



# The Style and Influence of Su Shi's Regular Script

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**Abstract:** Su Shi's regular script is acknowledged as the pinnacle of calligraphy in the Song Dynasty for its prowess and variety, and its amalgamation of conventional rules and personal spirit. The calligraphy of Su Shi is characterized by its flat, broad, and square structure. These attributes were initially perfected in his regular script and were subsequently embodied in his running script. He advocated for the ideas of "giving precedence to the regular script" and "elegant, diverse, and fluid calligraphy", which have significantly impacted subsequent generations of calligraphers and have become the predominant rules of calligraphy taught in foundational education at academies since the Yuan Dynasty.

**Keywords:** Su Shi, regular script, practice, concept, influence

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## 1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty employed civil servants who excelled in the art of calligraphy, which is why there were many individuals proficient in regular script. The Song Dynasty abolished the practice of appointing officials based on their calligraphy skills. To prevent any manipulation of examination results through the recognition of handwriting, candidates' names on the test papers were concealed and their responses were transcribed by designated persons. While this substantially enhanced the impartiality of the imperial examinations, it inadvertently resulted in a significant number of individuals in the Song Dynasty who were not proficient in calligraphy, particularly the regular script. Su Shi vigorously championed the significance of the regular script. He proposed a plethora of crucial notions and implemented them, which made substantial accomplishments. This study concentrates on Su Shi's regular script theory and applications.

## 2. Su Shi's Acquisition of and Approach to Calligraphy

During his teenage years, Su Shi developed a passion for painting and calligraphy under the influence of his father and was diligent in practicing calligraphy. He was ambitious, vowing, "I will expend countless brushes and vast amounts of ink to attain a level of skill comparable to Wang Xianzhi, even if surpassing Wang Xizhi remains beyond my reach. I am prepared to wear out thousands of brushes and ink sticks in my pursuit to be on par with Suo Jing, even if equaling Zhang Zhi proves elusive." [1] Feng Xuan Tie is the earliest work of Su Shi that has been preserved to date. It was penned in running script, but it still exhibits clear traces of regular script influence. As a teenager, Su Shi devoted himself to mastering the regular script. Song Dynasty records indicate that, in his youth, Su Shi would manually copy the classics. Each of his books features a style of writing. Upon completion of a book, he would have mastered a particular style. Regardless of the differences, all his styles can be traced back to the regular script. [2] Through extensive daily practice, Su Shi perfected his small character regular script, to the point where the script became second nature to his mind and hands. *Elegy to My Dead Uncle Su Huan* is the earliest surviving work of Su Shi in small character regular script. This work suggests that his mastery of small character regular script had developed prior to his proficiency in running script. This aligns with his understanding and application of the principle that "the learning of calligraphy should begin with small character regular script."

Su Shi concurred with his predecessor Cai Xiang that the study of calligraphy should start with the regular script. From his viewpoint, "The regular script is the basis of the running and cursive scripts." Cai Xiang was lauded by Su Shi as a maestro of calligraphy, who commenced with the regular script: "Junmo's calligraphic achievements are so immense at the tender age of 29. His initial learning grounds elucidate the reason behind his immense achievements." Su Shi believed that the start and conclusion of learning calligraphy could be described as: "When calligraphy is refined to perfection, it is termed regular script; when it reaches a transcendent plateau, it becomes known as running or cursive script." The theory that "the regular script gives rise to the running script, which in turn spawns the cursive script" does not hold up from the perspective of script evolution. Su Shi primarily underscored the importance of the regular script. He advocated mastering the regular script before progressing to the running script and, ultimately, the cursive script. This methodology not only reflected his personal practice but also served as a critique of individuals who undervalued the regular script or sought to bypass it, attempting to learn the running or cursive scripts without a solid foundation in the fundamentals. From a contemporary perspective, it's

possible to achieve proficiency in the running or cursive script without prior mastery of the regular script. However, there is no record of success in the Song Dynasty of individuals successfully mastering the running or cursive script without a background in the regular script. Despite often claiming to have poor skills in small character regular script, Su Shi “could write it when intoxicated”. His persistence and effort in this style resulted in the flawless mastery he eventually achieved in calligraphy.

