

Talking about the simplification of Tang makeup in film and television dramas - taking *Da Ming Palace* female image makeup as an example

Hantong Yu

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Winchester, United Kingdom

hy2y25@soton.ac.uk

Abstract. With the rapid development of film and television dramas, the makeup and dress of film and television dramas have also attracted widespread attention. The makeup and dress film and television dramas play an important role in shaping the beauty of the picture of film and television dramas. This article takes the TV series "*The Word of the Great Palace*" as an example, and through the analysis of the simplification of Tang Dynasty makeup in the makeup of its characters, it explores the application value of the simple of Tang Dynasty makeup. The simplification of Tang Dynasty makeup not only retains the essence of Tang Dynasty makeup, but also opens up new ideas for the inheritance and of traditional makeup and dress, Still the innovation of visual aesthetics and artistic.

Keywords: the story of the Ming Palace, Tang Dynasty makeup, simplification

1. Introduction

The design of female makeup and hairstyling in *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*) is not a straightforward replication of Tang dynasty cosmetics. Rather, it represents a selective and focused reinterpretation. The production retains the key features that most vividly embody Tang aesthetic ideals, while deliberately discarding elements that are overly intricate, visually distracting, or ill-suited to cinematic rhythm. This approach can be summarized in four main aspects. First, it adopts a strategy of "discarding the form while preserving the spirit", refining symbolic elements by simplifying floral forehead ornaments, eyebrow shapes, and facial decorations into a clearer and more contemporary visual language. Second, it carefully negotiates the relationship between "movement" and "stillness" within the frame—combining the flowing quality of hair ornaments and garments with the solemn stability of courtly composition. Third, instead of pursuing the rich and saturated palette characteristic of Tang aesthetics, the use of color is more restrained, with subtle variations employed to suggest character traits and destiny. Fourth, makeup and hairstyling are elevated from mere visual embellishments to expressive tools that convey character, enabling female figures to be not only objects of viewing but subjects who articulate their psychological states, positions of power, and emotional transformations. Based on these four dimensions, this chapter examines how *Da Ming Palace* achieves a

balance between historical authenticity and modern aesthetic sensibilities, and how makeup and hairstyling function in the service of character construction and narrative expression.

2. Overall conceptualization of makeup and hairstyling for female characters

2.1. Discarding the form while preserving the spirit

In the visual presentation of film and television dramas, the restoration and innovation of historical makeup has long been caught in a fundamental dilemma [1]: it must both satisfy the audience's expectation of historical authenticity and accommodate modern aesthetic sensibilities and narrative rhythm. *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*) adopts the design principle of "discarding the form while preserving the spirit", through which Tang-dynasty makeup is subjected to symbolic refinement and functional transformation. While retaining the core characteristics of Tang aesthetics, the series endows them with renewed artistic vitality. This section examines the issue from three perspectives: the selection of historical elements, methods of symbolic extraction, and the functional transformation of makeup within character construction.

First, with regard to the selection of historical elements, the approach shifts from complexity to concision. Tang-dynasty makeup was famously characterized by the so-called "seven-step process", which included the application of white powder, rouge, painted eyebrows, floral forehead ornaments (huadian), cheek dimples (mianye), slanting red makeup (xiehong), and lip color [2-4], reflecting an extreme pursuit of detail. However, a complete replication of this process in film and television production would be both time-consuming and labor-intensive, and could weaken character expression through visual redundancy. In its styling design, *Da Ming Palace* makes bold and deliberate choices [3]. It simplifies the makeup process by omitting complex procedures such as xiehong and layered applications of rouge. For example, the makeup of Princess Taiping retains only dark eyebrows and subtle facial accents, while floral ornaments and slanting red are deliberately downplayed. By reducing decorative elements, the design reinforces the character's sense of innocence and purity.

Such choices do not constitute a departure from history, but rather achieve a mastery of complexity through simplicity by distilling core symbols. As Ye Jintian has observed, "Design should appear natural and effortless, without revealing the traces of design itself" [5].

Second, symbolic extraction proceeds from the concrete to the abstract. In *Da Ming Palace*, the refinement of Tang-dynasty makeup symbols is manifested in the abstraction and reinterpretation of iconic elements, particularly the huadian. Traditionally made from gold foil or fish scales and cut into diverse shapes—such as plum blossoms or birds and animals [6, 7]—huadian in the series are simplified into geometric forms, such as diamonds or teardrops, predominantly in red. This approach preserves their symbolic association with aristocratic status while enhancing visual focus through modern minimalist design. A notable example is the diamond-shaped huadian worn by Zetian Wu, whose sharp lines subtly suggest her authority and decisiveness.

The essence of symbolic extraction lies in transforming historical elements into a visual language that combines recognizability with narrative function. Similarly, although the elaborate structures of Tang high coiffures are simplified, the use of minimal gold ornaments—such as hairpins with dangling elements (buyao)—and clear contour lines continues to convey the solemn dignity of aristocratic women.

