

Original article



The calligraphic art of Chu Suiliang: issues of genesis and features of artistic style

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Abstract. This article delves into the calligraphy of Chu Suiliang, a renowned master of the Tang Dynasty whose style was profoundly influenced by Ouyang Xun, another seminal calligrapher of the period. The primary objective of the work is to analyse the genesis of Chu Suiliang's style by identifying the mechanisms of reception of Ouyang Xun's artistic principles and the distinctive features of his own artistic language. The research is based on a thorough examination of historical chronicles, calligraphic treatises, and a comparative formal and stylistic analysis of significant works, specifically stelae and inscriptions by both masters. The author approaches the evolution of Chu Suiliang's style from two perspectives: through written records and in terms of the transformation of writing techniques. The study reveals that in his early period, the master's work was heavily influenced by Ouyang Xun, as seen in his character construction, compositional structure, execution of strokes, and the use of bafen elements — a transitional calligraphic style situated between lishu (clerical script) and kaishu (regular script). However, Chu Suiliang eventually transcended his predecessor's canon, also drawing inspiration from the legacies of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, thereby developing his own unique artistic language. This creative reinterpretation of tradition allowed the calligrapher to develop a distinctive style characterised by delicacy, plasticity, and a harmonious synthesis of rigour and softness. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that examining the influence of Ouyang Xun is fundamental to understanding the artistic language of Chu Suiliang, who did not merely adopt the technique but transformed it, thereby enriching the regular script of the Tang era. His oeuvre represents a significant contribution to the evolution of Chinese calligraphy.

Keywords: Chu Suiliang, Ouyang Xun, Chinese calligraphy, calligraphic style, Tang dynasty, regular script (kaishu), bafen style, reception of artistic principles, stylistic evolution

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Introduction

The Tang dynasty (618–907) represents one of the most brilliant and productive periods in the cultural development of China and is therefore rightly referred to as the “Golden Age” of Chinese

culture. Its unprecedented flourishing was reflected in various spheres of intellectual and spiritual activity, supported by powerful intellectual forces grounded in the enduring teachings of Confucius. An important role in this process was also played by imperial patronage

of the arts and sciences. Suffice it to mention Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756), who welcomed poets and artists and established two academies — the Forest of Brushes and the Assembly of Worthies — which brought together the most outstanding intellectuals of his reign [1, p. 77].

Traces of the extraordinarily intensive creative activity during the flourishing of the Tang dynasty can be found everywhere — from the sphere of religious beliefs to everyday culture, which was characterised by a remarkable richness of expression in various rituals and leisure practices. The achievements of Tang artists were particularly impressive in architecture, which benefited from stable economic development and active cultural exchange with other states, as well as in the visual arts.

Traditionally, three art forms are singled out as having reached exceptional development during the Tang dynasty: calligraphy, sculpture, and monumental painting, to which, according to Chinese tradition, poetry is also added [2, p. 259]. Painting of this period is distinguished by refined stylistics, a diversity of technical approaches, and an extraordinarily wide thematic range, including important secular subjects such as scenes of feasts and leisure among the Tang aristocracy. Outstanding examples of Tang sculpture include the colossal statues of the Buddha representing Maitreya, dating from the late 7th to early 8th centuries, located in the Mogao Caves within the Qianfodong Buddhist temple complex (Gansu Province). Calligraphy also reached a high level of development during this period, with eminent masters creating new script styles (*zhuanshu*, *lishu*, *caoshu*, and others), which later became models for subsequent generations of calligrapher-artists.

Among those rightly regarded as luminaries of Tang calligraphy, Ouyang Xun (557–641) and Chu Suiliang (596–658), outstanding calligraphers of the early Tang period, occupy a particularly prominent place. They are especially renowned for their mastery of the regular script (*kaishu*). Ouyang Xun, who lived at the transition from the Sui to the Tang dynasty, developed a distinctive artistic manner early in his career, which later gained universal recognition during the Tang period and earned him the title of the “foremost master of Tang regular script”. Such high praise attests to his exceptional status in the history of regular script. Taking this into account, it becomes clear why Chu Suiliang, the son of Ouyang Xun’s old friend Chu Liang, inevitably came under his influence during the formation of his own style.

