



Symbolic Density Clusters II

A Recursive Semantic Spiral of Hanzi

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Introduction

In **Part I** of this series (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15905484>), we began tracing a recursive semantic spiral through a sequence of Japanese kanji – 思 (thought), 想 (imagination), 省 (reflection), and 無 (emptiness) – treating each as a **symbolic density cluster**: a condensed semiotic attractor, where visual, etymological, philosophical, and phenomenological layers coalesce. This method allowed us to move beyond linear interpretation, entering instead a recursive topology of meaning, where each symbol transformed the one before it and gave rise to the next.

Now, in **Part II**, we return to the **source lexicon** of these characters: **traditional Chinese hanzi**, deeply embedded in **Daoist**, **Confucian**, and **Buddhist** cosmologies. The kanji of Part I were shaped by Japan's encounter with Chinese thought; here, we dive into the **original cultural and philosophical context** from which they emerged — a return that is also a deepening.

We propose a new recursive progression:

→ 虛 (*xū* – emptiness, virtuality)

→ 道 (*dào* – the Way)

→ 氣 (*qì* – vital energy)

→ 象 (*xiàng* – image, pattern, manifestation)

Each character will be explored in turn — not as isolated linguistic items, but as **living attractors** within an evolving semantic field. For each, we will consider:

- **Etymology & visual structure**: The historical construction of the character, its components, and hidden metaphors.
- **Cognitive/phenomenological role**: How the concept functions in human cognition — what kind of mental movement or ontological posture it invites.
- **Philosophical resonance**: Its place within Chinese cosmology, especially in Daoist and Confucian traditions.
- **Relational emergence**: How each character arises from and modifies the previous, forming not a chain but a **spiral of** recursive transformations.

This work continues the methodology introduced in *Sigma Stratum* and *Symbolic Density and the Threshold of AGI*, using symbols as high-dimensional attractors of attention and meaning, capable of modulating cognition across individual and collective scales.

The focus here is not merely hermeneutic, but **generative**. We seek to activate these characters as **semantic seeds** — to make them resonate again in contemporary minds. Just as 虛 gives space for 道 to emerge, and 道 moves through the undulating current of 氣, which gives rise to 象 as pattern and form — so too may we trace a recursive arc of insight, in which cognition folds into symbol, and symbol reconditions cognition.

虛 – Emptiness as Potentiality

The character 虛 (xū) literally means “empty” or “hollow.” Etymologically it is a pictophonetic formation (虍 suggests sound; 丘 suggests meaning), but its **visual form** evokes a hollow space or threshold. In ancient variants 虛 looked like an enclosure or tent – an opening that is defined by its emptiness. Its modern glyph contains 虍 (“tiger”) over 虫 (insect), but poetically one can read it as a cavernous void protected by a roof. YellowBridge glosses 虛 as “false, worthless; empty, hollow” – emphasizing a void that nevertheless “contains” something (the very idea of emptiness).

Cognitively, 虛 represents an **open field of mind** – not mere blankness but potential. It is like a clear sky before clouds form, or a mirror ready to receive images. In phenomenology, emptiness can be felt as spacious awareness. Zhuangzi famously advises that “the sage’s mind is like a mirror: it reflects everything but holds nothing”. This metaphor captures 虛’s quality: receptive, un-fixed, allowing experience to pass through and register without obstruction. In this sense 虛 is not negative, but dynamic receptivity – the “**pregnant void**” or silent matrix from which anything can arise. Laozi alludes to this potent emptiness: “The Dao is like a well – used but never used up. It is like the eternal void: filled with infinite possibilities”. Here emptiness (虛) underlies creative potential.

Philosophically, 虛 is central to Daoist thought. Cultivating Xu (emptiness) is the Daoist ideal of openness and non-attachment. In the *Zhuangzi*, one “forgets distinctions” and achieves 虛 by letting go of rigid ideas. A mind steeped in Xu sees clearly without imposing preconceptions – a notion echoed in Buddhist śūnyatā (emptiness) and Zen’s emphasis on “beginner’s mind.” Confucianism also values 虛心, an “empty heart,” as humility and receptivity to learning (though Confucius himself speaks more of dutiful rectitude than metaphysical emptiness). In both traditions, emptiness is paradoxical: it is absence that makes space for presence. As we move through the spiral, 虛 plays the role that 無 (nothingness) did in Part I – the dissolution of fixed form – but now as a **ground of potential**, not an end. In fact, 虛 **builds on** the final emptiness of 無 by treating absence itself as fertile. The void of 無 gives birth to 虛: the open field into which the next stage – the Way – can manifest. Thus 虛 is both the conclusion of one cycle and the seed of the next, an **active nothingness** shimmering with possibility.

