender their goals of “survival”, “mating” and “reproduction” upon seeing that the Ming emperor’s son (i.e. the heir of the falling empire) has been released. In this, we also witness the two protagonists’ mutual goal of “reproduction” being indirectly fulfilled. With the proposed paper, I shall argue that 1) evolutionary ideas are instrumental in reverse-engineering Cantonese operatic plots; 2) while dramatic *high-points* are often created when a protagonist is forced to give-up his/her goals, the ultimate climax is constructed when the protagonist “voluntarily surrenders” (Pinker 1999:543) his/her much desired goals, which are not the immediate but the underlying ones.

Among the three underlying goals, climactic points are often associated with death and survival. It is apparent that the more people emphasize survival in real life, the more scriptwriters deploy the “surrender of survival” for achieving dramatic climax. I believe further research will reveal that similar strategies of goal deployment can be found in many other Cantonese opera plots.