Third, in character construction, the function of makeup shifts from decoration to narration. Through this functional transformation, makeup symbols in *Da Ming Palace* are elevated from purely ornamental elements to tools for character development and plot progression. One important manifestation of this shift is the reinforcement of character traits. Taking Princess Taiping as an example, her makeup omits redundant elements from the Tang "seven-step" process, such as xiehong and pronounced facial ornaments. This design

echoes the early Tang aesthetic of "lightly applied rouge," as seen in *The Portrait of the Military Governor's Wife Paying Homage to the Buddha* in Cave 130 of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves [8]. By contrast, Zetian Wu's severe eyebrow shape and dark-toned costumes imply the ruthlessness inherent in power struggles. This contrast is particularly evident in the scene depicting the death of Shao Xue, where Princess Taiping sheds her ornate garments and removes all traces of makeup; the dissolution of her appearance symbolizes the collapse of her idealism. Moreover, makeup serves as a metaphor for hierarchical power relations. When Zetian Wu ascends the throne, her makeup adopts gold as the dominant tone, with sharply defined eyebrows and crown-like huadian, transforming traditional symbols of feminine softness into emblems of authority. This design transcends historical prototypes and imbues makeup with a distinctly political narrative function.

At its core, "discarding the form while preserving the spirit" represents a modern translation of cultural symbols. The complexity of Tang makeup originated from the openness of Tang society and its pluralistic aesthetics, whereas the simplification seen in *Da Ming Palace* resonates with the "aesthetics of subtraction" prevalent in contemporary visual media—achieving a balance between historical authenticity and artistic imagination through symbolic refinement. For instance, while the series references the costume silhouettes of *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, it deliberately weakens decorative patterns, employing visual restraint and blank space to stimulate the audience's imagination of the High Tang era.

This process of translation also reflects a distinctive female perspective. Traditional Tang makeup has often been reduced to stereotypes of "gaudiness" or "exposure", whereas *Da Ming Palace* adopts a more restrained approach, transforming female beauty from an object of the gaze into a medium of self-expression. As Princess Taiping declares in the series, "Beauty should not be a cage, but a pair of wings".

Ultimately, the principle of "discarding the form while preserving the spirit" in *Da Ming Palace* is not merely an innovation in visual design, but a profound reactivation of traditional cultural symbols. By refining core elements such as huadian and eyebrow shapes and converting their functions into narrative instruments, the series successfully accomplishes a modern translation of Tang aesthetics. This approach offers a valuable paradigm for historical film and television productions: simplification does not negate history; rather, through the reconstruction of symbols, it allows the classical spirit to be revitalized within a contemporary context.

2.2. The integration of "movement" and "stillness"

In the visual presentation of film and television drama, the balance between dynamic scenes and static composition is not only central to visual aesthetics, but also a crucial means through which cultural meaning and character traits are externalized. *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*) skillfully integrates dynamic action with static composition through the sense of movement in costume, the contrastive use of color, and the symmetry of spatial arrangement. In doing so, it both resonates with the Tang aesthetic principle of "expressing the spirit through form" and responds to the narrative demands of modern audiovisual media. This balancing strategy represents not only a refinement of historical culture, but also a precise engagement with contemporary audience psychology.

In dynamic design, the visual expression of fluidity and vitality is most prominently realized through the interaction between hair ornaments and spatial movement. The series emphasizes a principle of "harmonizing movement and stillness" in its hairstyling: lofty coiffures—such as the *dandao banfan ji*—assert aristocratic status through their static presence, while dangling ornaments such as *buyao* hairpins and strings of beads sway gently in motion. For instance, the golden *buyao* worn by Zetian Wu at her enthronement catches and refracts light with the slightest movement of her head within an otherwise solemn, static composition. This not only reinforces the symbolism of imperial power, but also lends the character a sense of human vitality. The

design draws inspiration from the "cloud-like hair and floral visage" of court ladies depicted in Tang murals, with modern cinematographic techniques amplifying their dynamic details.

Equally important is the rhythmic use of color contrast. Dynamic scenes often enhance visual tension through contrasts between warm and cool tones. At a palace banquet, Princess Taiping appears in a pale gold gown set against deep red drapery, creating a striking interplay of cool and warm hues. As the hem of her dress flows with her movements, the scene embodies the Tang ritual convention that privileged red as a symbol of status, while simultaneously using chromatic variation to suggest the fluctuations of the character's fate. This technique parallels the flowing garments of the *feitian* figures in Dunhuang murals, translating the sense of movement found in religious art into a visual language suited to secular narrative [1, 2, 4].

By contrast, static compositions place greater emphasis on symmetry and solemnity as a means of historical evocation, particularly through the revival of Tang axial aesthetics. Tang architecture is renowned for its symmetrical layouts, exemplified by the central-axis planning of structures such as the Hanyuan Hall and the Danfeng Gate of the Daming Palace, which embodied imperial order. *Da Ming Palace* makes extensive use of symmetrical composition in static scenes. When Zetian Wu sits enthroned, palace lanterns and attendants on either side are arranged in mirror symmetry, while carved screens and carpet patterns in the background form geometric correspondences. This visual order not only reconstructs the grandeur of Tang palatial space, often described as "the celestial gates opening to the nine heavens", but also reinforces the authority of the character through a sense of compositional stability. Such imagery closely aligns with the majestic atmosphere evoked in Wang Wei's poetic line, "The robes and crowns of myriad realms bow before the imperial crown", transforming historical reality into artistic truth.