Since Ouyang Xun played a key role in the formation of early Tang calligraphy, the genesis of Chu Suiliang’s handwriting was also shaped by the artistic trends of the time. However, Chu Suiliang did not confine himself to imitation. Drawing upon the “legacy of the Two Wangs” — that is, the two great

calligraphers of the past, Wang Xizhi (303–361) and Wang Xianzhi (344–386) — he developed his own unique artistic identity. The aim of this study is to investigate the genesis of Chu Suiliang’s calligraphic style and to demonstrate the sources he drew upon in the early stages of his creative activity. Based on the material of regular script, as well as written sources and stylistic analysis of inscription techniques, this article substantiates the thesis that, having assimilated the style of Ouyang Xun, Chu Suiliang gradually developed an independent manner, thereby contributing to the further development of Tang regular script. Of particular importance is the development of a methodological approach for this study, grounded in the application of the formal-stylistic method to the analysis of calligraphic works.

Chu Suiliang’s reception of Ouyang Xun’s style

Beginning in the early Tang period, the regular script of Ouyang Xun enjoyed widespread recognition. In the *Jiu Tang Shu (Old Book of Tang)*, the officially sanctioned historical chronicle of the ruling dynasty, a biography of Ouyang Xun records the following: “The force of his brush, tense to the utmost and powerful, had no equal at the time; whenever people obtained his letters or documents, they regarded them as models of perfect calligraphy. In Goguryeo, his calligraphic art was held in high esteem, and envoys were repeatedly sent with requests to obtain works written by him” [3, p. 3156].

From this, it follows that his contemporaries perceived his handwriting as a normative standard, serving as a generally recognised model for imitation. During the reign of Emperor Li Shimin (temple name Taizong), under the era title Zhenguan (貞觀, “Golden Years”), Ouyang Xun enjoyed special favour at court and, by imperial command, together with Yu Shinan, head of the Imperial Secretariat, taught the principles of regular script at the Hongwen Pavilion. Consequently, Chu Suiliang, who at that time held the position of secretary, naturally came under the influence of his *kaishu*. Moreover, in the Yuan period, Liu Yuding, commenting on Zheng Gou’s treatise *Yanji*, noted: “Ouyang Xun inherited the tradition from Yu Shinan, and Chu Suiliang directly studied under Ouyang” [4, p. 113]. Although this testimony may be considered a later interpretation, Chu Suiliang’s own biography states: “Suiliang was widely learned in literature and history and particularly excelled in *lishu*; Ouyang Xun, a friend of his father, held him in high esteem” [5, p. 2729]. This confirms not only the close personal and professional connection between the two eminent calligraphers, but also provides grounds to speak of Ouyang’s special attention to Chu’s work.

Based on the above evidence, it can be confidently asserted that Chu Suiliang’s reception of Ouyang

Xun's style is also reflected in later theoretical writings, where the undeniable stylistic affinity between their works is emphasised. Thus, in Ruan Yuan's treatise *On the Southern and Northern Schools of Calligraphy (Nanbei shupai lun)*, the calligraphic art of this period is divided into "southern" and "northern" models, with both Ouyang Xun and Chu Suiliang classified within the "northern" tradition [6, p. 17]. Such a classification allows for a deeper understanding of the stylistic continuity between them. Although there is no direct evidence of a formal teacher–student relationship, the evident influence of Ouyang on Chu's manner — observable through stylistic analysis — suggests a form of artistic succession, indirectly supporting Liu Yuding's view.

The flourishing Tang-period calligrapher Xu Hao, in his treatise *On Calligraphy*, remarked: "Chu attained the flesh, Ouyang attained the bone" [7, p. 276]. This statement highlights not only their shared foundation but also, more intriguingly, the differences in their stylistic qualities within a common artistic lineage. Both masters absorbed the legacy of the "Two Wangs" as well as that of the northern stela tradition; therefore, despite differences in individual style, their calligraphy belongs to a unified traditional line and reveals an inner interconnectedness.

The art of Chu Suiliang: issues of stylistic evolution

As for the evolution of Chu Suiliang's individual manner, his artistic career can be conditionally divided into three periods, whose boundaries are marked by his major achievements as a skilled and inventive calligrapher. At the age of forty-six, he created the *Buddhist Niche Stele at the Yi Que Gate*, distinguished by strictness and structural firmness, with clearly articulated compositional order — features that still reveal the influence of Ouyang Xun characteristic of the early phase of his stylistic development. However, already at the age of forty-seven he produced the *Stele of Master Meng* (642; Fig. 1), and at fifty-three, the *Stele of Fang Xuanling* (648; Fig. 2, 3); in these works, the influence of the "Two Wangs" becomes stronger, and the author gradually moves beyond the style of his predecessor, forming an independent manner. Thus, Chu Suiliang's style enters a phase of full creative maturity. At the age of fifty-eight, he created the *Stele Inscription with the Preface to the Tripitaka at the Great Wild Goose Pagoda (Yanta shengjiao xu)*, his most representative work in regular script (Fig. 4).