Su Shi advocated for comprehensive learning beyond his emphasis on the regular script. In his opinion, one should not restrict their learning to a single style of calligraphy. Regardless of their reputation in the calligraphy community, anyone who had achieved a superior level of mastery in the art was qualified to teach him. Wang Xizhi’s work *Yi Jiao Jing* was once considered by some as a forgery. Su Shi opined that authenticity was irrelevant. “The skillful application of meticulous and steady brushwork confirms that it is a masterwork.”<sup>[3]</sup> Su Shi’s early works in small regular script emulated the Tang style epitomized by Yan Zhenqing. Later, he integrated the styles of Zhong Yao, Wang Xizhi and Liu Gongquan. Su Shi believed that one must be diligent and first master the rules when learning calligraphy. Indeed, he himself was a testament to this concept. Su Shi articulated a significant perspective when critiquing the forgery of the calligraphy of Monk Yong Chan or Zhi Yong, stating that a superior work of art necessitates refined expertise. He described Zhi Yong’s authentic calligraphy as “forceful and steadfast”, praising its excellence. Zhi Yong produced 800 facsimiles of the *Thousand Character Classic*, showcasing his extraordinary commitment to the craft. Furthermore, Su Shi cited Cai Xiang’s viewpoint on calligraphy, stating: “Skillful execution of strokes makes the art piece engaging and expressive.” Mastering the regular script is a fundamental requirement for learning calligraphy, which must be paired with diligent practice aimed at “proficiency”. Only through this method can one produce works that are both engaging and deeply expressive. Irrespective of one’s high aesthetic standards and discerning vision, these qualities amount to nothing more than mere talk without dedicated effort and application. Achieving mastery of the rules and excelling through that foundation is what distinguishes one from a mere “craftsman”. “Expressing one’s inner state and mindset without losing sight of the rules is what all calligraphers should aspire to.” Calligraphers ought to be capable of expressing their inner state and mood in their works, a key feature that distinguishes calligraphers of the Song Dynasty from those of the Tang Dynasty who overly emphasized rules and were unable to freely convey their personal thoughts in their works.

### 3. The Formation of Su Shi’s Regular Script Style

Su Shi’s regular script style evolved through a blend of his ideas and practical application. The principles of regular script techniques as proposed by Su Shi are primarily manifested in the requirements of the regular script. He stated, “It’s difficult to attain flexible utilization of strokes in the regular script.” The concept of “flexible utilization of strokes” implies that the strokes in the regular script ought to be adaptable yet they cannot deviate from the fundamental prerequisites of the regular script, a challenging standard to meet. Mi Fu, in his critique of the Tang Dynasty’s regular script, asserted that the characters are uniformly laid out, their dimensions essentially unvaried, and the brushwork decidedly monotonous. Su Shi’s advocacy for the regular script that “the strokes should be used flexibly” is an attempt to liberate calligraphy from the overly rigid constraints of conventional rules. Secondly, “the mind and hands must act as second nature” is a principle requiring the integration of conventional rules and personal spirit. It is a seminal concept from Su Shi that outshines the insights of his predecessors. Su Shi employed a broad array of techniques, amalgamated diverse styles, and incorporated his personal spirit, thus initiating a fresh era in calligraphy.