At the same time, the simplified design of makeup and costume is endowed with symbolic function. Princess Taiping's restrained makeup—retaining only a subtle forehead ornament—becomes a visual focal point in close-up shots. The deliberate "blankness" of her face, set against ornate attire, both suggests the character's inherent innocence and generates narrative tension within a static frame. This approach echoes the compositional principle of "controlling complexity through simplicity" found in Tang mural art. In the murals of Princess Yongtai's tomb, for example, the faces of attendant figures are defined only by red lips and dark eyebrows, while the remaining areas are left in pale tones, thereby emphasizing subjectivity through restraint.

Finally, the chromatic choices in static scenes favor low saturation and harmonic balance. Court deliberation scenes, for instance, are dominated by dark red and deep green tones [9]. Textile patterns—such as linked-pearl roundel motifs—are presented in orderly symmetry, referencing the Tang brocade tradition known as the "Lingyang style", while the restrained palette conveys the oppressive atmosphere of political struggle. This design approach departs from the conventional, and often stereotypical, emphasis on the "brilliant Tang style" in historical dramas.

The integration of "movement" and "stillness" in *Da Ming Palace* ultimately constitutes a modern translation of Tang aesthetic spirit. Through the fluidity of costume, the symmetry of composition, and the rhythmic modulation of color and scene, the series preserves the historical weight of the Tang dynasty while imbuing it with contemporary aesthetic vitality.

2.3. The restrained use of color

Among the visual symbols of Tang-dynasty makeup, rich and intense coloration constitutes one of its most defining features. From the full-cheek flush of the so-called "wine-blush makeup" (*jiuyun zhuang*) to the lightly applied vermilion of "flying-cloud makeup" (*feixia zhuang*), Tang women employed bold chromatic schemes to express social openness and aesthetic confidence. *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*), however, does not mechanically reproduce this historical flamboyance. Instead, through a restrained application of

color, the series preserves essential cultural signifiers while translating them into a more implicit mode of expression aligned with modern aesthetic sensibilities. This approach represents both a refinement of historical authenticity and a key strategy of artistic re-creation.

Red makeup (*hongzhuang*) was a hallmark of Tang cosmetics. Rouge was often applied extensively, covering not only the cheeks but also the eyelids and even the ears, producing a visually striking effect, as seen in styles such as "wine-blush makeup" and "peach-blossom makeup". In its portrayal of Tang female figures, however, *Da Ming Palace* adopts a selective simplification of this tradition.

Within the series, low-saturation hues such as pale peach and soft pink-orange replace the intensely vivid rouge of historical practice. For instance, in her girlhood, Princess Taiping's makeup features only a light sweep of blush across the cheeks. This treatment retains the cultural symbolism of "red makeup" while avoiding visual excess, and it resonates with her innocent and vivacious personality. The approach draws inspiration from the Tang technique of lightly applied vermilion associated with *feixia zhuang*, yet further attenuates color intensity to align with contemporary audiences' preference for a more "natural" aesthetic.

Beyond moderation in tone, *Da Ming Palace* elevates color into a visual metaphor for character traits and trajectories of fate, thereby transforming color from a purely decorative element into a narrative device. Princess Taiping's chromatic progression is particularly illustrative: in her youth, light yellow and white dominate her palette, constructing an image of purity and simplicity; after marriage, red and gold gradually prevail, signifying elevated status and heightened emotional intensity; in the later stages of her life, brown and black become predominant, reflecting the weariness and repression born of prolonged engagement in power struggles. Through such controlled chromatic shifts, the series embeds psychological depth and narrative meaning within its visual design.

3. The construction of new images for different characters

3.1. Distinction and unity between form and type in hairstyling

In the styling design of film and television productions, the relationship between the *form* (*xing*) and the *type* (*xing*) of hairstyles constitutes a core tension between historical reconstruction and artistic expression. Form refers to the concrete style and physical structure of a hairstyle, such as high buns or hanging side locks; *type*, by contrast, encompasses its symbolic meanings and functional attributes, including markers of social status and metaphors of character. *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*) achieves a balance between historical authenticity and modern aesthetics by simplifying *form* while strengthening *type*. From the perspectives of hierarchical differentiation, formal modification, and symbolic implication, this section analyzes the artistic logic and cultural connotations underlying the series' hairstyling design.

In the Tang dynasty, the degree of complexity in women's hairstyles was directly correlated with social rank. *Da Ming Palace* employs hairstyle complexity as a visual signifier to distinguish between aristocracy and commoners, as well as between principal characters and supporting figures.