In this section, the *Buddhist Niche Stele at the Yi Que Gate* is examined as an example of the early stage and is compared with Ouyang Xun's regular-script masterpiece, the *Inscription on the Sweet Spring at the Jiucheng Palace* (Fig. 5, 6), allowing us to identify the characteristic features of Chu Suiliang's early reception of Ouyang's *kaishu*. The influence of

Ouyang Xun is also noted in later evaluations. In the Qing-dynasty treatise *Collection of Inscriptions and Notes* by Liang Yan, it is stated: "Chu Henan's writing in his middle years is even and firm, incorporating many *bafen* techniques... The conception of his brushwork is essentially akin to that of Ouyang — is this not admirable?" [8, p. 11]. This underscores that Chu Suiliang adopted Ouyang Xun's methods; the use of *bafen* elements is a characteristic feature of his calligraphy and at the same time one of the traits of Ouyang's regular script.

The *Buddhist Niche Stele at the Yi Que Gate* is the earliest extant example of Chu Suiliang's regular-script stela. Its comparison with the *Inscription on the Sweet Spring at the Jiucheng Palace* clearly reveals the stylistic features of his early reception of Ouyang Xun's calligraphic tradition. By comparing the vertically curved hook in Ouyang Xun's writing with the corresponding stroke in Chu Suiliang's work, as well as examining horizontal and descending strokes (*na*), one can observe that both the technique and the compositional structure of Chu's regular script were influenced by Ouyang. At the same time, however, it is equally important to note that Chu's script shows a stronger influence of *bafen* (clerical script). For example, in the characters "七" ("seven") and "从" ("to follow") the horizontal and descending strokes display pronounced waviness and angularity (*bopo*). In other words, Chu Suiliang's early regular script represents a synthesis of *kaishu* with elements of *lishu* (clerical script).

In the construction of characters, the descending stroke is close to that of Ouyang, and both the direction of brush movement and the overall inclination of the characters show similarities, while the wave-like endings of descending strokes reveal techniques associated with *zhangcao* (章草), a form of early cursive clerical script that serves as a transitional stage between *lishu* and *caoshu*. It is precisely this combination that testifies to Chu Suiliang's assimilation of Ouyang Xun's style. Although the influence is mainly evident in the structural organisation of characters, these elements are quite pronounced in Chu's early works. Therefore, it may be asserted that Ouyang Xun's influence manifested itself not only in technique but also in shaping Chu Suiliang's artistic vision and aesthetic sensibility.

The renowned Chinese scholar, philosopher, and calligrapher Kang Youwei (1858–1927), in his treatise *Guangyi Zhoushuang Ji (The Two Oars of the Boat of Art from Guang, 1889)* — a seminal study of the history of Chinese calligraphy and a kind of aesthetic synthesis of its accumulated experience — wrote: "Chu Henan's Yi Que Stone Niche' derives from the 'Memorial Inscription for Bi Gan' and from the inscription on the creation of a statue from the fifth year of Wuping of the Qi dynasty; all of them equally

preserve the legacy of *bafen*" [9, p. 121]. Thus, Chu Suiliang's assimilation of Ouyang Xun's tradition is manifested not only in the similarity of their styles but also in a deeper understanding of the broader principle of incorporating elements of clerical script into regular script as a legitimate practice in his own artistic work.

Moreover, the influence of Ouyang Xun on Chu Suiliang's stylistic manner can also be traced in the compositional organisation of identical characters. This is particularly evident in the arrangement of the same graphs, where both continuity and individual interpretation are present. Comparison of identical characters (则, 虽, 灵, 阁, 重) from the *Buddhist Niche Stele at the Yi Que Gate* and the *Inscription on the Sweet Spring at the Jiucheng Palace* reveals both shared structural principles rooted in Ouyang Xun's tradition and distinctive interpretive features characteristic of Chu Suiliang.