Su Shi made significant accomplishments in both small and large character regular scripts. The small character regular script of Su Shi matured earlier. His earliest surviving works of small character regular script include *Elegy to My Dead Uncle Su Huan*, followed by *The Daughter-in-Law’s Questions*, *Wen Yu Ke Zi Shuo*, *Yuan You An Ming*, and so on. Based on the evolution of his early regular script style, it is apparent that he initially imitated the Tang Dynasty’s script style. For instance, the characters in *Elegy to My Dead Uncle Su Huan* exhibit distinct curves and bends, and the glyphs are slender with noticeable variations in stroke thickness. *Wen Yu Ke Zi Shuo* was created during the latter part of the initial stage. The stroke beginnings and turns are both square and round, and the characters are flat and wide, maintaining uniform thickness despite some variations. In that time, Zhong Yao’s and Wang Xizhi’s calligraphy styles wielded significant influence, yet it still adhered to the rules established during the Tang Dynasty. The calligraphy works in small character regular script that Su Shi created during his middle age include *The Inscriptions on the Stupa in the Truth Court*, and *The Mahaprajna Paramita Heart Sutra*, among others. These two pieces represent mature masterpieces of Su Shi in small character regular script, characterized by stable strokes, remarkable style, and broad glyphs. It would not be an overstatement to describe Su Shi’s mature small character regular script works as “elegant, diverse, and fluid”. During that period, Su Shi’s oeuvre exhibited remarkable diversity. For instance, in *The Mahaprajna Paramita Heart Sutra*, he crafted over 20 distinct versions of the reg-

ular script character for “无” (wu). Despite this variety, each of these characters remains in strict adherence to the stringent rules of the regular script.

The small character regular script pieces he crafted in his later years will not be examined due to the absence of well-preserved texts. In his commentary on Su Shi's *Bao Yue Ta Ming*, Huang Tingjian stated, “The inscriptions are minute, reminiscent of the style written when one is filled with pride and confidence. The calligraphy is executed with remarkable finesse, showcasing Su Shi's exceptional skill and expressiveness”. Huang Tingjian thought that Su Shi's calligraphy in his later years had reached a level of significant mastery — a culmination of years of practice, and his works radiate a sense of ease and unforced mental state. This represents a harmonious integration of rules with personal spirit and the idea of “elegant, diverse, and fluid calligraphy”.

Su Shi's notable works in large character regular script include *Biao Zhong Guan Bei* in the early stage, *Record of the Old Tippler's Pavilion* and *On Fengle Pavilion* in the middle stage, and *Chenkui Pavilion Monument* and *Luochi Temple Monument* in the late stage. A comparison of his early and later works reveals that the characters in *Luochi Temple Monument* are manifestly more prudent and fluid while those in *Biao Zhong Guan Bei* are elegant and rigorous yet its brushwork lacks refinement and vigor. Liang Yan from the Qing Dynasty remarked, “The characters in *Luochi Temple Monument* are incredibly lively, and frequently studying them can enhance one's calligraphic prowess.” [4] Liang asserted that this monument showcases the apex of Su Shi's top big character regular script. The big character regular script works penned by Su Shi in his middle ages outshine *Biao Zhong Guan Bei* in terms of technical prowess, however, they lag significantly behind *Luochi Temple Monument* in terms of vigor and fluidity.

The works of Su Shi, in both big and small character regular scripts, highlight variability, a trait already evident in his early pieces. The characters exhibit harmony and unity as a whole, but each character varies in size and length. The early works feature strokes of varying thickness, while those from the middle period are characterized by a consistently substantial thickness. In the later works, the strokes become fluid yet stable. Su Shi's two calligraphic styles evolved concurrently. The notable difference is that his small character regular script shows a strong influence from Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi, alongside the stylistic impacts from Tang Dynasty calligraphers. In contrast, his large character regular script is primarily shaped by the conventions of the Tang Dynasty, enriched by his personal spirit.

#### **4. The Notion That Regular Script Serves as The Fundamental Basis for Running Script and Its Associated Applications**

Su Shi believed that the regular script gives rise to the running script. His regular script style matured earlier than his running script style and consistently influenced the development of his running script style. His earliest extant work in running script, *Feng Xuan Tie*, prominently exhibits characteristics of the Tang Dynasty's regular script style. During that period, his running script was underdeveloped, with rigid strokes. From the perspective of script evolution, apart from more stroke linking, the running script has long developed into a symbolic writing style. It is characterized not just by the linking between strokes. The stylistic development of Su Shi's calligraphy career began with mastering the regular script and subsequently progressed to the running script.