Zetian Wu and Princess Taiping predominantly wear lofty coiffures such as the *paojia ji* and the *dandao banfan ji*, drawing on aristocratic female models found in Tang murals—for example, the "towering bun" (*e ji*) structures seen in *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*. In the series, these high buns are technically modified: lightweight materials, such as gauze-wrapped hairpieces, replace traditional metal frameworks. This approach preserves the solemnity of the silhouette while reducing physical strain on the actors. For instance, the *dandao banfan ji* worn by Zetian Wu at her enthronement is adorned with gold filigree floral ornaments at the crown; its strong vertical lines intensify the visual symbolism of power. Set

against low-saturation costumes, the hairstyle underscores her authoritative presence and visually articulates her transgression of gendered constraints on power.

By contrast, palace maids are typically styled with double hanging buns or low side buns, accented only with plain silk ribbons. This design is derived from attendant figures in Tang tomb murals, such as the simplified "hanging side locks with divided buns" depicted in the murals of Princess Yongtai's tomb [4]. By minimizing decorative elements—omitting *buyao* hairpins and gold ornaments—the design remains faithful to historical evidence while avoiding visual distraction, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical distinction between mistress and servant.

Moreover, the series' reinterpretation of traditional hairstyles exemplifies the simplification of *form* and the re-creation of *type*.

One manifestation of this approach lies in the minimalist treatment of bun contours. Tang high buns were often constructed with metal wires and stacked hairpieces to create exaggerated volume—historical records note that Yang Yuhuan's hairpieces could reach up to thirty centimeters in height. In *Da Ming Palace*, however, such volume is moderated by reducing layers and softening edges, allowing the hairstyles to align more closely with modern aesthetic preferences. Princess Taiping's "double-ring interlocking bun" provides a clear example. Tang textual and archaeological sources indicate that the *jiaoxin ji* is characterized by two braids crossing at the crown, as recorded in *Zhuangtai Ji*, while the *tongxin ji* emphasizes concentric circular structures, as seen in murals from Li Ji's tomb and in the sancai female figurines from An Yuanshou's tomb [1, 2, 4]. The series merges these two forms, combining twin loops at the crown with layered coiling at the back of the head. This synthesis preserves the symmetry of the *jiaoxin ji* while incorporating the rounded fullness of the *tongxin ji*, retaining the tall and ample silhouette common to both. At the same time, the design selectively weakens ornamental elements frequently found in murals—such as gold and silver *buyao* and *huadian*—and instead emphasizes the texture of the hair itself, evoking the early Tang tradition of "true-hair coiffures" marked by simplicity. Similarly, Princess Taiping's *paijia ji* retains only the curved contour at the top, with side strands falling naturally. This both echoes the Tang aesthetic of relaxed elegance described as "cloud-like temples loosely combed" and skillfully employs the fluid lines of the neck to convey youthful femininity. Together, these designs achieve a balance between classical rhythm and modern sensibility.

A second key aspect is the lightweight treatment of materials used in hairstyling and ornamentation. The internal support structures of the series' hairstyles draw on Tang *yiji* techniques. Historically, *yiji* were inserted into buns to maintain height and shape; aristocratic Tang women commonly used wooden or paper cores wrapped in real hair, reinforced internally with metal wires or fishbone lattices to enhance load-bearing capacity. In the series, however, lightweight alloy shells are used for hairpieces, while long hairpins replace metal wires and fishbones embedded in the midsection of the bun. This preserves the elevated form while avoiding the heaviness and rigidity of traditional frameworks. In addition, ornaments are crafted from thin gold sheets and silk flowers rather than heavy gold-and-silver filigree. For example, the peony silk-flower hairpin worn by Princess Taiping at her wedding banquet employs silk threads to simulate the Tang *tongcao* flower technique. It retains the opulent imagery evoked by the line "Her garments recall the clouds, her face the flowers", while enhancing visual lightness on screen through the translucency of the materials. This design resonates with Ye Jintian's concept of "modernizing classical elements", whereby material innovation renders historical symbols more accessible to contemporary audiences.

More broadly, the hairstyling in *Da Ming Palace* is not a simple replication of Tang forms, but a reinterpretation of Tang culture through the distillation of core symbols. The vertical lines of high buns and the treatment of the temples draw directly from the lineage of Tang mural *chui ji* styles, while integrating the modern minimalist pursuit of geometric clarity. For instance, the sharp contours of Zetian Wu's hairstyle form

a dynamic contrast with the softness of her clavicle lines, embodying the Tang aesthetic principle of "expressing spirit through form" while simultaneously offering a contemporary articulation of female power.

The double hanging buns worn by palace maids not only signify class distinctions, but also metaphorically convey the oppressive order of the court through their strict neatness—symmetrical structures devoid of stray strands. This design draws on Tang records stipulating that palace women were "not permitted to wear their hair loose," translating historical discipline into visual language.

Through the simplification of formal structures and the intensification of symbolic meaning, the hairstyles in *Da Ming Palace* achieve both historical depth and artistic tension. The restraint of *form* and the richness of *type* not only recover the cultural genes of Tang hairstyles, but also activate the contemporary vitality of classical aesthetics. This design logic demonstrates that simplification in screen styling does not negate history; rather, through the dialectical unity of form and type, it allows traditional culture to generate renewed narrative energy on screen.