Thus, the analysis demonstrates that while relying on Ouyang Xun's model, Chu Suiliang does not merely reproduce it but creatively reinterprets the structure of characters, imparting greater plasticity and expressiveness. As seen in the illustrations, in the *Yi Que Cave Temple Stele*, character forms are predominantly even, regular, and structurally well-constructed. Vertical strokes often exhibit angular internal turns; the overall dynamism of the characters appears remarkably energetic and tense, with a clearly articulated internal rhythm — reflecting the spirit of the northern stelae tradition. The structure of characters is generally stable and square: the upper part is more free and dynamic, while the lower part is more compact. In the *Inscription on the Sweet Spring at the Jiucheng Palace*, the forms are more mature, proportions slightly elongated, verticals more frequently inclined, and the composition of the regular script more balanced and unified. As seen in the examples of the characters “阁,” “则,” “虽,” “灵,” and “重” from the *Yi Que Stele*, their structure and construction largely correspond to analogous forms in the *Inscription on the Sweet Spring at the Jiucheng Palace*.

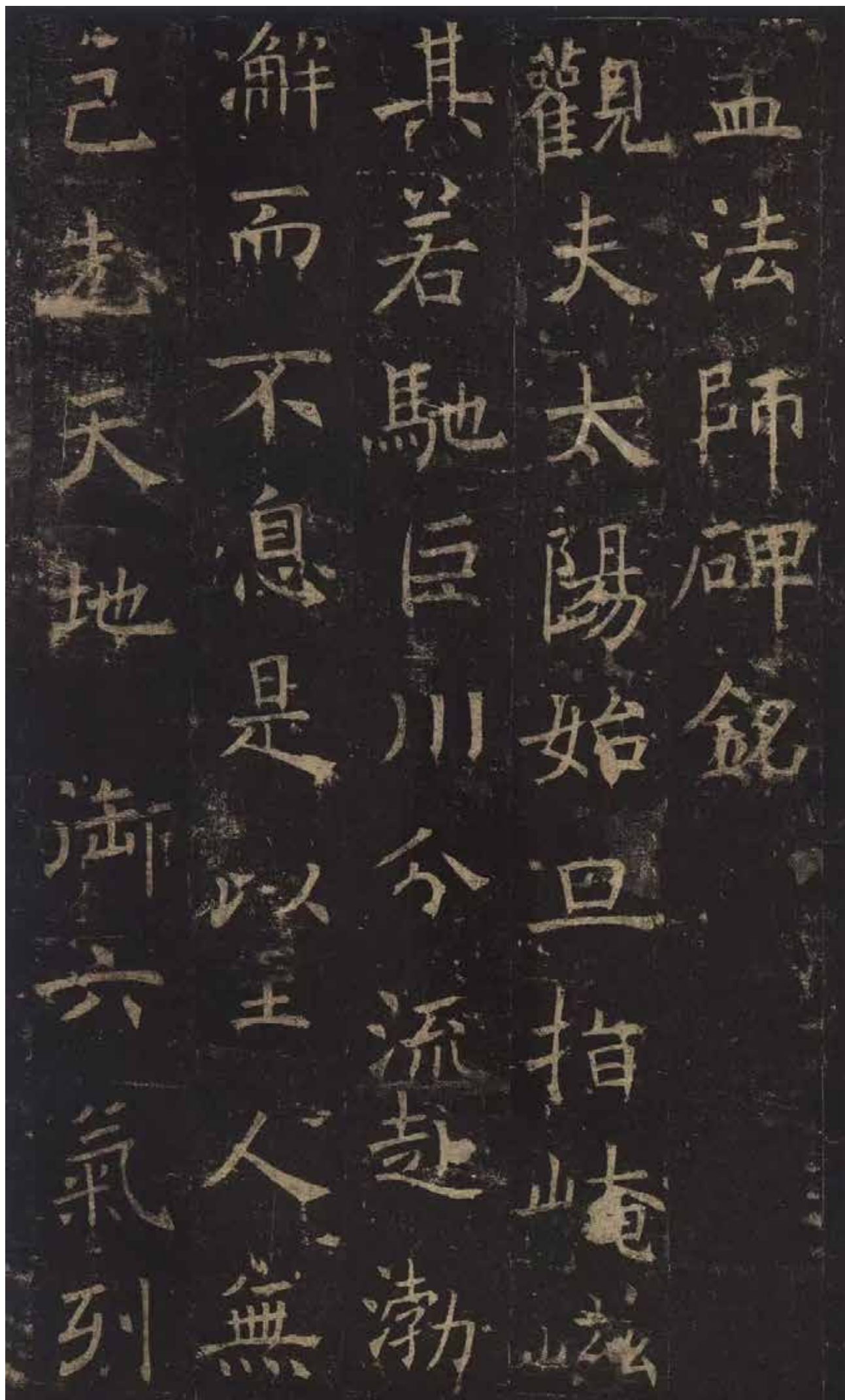
This comparison confirms the earlier conclusion that in his early period Chu Suiliang adopted Ouyang Xun's principles of character construction. His assimilation of Ouyang's style is also evident in writing technique and in the treatment of individual strokes. In the *Yi Que Cave Temple Stele*, strokes are predominantly horizontal in orientation and are characterised by structural clarity, precision, and tectonic solidity: angles are sharp, lines dense and forceful; stroke beginnings are often executed with a square brush technique, followed by turns and bends, where the fusion of chisel and brush is perceptible; stroke endings are weighted and retain clear traces of carving. Horizontal strokes are straight, verticals strict, and descending strokes (*na*) often display wave-like endings — an evident influence