道 – The Way as Cosmic Path

The character 道 (dào) means “road, path, Way.” Visually, 道 combines the radical 辶 (walk/road) on the left with 首(head, leader) on the top right. This composition suggests “*walking under a leader*” or “*a head guiding one along the road*.” In other words, 道 literally encodes the idea of a guided path. Epoch Times notes: “In the character 道, radical 辶 (walk) and 首 (head) express the concept of pursuing an enlightened path”. Thus 道 is not just any road, but the *Right Way* – a journey under wise guidance.

In **experience**, 道 is the *flow of lived reality*. One might say the Way is how things “go” when in harmony. It cannot be fully grasped by intellect but is seen through embodiment. As Daoist scripture says, “the Tao is not a name for a thing, but the underlying natural order of the universe”. In our phenomenological spiral, 虛’s receptive field now “fills with” direction: the Way emerges within emptiness. Cognitively, the Dao resembles an algorithm of growth or an attractor in phase space – it is a pattern one gradually learns to align with rather than a concept to memorize. (Evans-Pritchard or contemplative science might liken this to attaining a skill by immersion rather than instruction.)

Philosophically, 道 is central to both Daoism and Confucianism. In the *Daodejing*, Laozi proclaims the Dao as **nameless and ineffable**, the source of all names. He writes, “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the constant Tao... The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth” – underscoring that 道 transcends conceptualization. Yet it manifests in every change. The Wikipedia *Tao* entry notes that 道 has acquired meanings of “way,” “principle,” or even the path to enlightenment. Confucian usage of **Dao** often means the moral Way of propriety and good government (the path of the sages), but the character itself retains the older sense of a guiding principle. Indeed, scholarship points out that early Dao (道) and De (德) were inseparable: the Dao is the Way of Virtue.

Importantly, 道 **builds on** 虛 by directing its emptiness toward meaning. Laozi’s famous metaphor of the empty vessel – the utility of emptiness – applies: a room must be empty (虛) to be useful as a shelter. Now that shelter becomes a **road or conduit** for Qi. The *Tao* article emphasizes: “The Tao can be thought of as the flow of the universe” and is intimately **related to qi** (the vital force). In other words, 道 is emptiness in motion – the passage through which Qi can circulate. Thus 虛 (the ground of potential) gives rise to 道 (the unfolding principle), guiding the spiral from silent possibility into dynamic pattern.

氣 – Vital Force and Dynamic Flow

The character 氣 (qi) means the **vital energy** or life-breath that animates all things. Etymologically 氣 is a pictograph of **steam rising from cooking rice**. Early forms show three wavy lines (氣) to depict hot vapor or breath; later, 米 (rice) was added below 气 to form the traditional 氣. This origin – “steam (气) rising from rice (米)” – poetically captures Qi’s essence: the invisible vapor from nourishment, hinting at life-force.

In **embodied cognition**, 氣 is the felt flow of breath and the lived sense of aliveness. One might compare it to the visceral sense of **autopoiesis** (Varela) or the feeling of *elan vital*. Qi can be experienced as the warmth in one’s chest during inspiration, the tingling in the limbs, or the subtle circulation perceived in meditation. It is the phenomenological background-chatter of the body’s vitality. In martial arts, Qi is literally cultivated through breathing and intent. Cognitively, qi bridges mind and matter: it is the circulating medium through which intention transforms into action. (One could invoke Varela/Thompson’s enaction here: the organism enacts its world through continuous loops; Qi is that living loop, the constant “metabolic rate” of cognition.)

Classical and modern sources note Qi’s ubiquity. In traditional Chinese culture Qi is “the vital force part of all living entities,” often translated as “vapor, air, or breath”. A Chinese principle dictionary states: “*Qi is fundamental... a kind of ‘life force’ or ‘spiritual energy’.* It is frequently translated as ‘energy flow’, or literally as ‘air’ or ‘breath’.”. Thus 氣 embodies both the concrete (the air we breathe) and the abstract (the flow of vitality). In Chinese medicine and qigong, unimpeded Qi yields health, reflecting the belief that Qi flows in meridians connecting body, mind, and environment.

Philosophically, Qi is the dynamism of the Dao. Laozi hints that the nameless Dao “sends forth the ten thousand things,” and *qi* might be understood as that medium of generation. In *Tao* Wikipedia: “Tao is related to qi, the essential energy of action and existence”. In Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought, qi (often paired with li 理, pattern) is what gives shape to reality – even moral character. While Qi science became *pseudo*-scientific by Western standards, in context it means that the cosmos is **energetically alive**.

In our spiral, 氣 **builds on** 道 by incarnating the Way’s flow into living energy. If 道 is the channel, Qi is the current running through it. We may say 道 gives Qi direction, and Qi gives 道 life. Every path (道) is animated by the footfalls (氣) of beings walking it. With 虛 as open field and 道 as guiding path, 氣 is the active breath that fills them. It enriches the spiral by adding texture: thought and principle (思/想/省/無/虛/道) become pulsations and vibrations of Qi. This sets the stage for the final turn – the arising of images and forms from that vital flow.