3.2. The simplification of eyebrow shapes and eye makeup

In Tang-dynasty cosmetics, the diversity of eyebrow shapes and eye makeup reached an unparalleled level. From the gentle elegance of arched eyebrows and willow-leaf brows depicted in the *Illustration of Ten Eyebrow Styles*, to the bold expressiveness of cassia-leaf brows and figure-eight brows, Tang women displayed aesthetic freedom through subtle variations of brow and eye. Eye-makeup techniques such as "weeping makeup" and "tear makeup", with their exaggerated lines and intense coloration, further conveyed heightened emotional tension. In reconstructing Tang female imagery, however, *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*) does not remain bound to the intricacies of historical detail. Instead, it simplifies eyebrow and eye lines, distilling the multiplicity of traditional makeup into a system of symbolized visual language.

The diversity of Tang eyebrow styles emerged from social openness and the blending of foreign cultures, yet within the limited duration of a television drama, character recognizability must be foregrounded. *Da Ming Palace* adopts a strategy of "polarized simplification", compressing more than ten historical eyebrow types into two core symbolic forms. One unifies eyebrows that express feminine softness into rounded, arched curves; the other employs thick, straight, and obliquely angled lines—resembling a blade—to signify authority.

In the series, the young Princess Taiping is portrayed with slender willow-leaf brows, their smooth lines resembling a new moon and their peaks softly curved. This design both echoes the "crescent brows" tradition seen in *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers* and reinforces her innocent, carefree character through its delicate form. By abandoning the heavy strokes of Tang "broad brows", such as Yang Yuhuan's cassia-leaf brows, the design uses visual restraint and blankness to emphasize facial purity, aligning with director Li Shaohong's aesthetic principle of "depicting complexity through clarity". By contrast, Zetian Wu's eyebrows are deliberately thickened and straightened, with sharply upturned tails that resemble blades—departing from historical descriptions of figure-eight brows. This transformation breaks through gendered conventions, conveying the oppressive force of power through geometric rigidity. In her enthronement scene, the vertical alignment between her eyebrows and the dangling beads of the imperial crown creates a visual echo that intensifies her aura of authority.

Similarly, while Tang eye makeup centered on "red makeup", often involving the extensive blending of vermillion or rouge across the eyelids and even toward the temples—as in "blood-flush makeup"—*Da Ming Palace* weakens chromatic layering and instead relies on line work to define the expressive core of the eyes [3].

First, the series abandons the Tang technique of heavy blending, replacing it with finely drawn eyeliner. Princess Taiping's eyeliner is thin and straight, with slightly downturned tails that create a "tearful gaze", forming a visual intertext with her tragic fate. Zetian Wu's eyeliner, by contrast, rises sharply at the outer corners, forming a double-blade motif in concert with her eyebrows and reinforcing her ruthless decisiveness. This approach draws on the "raised-brow" techniques of traditional Chinese opera makeup, yet with greater restraint, in keeping with the realist demands of modern screen aesthetics.

Second, eye shadow is used sparingly, if at all. A light sweep of pale brown may contour the eye socket, but overall the design follows an aesthetic of subtraction, allowing eye lines to carry narrative meaning. In the portrayal of the aged Zetian Wu, color is entirely omitted from the eyes; only gray-white eyeliner traces the drooping contours, working in tandem with wrinkles at the corners of the eyes to convey the loneliness of an emperor in her twilight years.

This treatment resonates with Zhang Yanyuan's Tang aesthetic principle that "with but one or two strokes of the brush, the image already emerges" [10], using minimalist lines to activate the viewer's imagination. In the farewell scene between Taiping and Shao Xue, a single tear sliding across an eyelid devoid of eye shadow creates a powerful tragic image through the stark contrast between pallid skin and crystalline tears.

At its core, the simplification of brows and eyes in *Da Ming Palace* represents both inheritance and integration of Tang facial-makeup traditions. Tang painter Wu Daozi was renowned for using sparse, expressive lines to capture spiritual vitality; the series' eyebrow and eye designs continue this tradition of "expressing spirit through form". Princess Taiping's willow-leaf brows, stripped of meticulous detail and rendered through a single arc, epitomize the practice of "grasping the bone structure and allowing likeness to arise naturally". Meanwhile, Ye Jintian's incorporation of the Bauhaus principle that "less is more" into visual design is evident in the gray-white eyeliner of the aged Zetian Wu, where a single line condenses a lifetime of vicissitudes, achieving an effect in which "one stroke encompasses an entire world". Far from dissolving Tang culture, such simplification refines symbols and transforms functions, enabling the *form* of brows and eyes to bear the *weight* of destiny and allowing historical makeup to generate renewed expressive power on the contemporary screen.