of *bafen* clerical script. In the *Inscription on the Sweet Spring at the Jiucheng Palace*, strokes appear more natural: beginnings are also often even, but endings are more rounded; at points of inflection, an internal rotation of the brush is perceptible.

As these examples show, Chu Suiliang and Ouyang Xun exhibit considerable similarity in technique and stroke character. In the single-component character “为,” both masters begin with a dot, lifting the brush upward before transitioning into a broken *pie* stroke, reflecting a shared principle of continuous brush movement. The overall form is narrow at the top and wide at the bottom; the relationship between strokes is nearly identical, with brush turns involving inward lifting, resulting in angular contours. In the two-component character “体,” the inner space (central area) is extremely compressed in both, with thinner horizontal strokes on the left and thicker ones on the right; the overall form is geometric and strict, while between the dots one senses a strong element of semi-cursive movement. Chu's proportions are broader, yet the principle of the “compressed center” is common to both calligraphers. In the character “而,” the inclination of horizontals and verticals is nearly identical in both; the difference lies mainly in stroke length: Chu's writing is more square and solemn, while Ouyang's is more tense and resilient, as if charged with inner energy. Nevertheless, the direction of brush movement and the use of square beginnings are highly similar. In the character “于,” the vertical element is executed firmly in the manner of “iron lines and silver hooks”; stroke direction, inclination, and the thickness of the returning descending stroke display a high degree of similarity. Even the treatment of the two lower dots — one rounded and the other square — emphasises the connection between their styles. In the vertically elongated character “未,” the opening of the sweeping strokes — restrained on the left and expanded on the right — coincides in both, while the wave-like ending of the descending stroke again reflects the influence of clerical script.

From these examples, it is evident that although Chu's script is broader in proportion, his strokes remain fine and energetic, aligning his stylistic manner with that of his predecessor. Stroke length, the inclination of horizontals and verticals, the interrelation of lines, and the overall rhythmic structure of the composition largely coincide. This allows us to conclude that in his early period Chu Suiliang assimilated Ouyang Xun's regular script both in technique and in the treatment of individual strokes.

Thus, Chu Suiliang's adoption of Ouyang Xun's style manifests itself primarily in three aspects. First, his writing extensively employs *bafen* elements, clearly inspired by Ouyang's style. Second, in character construction, Chu's forms appear monumental, archaically elegant, and at the same time strict, closely



1. **Chu Suiliang.**
Stele of Master Meng
(Meng fashi bei).

642.

Ink on paper; rubbing
(Tang dynasty copy).

27 × 15,8 cm.

Tokyo, Mitsui Memorial
Museum.

The original stele was lost
during the Song
and Jin dynasties;
the extant version is a rare
Tang dynasty copy

2. **Chu Suliang.**

Stele of Fang Xuanling

(Fang Xuanling bei).

Upper part.