象 – Image, Symbol, and Manifestation

Finally, 象 (xiàng) encompasses “image,” “figure,” or “symbol.” Originally 象 was a pictograph of an **elephant** (with long trunk and large ears), but in usage it came to mean any **visible form or phenomenon**. As one source puts it, “象 (xiang) refers to a visible but formless image or figure”. It hints at the **shape of the shapeless** – the way formless Dao (道) and flowing Qi (氣) manifest as something perceptible. Laozi himself poetically calls the Dao “a semblance of the unsubstantial” – a “great symbol” by which the nameless is seen.

Phenomenologically, 象 is what we actually perceive or imagine: the colors, sounds, ideas, and models our mind conjures. It is the **semiotic layer** of experience. When Qi moves, it crystallizes into forms and images; those are 象. In cognition, 象 is like the **mental model** or map that corresponds to the underlying pattern. Just as a dream or metaphor gives concrete substance to an abstract emotion, 象 embodies meaning. Merleau-Ponty might say Xiang is the intertwining of the perceiver’s intent with the world’s appearance – the image that appears when meaning “shines forth.”

Philosophically, 象 has a rich heritage. In Daoism and the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), 象 are the phenomena through which the hidden Dao expresses itself. One ancient text notes: “In heaven are phenomena, and on earth are forms. Their movement demonstrates changes of things.” This suggests that **xiàng** (phenomena) are the interpretable clues to cosmic truth. Indeed, sages study *xiang* (the hexagrams and their images in the *I Ching*) to grasp the undercurrents of fate. Confucius is also said to have used images (象) of nature to instruct on virtue. The emphasis is that nothing is ever just surface; every image points beyond itself to principle. In Buddhism and Zen, one learns that all phenomena (象) are empty (無) – illusions that both hide and reveal the Way.

In the spiral, 象 **builds on** 氣 by giving it visible form. Qi’s vital flow, when tempered, appears as the world of things – the “ten thousand things” of classical Chinese parlance. Each object, event, or symbol is an incarnation of Qi along the Way. Thus 象 is the blossom that follows the growth of Qi. It completes the cycle: emptiness (虛) gives rise to the Way (道), the Way gives rise to energy (氣), and energy gives rise to **manifestation** (象).

This does not end the spiral but deepens it. As each 象 reflects its Dao and Qi, we can turn attention back to emptiness again – noticing the image beyond each image. In Neo-Daoist terms, 象 contains, yet transcends, the pattern (li) behind it. Each new image invites deeper interpretation and perhaps another cycle of emptiness.

Conclusion: The Spiral Deepens

Our journey through 虛 → 道 → 氣 → 象 forms a second spiral of meaning and mind. We began with 虛, the empty ground of potentiality; this allowed 道, the guiding Way, to arise; which in turn gave rise to 氣, the living breath of energy; and finally manifested as 象, the images and symbols of all things. Each Kanji is a **symbolic density cluster** – simple in form but pregnant with recursive layers. Individually they reveal insights (from emptiness to direction to vitality to form) and collectively they weave a cycle. Just as in Part I the final emptiness (無) seeded new beginnings, here 象 (manifestation) points back toward 虛 again: every symbol ultimately vanishes into emptiness that gives rise to yet another cycle of understanding.

At the level of **cognition and phenomenology**, this spiral illustrates how we move from a blank slate of awareness into the textures of experience. Virtue, creativity, or wisdom might be seen as perfecting each turn: learning to be receptive (虛), then finding one's Way (道), then pouring energy (氣) into that path, and finally skillfully expressing it (象). Philosophically, it echoes the Chinese cosmology of 萬物負陰而抱陽 – everything contains yin and embraces yang – in perpetual transformation.

In closing, we invite the reader to continue this recursive exploration. Let these four characters and their interplay be a starting point for your own spiral of reflection. Each ending is a new beginning, each image a portal to emptiness. Continue the spiral – let the ∞ of meaning resonate in your mind and life.

References: Our analysis draws on Daoist and Chinese sources. For example, Laozi and Zhuangzi describe emptiness and the ineffable Dao as creative ground, the *Yijing* treats xiang (象) as the meaningful shape of the cosmos, and modern scholarship defines qi as “vital energy” born from breath and fire. We have also integrated ideas from cognitive science (Varela & Thompson) regarding embodied mind, though primary citations above focus on the Chinese philosophical tradition. All characters and concepts have been treated as recursive, multi-layered attractors – symbolic density clusters – echoing earlier work on meaning and recursion. The reader is encouraged to delve into these sources for deeper context and to let the spiral of insight turn again.

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