3.3. The precision of facial-ornament symbolization

The complexity of facial ornaments in the Tang dynasty was unmatched in Chinese history, and their cultural significance can be understood along three main dimensions. First, the styles and colors of *huadian* (forehead and facial ornaments) functioned as markers of social identity, distinguishing court women from those of common origin [11]. Red *huadian* were predominantly reserved for the aristocracy, often taking the form of plum blossoms or flying birds, and symbolized nobility and refinement. Second, the frequent appearance of mythical creatures and floral motifs in facial ornaments—such as the elements of "feathered crowns" and "fangs" discussed in studies of the *Hou Shijiahe jade divine-human face motif*—reflects the Tang synthesis of nature worship and shamanistic traditions. Finally, individual choices in facial decoration, including styles such as "weeping makeup" and "blood-flush makeup", reveal Tang women's pursuit of aesthetic freedom and, at times, an implicit challenge to the constraints of ritual propriety.

While preserving the core symbolic elements of Tang facial ornaments, *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*) subjects them to a process of refinement and abstraction. Through the selective weakening of ornamentation and the use of facial decorations as symbolic masks, the series achieves a precise and controlled visual language.

First, the *huadian* and *xiehong* in the series abandon the intricate patterns common in the Tang dynasty—such as multicolored overlays or animal forms—and instead adopt monochromatic geometric shapes, most

typically circles. These ornaments are not applied indiscriminately, but are carefully matched to character identity and narrative context. For example, the white circular mark on Princess Anle's cheek is a transformed version of the Tang *xiehong*. Historically, *xiehong* was associated with the expression of sorrow; in the series, it is reduced to a single-toned dot resembling a tear stain. By diminishing its decorative function, the design amplifies its expressive power, underscoring the character's restraint and loneliness after enduring hardship. Similarly, the historically popular Tang "black paste" (*wu gao*) lip color—deep black or dark crimson—is adjusted to hues more consistent with modern aesthetics, such as muted vermillion or nude pink. At Zetian Wu's enthronement, her lips are rendered in a matte, pure red, conveying imperial authority while tempering the exaggerated effect of historical cosmetics.

In addition, the *mianye* (dimple ornaments) originally served a functional purpose in marking palace maids' menstrual cycles before evolving into decorative symbols. In the series, this function is entirely stripped away, leaving only small circular or star-shaped embellishments placed at the dimples. At Princess Taiping's wedding, for instance, the *mianye* is rendered in gold powder, highlighting her splendor and youthful innocence.

Finally, the recurring appearance of Kunlun slave masks in the drama both reconstructs the Tang Lantern Festival custom of "wearing beast masks and cross-dressing", as seen in the scene of Taiping and Shao Xue's first encounter, and employs the acts of concealment and revelation inherent in masks to metaphorically suggest women's identity dilemmas within the entanglements of power and love.

It should be acknowledged that the simplification of facial ornaments may entail a partial loss of meaning [12]. For example, the rebellious spirit embodied in Tang "danger makeup" (*xian zhuang*) is not fully explored in the series, appearing only fleetingly in the flamboyant cosmetics of minor characters, such as the lover of Zhang Yizhi. Moreover, the drama does not distinguish between the earring practices of Han and non-Han women—historically, Han women in the Tang dynasty did not wear earrings [13]. The uniform omission of earrings simplifies the visual design but attenuates the representation of Tang cultural diversity. Nevertheless, by prioritizing symbolic economy, the series maximizes the universality of cultural communication. This approach not only infuses classical aesthetics with modern vitality, but also offers audiences a renewed perspective from which to understand the image of Tang women.

3.4. Innocence and liveliness

Although the bird-feather-themed image of Princess Taiping appears only briefly in the series, it constitutes a decisive, finishing touch. The design of her makeup and hairstyle fully embodies the drama's core creative philosophy: through an extremely minimalist symbolic language, it achieves an ultimate distillation of the character's spiritual essence. Following a logic of form–spirit separation and image–meaning co-existence, Princess Taiping's "innocence" and "liveliness" are elevated into a timeless sensibility and archetypal image that transcend historical specificity. Among these elements, the silver-thread feather hair ornament stands as a paradigmatic realization of the concept of "dematerialization". By adopting a counterintuitive choice of material, it dissolves the class attributes embedded in historical symbols, allowing the lightness of "form" and the purity of "spirit" to resonate through contradiction. Ultimately, the audience forgets the materiality of the adornment and is led directly to the authentic core of the character's soul.

In the Tang dynasty, the materials and craftsmanship of jewelry were closely bound to rigid hierarchies. Gold inlaid with gemstones symbolized power, while jade signified moral virtue. *The Da Ming Palace*, however, boldly strips away these traditional material metaphors. Princess Taiping's silver-thread feather hair ornament replaces gilded silver wire with nylon biomimetic fibers, realizing form–spirit separation through two subversive operations. Conventional gold and silver headdresses, by virtue of their material density,

implicitly suggest the disciplining power imposed on women; by contrast, the nylon feathers are markedly lighter and, according to behind-the-scenes production records, appear almost to float above the coiffure. This "weightless" state forms a structural parallel to Princess Taiping's desire to escape the shackles of the palace and pursue freedom. The lightness of the feather is thus not merely a physical attribute, but a visible manifestation of spirit, pointing directly to the authenticity of human nature.