Tang dynasty,

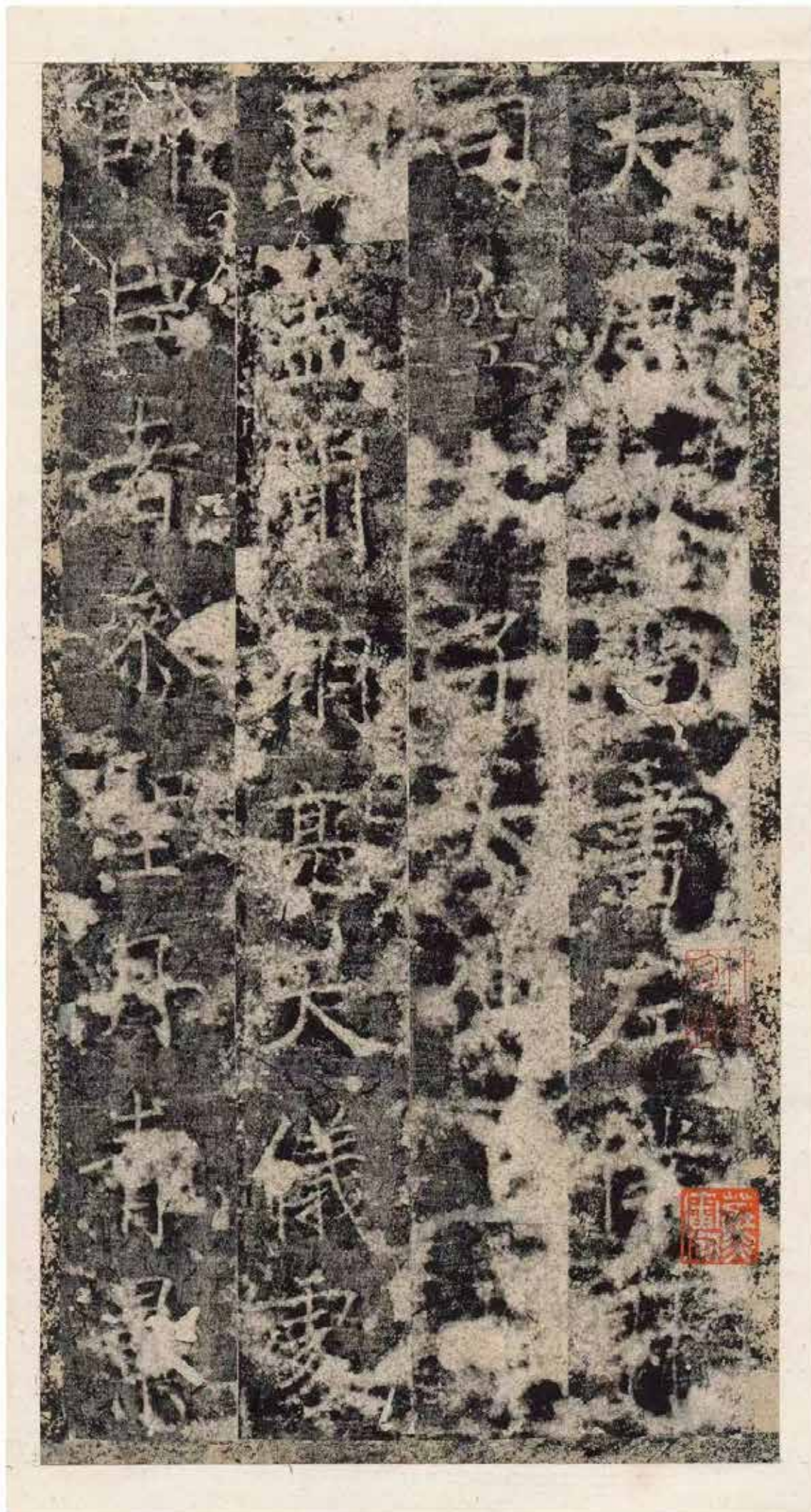
c. 652–653.

Carved stone.

385 × 136 cm.

Shaanxi Province, Zhaoling

Museum





3. **Chu Suiliang.**
Stele of Fang Xuanling
(Fang Xuanling bei).
Lower part.
Tang dynasty,
c. 652–653.
Carved stone.
385 × 136 cm.
Shaanxi Province, Zhaoling
Museum

4. **Chu Suiliang.**
Stele Inscription
with the Preface
to the Tripitaka
at the Great Wild Goose
Pagoda

(*Yanta shengjiao xu*).

Tang dynasty, 653.

Carved stone.

337 × 100 cm.

Great Wild Goose Pagoda,

Xi'an, Shaanxi Province



resembling Ouyang's regular script, which indicates deep continuity. Third, similarities are also found in the rhythm of brush movement and the treatment of strokes (direction, form of dots and lines, and their interrelation), which exhibit a high degree of correspondence in both masters.