For instance, Su Shi's regular script piece *Elegy to My Dead Uncle Su Huan*, and his running script piece *Feng Xuan Tie* were both penned around the same period. Both clearly demonstrate the calligraphy style of the Tang Dynasty, however, the running script evidently lacks the proficiency of the regular script. People described his calligraphy as “a toad pinned under a stone”, indicating the flat and broad characters in his calligraphy works. These flat and broad characters initially emerged in the regular script. For instance, the flat and broad character styles in *The Daughter-in-Law's Questions* are noticeably apparent, harmoniously merging the regular script style of Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi and that of the Tang Dynasty. The calligraphy works created in the same period, like *Leaving Hometown*, showcased a diverse range of styles. Some of these pieces exhibited slender and delicate strokes while some featured flat and broad strokes. Since reaching middle age, Su Shi began to increasingly use heavy strokes in his running script, a style that first matured in his regular script. In summary, Su Shi's practice in regular script has played a critical role in establishing his style in running script. His growing proficiency in running script contributed to the stable and fluid features of his regular script.

#### **5. The Status and Influence of Su Shi's Regular Script**

Su Shi's regular script calligraphy was highly revered before his demise, and his style gained widespread adoption among his contemporaries. Surviving works such as *Fan Zhongyun's Inscriptions*, *Epitaph of the Wife of Guangping Youfu*, and *Huang Tingjian's Epitaph of Wang Chunzhong*, were all penned in a relatively pure regular script style of Su Shi. Liang Yan commented that Su Shi's prowess in large-character regular script could rival that of the masters from the Tang Dynasty,

while Zhang Zongxiang thought that only Su possessed the talent necessary for monument inscriptions.

Su Shi's concept of regular script has a greater influence on later generations. This is manifested in his influence on the specific requirements for calligraphy instruction in ancient academies. Yuan-dynasty Cheng Duanli's work *Graded Everyday Schedule of Study* mandates that calligraphy beginners copy one thousand regular script characters of Zhi Yong in four days. Academies explicitly stipulated that the teaching of calligraphy must commence with the regular script. During the Qing Dynasty, academies required students to primarily focus on mastering the regular script. As stated in the *Eight Articles on Learning in Wenshi Academy*, "None can excel in the cursive script without prior mastery of the regular script." This illustrates the complete endorsement by these academies of Su Shi's principle, which prioritizes the regular script, and demonstrates the pervasive impact of his calligraphy philosophy. This method fundamentally became the sole approach to learning calligraphy throughout the nation following the Yuan Dynasty. Some institutions established regular script learning goals for their students to aspire towards. Once students had grasped the basic skills of regular scripting, they were expected to possess the ability to infuse their characters with emotional expression. For instance, according to *The Four Articles for Students in Longnan Academy*, Longnan Academy drew on Su Shi's critiques on calligraphy to guide its pupils, stating, "All students must be capable of creating quality regular script characters. Those who excel should write with consistent precision, while those who are less proficient can write in a cursive style. Students were required to first emulate the works of Ouyang Xun and Liu Gongquan to acquire the techniques of the old masters. As their brushwork matured, they could then advance to the works of Dong Qichang and Zhao Mengfu to study their skills. It is essential to pursue a style that embodies elegance, diversity, fluidity, vigor, and charisma. They regarded Su Shi's concept as the pinnacle of regular script learning and believed that the ultimate standard to achieve is uniformity. Before progressing to delving into the skills of Zhao Mengfu's and Dong Qichang's brushwork, it is necessary to learn the works of Ouyang Xun and Liu Gongquan, among other calligraphers of the Tang Dynasty, and thoroughly master the rules. This approach will help us create our unique styles through the integration of techniques from various masters and allow us to reach a state of calligraphy characterized by elegance, diversity, and fluidity.

## 6. Conclusions

Su Shi's regular script progressively matured through his diligent studies, assimilation of various styles, and cultivation of personal insights. The overall style of his artwork exhibits "elegance, diversity, and fluidity", characterized by flat and broad characters, heavy strokes, and abundant variations. His endeavors significantly shaped the development of his running script style.

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