The splendor of gilding belongs to the realm of the court, whereas the matte texture of nylon fibers is closer to nature. Through the diffusion of candlelight and moonlight, the drama renders the silver threads with a nacre-like, gentle luster, avoiding both the cold hardness of metal and any sense of cheapness. As art director Ye Jintian remarked: "I wanted her hair ornament to resemble a spider's web in the morning dew—fragile, yet shimmering with the light of life".

Across both Eastern and Western cultures, feathers are classic symbols of "lightness" and "ascension". Yet *The Da Ming Palace* endows them with a more complex semantic layer through material recomposition. The feathers in the hair ornament do not form a complete wing; instead, fragmented plumes are arranged in a staggered pattern. The feather tips retain torn edges, mimicking their natural state after being battered by wind and rain. As Princess Taiping runs, the feather pieces tremble at differing frequencies, like fledglings struggling to take flight. From the silver-white at the roots to the transparency at the tips, the gradient simulates the visual effect of feathers gradually dissolving into the air. This imagery of "wanting to fly yet failing to soar" precisely foreshadows Princess Taiping's tragic fate—caught between the prison of power and the illusion of freedom, she remains torn throughout her life, never truly able to take flight.

When the camera captures the silver-thread feather hair ornament gently swaying as Princess Taiping turns, the scattered points of reflected light seem to come alive. This fleeting play of light and shadow, permanently fixed through cinematic technology, gives the audience a sense of the awe of "the instant becoming eternity". The ornament ceases to be a cold prop and instead becomes a bridge across time and space.

The ultimate significance of the silver-thread feather hair ornament lies in its ability to achieve the most poetic expression through the most industrialized material. It is akin to Bada Shanren's "white-eyed fish": the materiality of xuan paper and ink never disappears, yet through minimalist brushwork it is sublimated into a spiritual symbol. When modern biomimetic materials collide with Tang-dynasty imagery, history is no longer a heavy burden; instead, it becomes stardust suspended within the genetic code of materials, waiting to be reactivated by a new artistic language.

4. The visual impact of makeup and hairstyling

4.1. A rembrandt-like texture and color palette

Rembrandt is one of the most representative painters of the Baroque period. His oil portraits are renowned for their dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, rich chromatic layering, and dense, tactile brushwork [9]. His signature technique lies in the combined use of thick impasto and transparent glazing on the face, creating a porcelain-like quality in which roughness and delicacy coexist. This is further reinforced by strong chiaroscuro to emphasize the subject, with triangular lighting used to intensify the figure, making the head appear to detach from the dark background and acquire a sculptural, relief-like three-dimensionality. Notably, the iconic stills of Princess Taiping in *The Da Ming Palace* demonstrate a comparable application of this classical technique. In particular, the visual effect of middle-aged Taiping's head bears a striking resemblance to Rembrandt's famous work *Saskia as Flora* (Figure 1).

In the still of middle-aged Taiping (Figure 2), a dark background is employed, dominated by the same tonal palette often found in Rembrandt's backgrounds, such as warm dark browns and ochres. This choice allows the

figure's head to be more effectively set off from its surroundings. As the head is visually foregrounded, the textures of the hairstyle and facial makeup are likewise rendered with greater clarity. Taiping's base makeup adopts a warm-toned beige, closely approximating the natural skin tones seen in oil portraits. When blended with white light sources, this hue avoids appearing overly cool or insufficiently saturated, ensuring adequate visual prominence while contributing to the construction of a porcelain-like facial texture. A similar approach can be observed in *Saskia as Flora* (Figure 1), where the figure's complexion is rendered in an ivory tone close to beige; even when cool white highlights are integrated into the facial features, they remain clearly defined while maintaining smoothness and overall tonal unity.



Figure 1. Rembrandt, *Saskia as Flora*



Figure 2. Still of Princess Taiping in *The Da Ming Palace*

Moreover, although Taiping's hairstyle in the still lacks overtly discernible details, preserving a sense of weight and volume against a dark background presents a significant challenge. In Rembrandt's paintings, the area surrounding the female figure's head is often accented with bright tones that outline the head as it merges into shadow. Warm ochre hues are subtly introduced into these highlights, preventing the edges of the hat from appearing overly rigid and thereby softening the velvet-like texture. A comparable method is evident in the drama still: the soft rim lighting around the darker areas of Taiping's chignon articulates the integrity of the

hairstyle's overall form. Light of similar intensity is also applied to the illuminated portions of the chignon, preventing excessive specular reflection from the hair. This treatment imparts a matte quality to the hair while preserving, to the greatest extent possible, the woven texture of the wig, ultimately conveying the material authenticity and fullness of the coiffure.

4.2. The role of geometric elements in iconic stills

It is well understood that for a composition to appear visually stable, the elements within the frame—such as the size, shape, and color of the primary subjects—must be coordinated. When these conditions are met, viewers perceive the image as coherent and aesthetically reasonable. However, to make a composition visually striking, the interplay of local elements within the frame becomes crucial.

In the still of Empress Wu and Princess Taiping (Figure 3), the hairstyles of the two characters function as local geometric elements that form distinct visual blocks atop their heads. These blocks enhance the compositional layers and overall form of the image while guiding the viewer's focal attention.