Chu Suiliang's development
of Ouyang Xun's style

Chu Suiliang's principal achievements in calligraphy lie in the fact that he not only assimilated but also significantly developed Ouyang Xun's style and early Tang regular script as a whole. A clear departure from Ouyang's stylistic paradigm becomes evident in the inscriptions *Stele of Master Meng* (638) and *Stele of Fang Xuanling* (648). Unlike the earlier master's script, where characters tend to lean forward to the left and horizontal strokes descend from left to right, Chu intensifies the dynamics of "inclination and lift" — forms become more energetic yet also more refined, even slightly mannered. He gradually frees himself from the influence of the northern stelae of the early Tang and begins to form a balanced and elegant regular-script style.

An important role in overcoming Ouyang's influence was played by Chu's turn to earlier models, which ultimately became one of the main factors

in shaping his individual style. Having absorbed the influence of the "Two Wangs," Chu gradually moved beyond the strict stylistic norms of his immediate predecessor and developed his own artistic manner, characterised by elegance, plasticity, and a harmonious combination of tension and softness, rigor and grace.

The influence of the "Two Wangs" on Chu Suiliang's style is also connected with his understanding of the principle of "writing with intent" (*yongyi shu*), which was encouraged by Emperor Taizong's reverence for this tradition. By this stage, Chu's individual style had already taken on an independent form, showing closer affinity in structure and strokes to the *Preface to the Sacred Teaching*. While retaining early wave-like features (*boze*), he strengthened elements of running script and made the internal "drawing-in" of strokes more pronounced. Character forms moved away from the earlier broad, square manner; dynamism increased, and "reversed brush" techniques were more frequently employed in turns. Overall, the style became more refined and gradually developed into a clear, balanced, and free manner, demonstrating both formal elegance and inner structural strength.

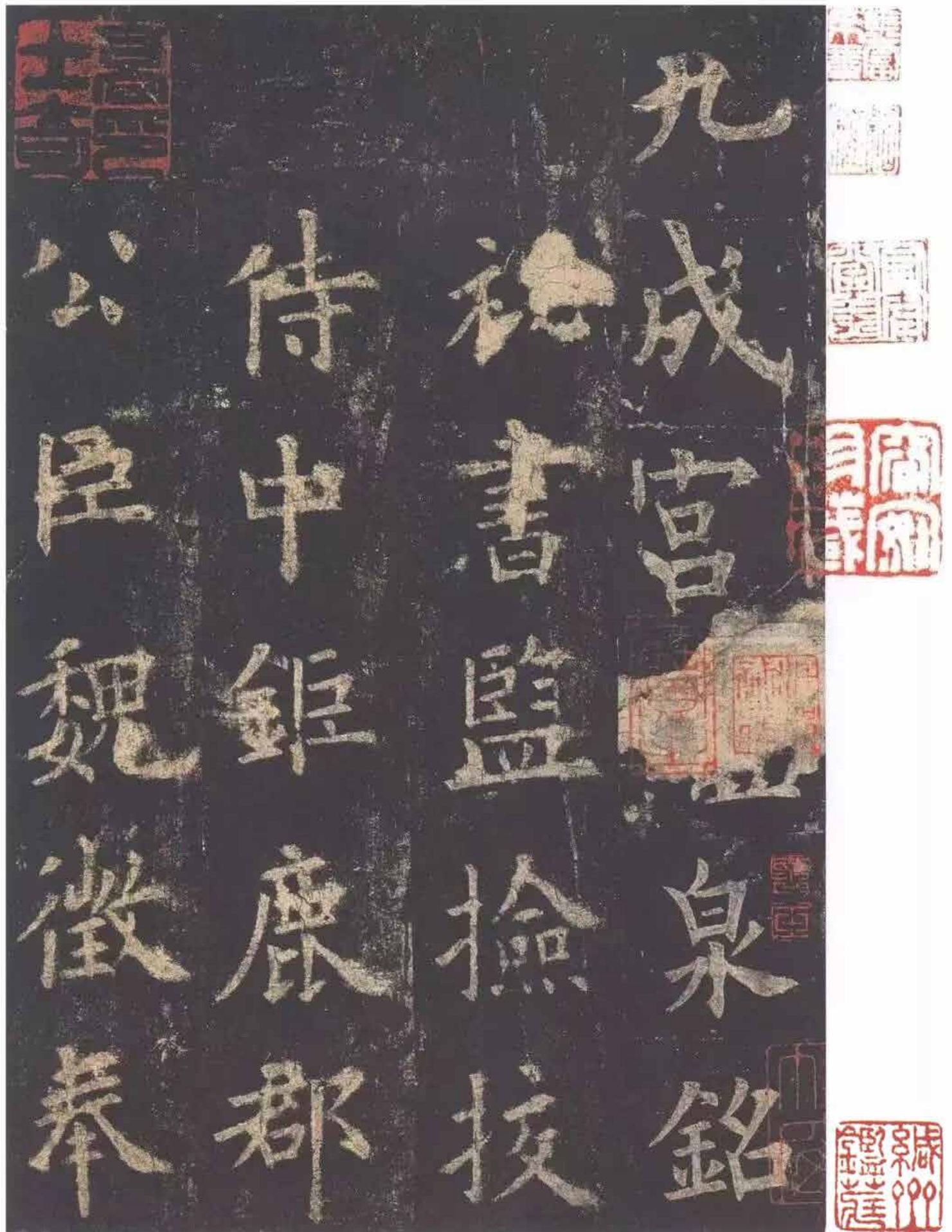
The work created by Chu Suiliang at the age of fifty-eight — the *Stele Inscription with the Preface to the Tripitaka at the Great Wild Goose Pagoda* —



5. Ouyang Xun.
Inscription on the Sweet
Spring at the Jiucheng
Palace (Jiucheng gong
liquan ming).
Upper part.
Tang dynasty, 632.
Carved stone.
247 × 120 cm.
Shaanxi Province, Jiucheng
Palace Museum (Linyou)

勅撰
維貞觀六年孟
夏之月
皇帝避暑乎九

6. Ouyang Xun.
Inscription on the Sweet
Spring at the Jiucheng
Palace (Jiucheng gong
liquan ming).
Lower part.
Tang dynasty, 632.
Carved stone.
247 × 120 cm.
Shaanxi Province, Jiucheng
Palace Museum (Linyou)



九成宮醴泉銘
秘書監檢校
侍中鉅鹿郡
公臣魏徵奉

is a landmark piece that established his regular-script style. The Song-dynasty calligrapher Mi Youren, in his commentary, wrote: “Among the celebrated men of the Tang, Chu’s calligraphy is the most refined and outstanding; more than anyone he mastered the method of Wang Xizhi; his regular script contains elements of *li*, forming an independent school unmatched by others” [10, p. 78]. Thus, the uniqueness of his regular script lies not only in his reception of earlier traditions from the Wei and Jin periods: Chu Suiliang directly engages with the linearity of *lishu*, blends *bafen* with *kaishu*, and imparts an archaizing quality to his writing, thereby finally freeing himself from Ouyang Xun’s influence in both structure and brush technique and establishing his own style.

The Northern Song literatus Su Shi noted: “Chu Henan’s writing is pure, detached, and free, with a slight admixture of *lishu*” [11, p. 318]. According to Su Dongpo, Chu introduces elements of clerical script into regular script; unlike the dense compositional centre of Ouyang’s style, Chu’s structure is more open, combining inner firmness with outer softness. The *Preface Stele at the Great Wild Goose Pagoda* is his most representative work and one in which his unique regular-script style fully matured [12, p. 147]. Characterizing it, the Chinese calligraphy specialist Zang Huaiguan employed a vivid metaphor: “In youth he followed the instruction of Yu Jian; in maturity he turned to the tradition of Wang Xizhi. His writing

is refined and elegant, like a jade pavilion and green agate shining in a spring forest; like a beautiful maiden, graceful and delicate, needing no luxurious adornment — so exquisite is his refined beauty that even the styles of Ouyang and Yu fall short of it” [13, p. 192]. Having studied the legacy of Wang Xizhi, Chu Suiliang introduced elements of running script into regular script, guiding it toward refined elegance. Thus, he formed his own artistic identity, which in a sense represents both the culmination of Ouyang Xun’s stylistic development and the broader calligraphic tradition of the early Tang.

Conclusion

The formation of Chu Suiliang’s regular-script style was the result of his assimilation of Ouyang Xun’s style. Although early Tang calligraphy exerted immense influence, Chu, drawing on the tradition of the “Two Wangs,” was able to absorb the features of Ouyang Xun and Yu Shinan while creating an independent manner of regular script. This has significance for contemporary calligraphic practice as well: it is essential to return to the origins and to understand the processes of reception and development in order to more deeply comprehend artistic tradition. In studying Chu Suiliang, it is important not only to imitate technique but also to seek new creative ideas that can enrich modern calligraphic practice.

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