Empress Wu's hairstyle, resembling a black trapezoid, serves as the only dominant dark block in the frame. Together with the red-and-white color blocks of her costume, it establishes a sharp color segmentation, enriching both the visual hierarchy and the sense of order. Against the light background, this trapezoidal shape is even more pronounced, effectively functioning as the compositional focal point and drawing the viewer's gaze. Upon closer inspection, the geometric rigidity of the hairstyle's edges contrasts with the soft curves of the face, creating a visual tension that emphasizes Empress Wu's facial expression and heightens the dramatic intensity of the still. This design approach resonates with Shihui's concept of geometric deconstruction in painting, using contrasting and restructured geometric shapes to create a ritualized visual focal area.

Princess Taiping's hairstyle, resembling a white oval, forms a black-and-white contrast with Empress Wu's trapezoidal coiffure. This juxtaposition highlights the delicacy and lightness of her adornments while enhancing the depth and spatial perception of the frame.

Although Taiping's hairstyle appears as a white oval mass, it does not merely act as a flat color block. Instead, it maintains the visual focal hierarchy while adding dimensionality to the scene. The edges of her hollowed-out hair accessories feature irregular undulations; under the camera, the hairpiece is perceived as a unified white block but remains visually distinguished from the pale background, subtly layering the whites in the composition. Moreover, by reducing the hairstyle to a geometric form, the color unity of this region is strengthened. This accentuates the cool tonality of the white feathers against the warmth of the white gown under lighting, creating a subtle cold-warm color contrast that further enriches the visual depth of the still.



Figure 3. Still of Empress Wu and Princess Taiping

5. Conclusion

In its costume and makeup design, *Da Ming Palace* (*Da Ming Gong Ci*) adopts a simplified approach to Tang dynasty cosmetics, reducing the visual complexity while simultaneously enhancing the cultural connotations. This strategy successfully modernizes the historical drama genre. In the series, the rich hues of traditional Tang makeup—such as the "wine-blush" and "peach-blossom" styles—as well as elaborate facial ornaments are deliberately muted. This simplification emphasizes a contemporary interpretation of the characters, enabling audiences to connect emotionally with them through visual design. For instance, Princess Taiping's makeup harmonizes with the dark, rain-drenched tones of her scenes, creating an oppressive courtly atmosphere, while Empress Wu's darker, more solemn makeup accentuates her authority and dignity. By avoiding the potential visual clash of overly vivid Tang-era colors, this approach enhances viewer immersion.

The simplified treatment of Tang makeup elevates the visual aesthetics of *Da Ming Palace* to a new level. Rather than focusing on exact historical replication, the design integrates makeup and hairstyling with character development and narrative progression, allowing these visual elements to serve the depiction of inner states and plot dynamics. This method offers a reference for future historical dramas, suggesting that respecting historical tradition does not preclude minimalist reinterpretation, thereby achieving a balance between artistry and contemporary audience sensibilities.

In summary, the streamlined approach to Tang dynasty cosmetics represents a major highlight in the series' design philosophy. By successfully blending traditional makeup with modern aesthetic preferences, *Da Ming Palace* enables viewers to appreciate both the emotional nuance of the characters and the historical beauty of Tang-era cosmetics, providing a new direction for the modernization of visual design and aesthetic development in period dramas.

References

- [1] Wei, N. (2011). Study of Chinese genre television dramas. Beijing: Communication University of China Press.
- [2] Jin, W., & Xing, Z. (2010). Complete works of Chinese fine arts. Hefei: Huangshan Publishing House.
- [3] Li, L., & Chen, S. (1999). Complete works of Chinese painting. Hangzhou: Cultural Relics Press; Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House.
- [4] Tang, C. (2005). Murals of the Tang dynasty. Xi'an: Shaanxi Tourism Press.
- [5] Ye, J. (2001). Creative aesthetics of Ye Jintian: A study of imagination and inspiration. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore.
- [6] Lin, X. (2021). A preliminary discussion on the evolution of women's makeup in the Tang dynasty. *Art and Design Research*.
- [7] Wang, L. (2018). Research on the aesthetic culture of female facial makeup in the Tang dynasty: From subtle to bold styles (Doctoral dissertation, Xi'an University of Electronic Science and Technology).
- [8] Dunhuang Academy. (1983). Research on Dunhuang grotto art. *Cultural Relics*, (4), 56–62.
- [9] Xiao, F. (1996). On the color thinking of film directors. *Film Art*.
- [10] Yang, W. (2019). Study on women's clothing and makeup and Tang dynasty aesthetic taste (Doctoral dissertation, Sichuan Normal University).
- [11] Zheng, Z., & Wang, Y. (2000). The story of Daming Palace. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- [12] Avtonomikov, L. (Ed.) [Translated by F. Shen]. (1981). Concise dictionary of aesthetics. Beijing: Knowledge Publishing House.
- [13] Chen, T. (2016). Preliminary study of female makeup in the Tang dynasty (Doctoral dissertation, Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology).