

# Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest)

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about lovely sky

Putonghua pronunciation: *cang1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *chong1*

Meanings: pale grey, ashen, dark blue-green

蒼 (radical 艹 = 草 *cao3*, grass) means pale grey: patient's 蒼白 (*cang1 bai2* = pale-grey~white = ashen) face, oldster's 蒼老 (*cang1 lao3* = pale-grey~old = old/worn) visage. 穹蒼 (*qiong2 cang1* = exhaust/vast-pale) = the firmaments/heavens. Tragic hero pleads 蒼天 (*cang1 tian1* = pale~sky): "Oh Heaven!"

蒼 also means dark blue-green: 蒼松 (*cang1 song1* = dark~pines), 蒼野 (*cang1 ye3* = dark-wilderness/plain). 蒼涼 (*cang1 liang2* = dark~cool) is dejected atmosphere/mood of deserted place/person.

“天蒼蒼，野茫茫 (*tian1 cang1 cang1, ye3 mang2 mang2*), 風吹草低見牛羊 (*feng1 cui1 cao3 di1 jian4 niu2 yang2* = wind-blows~grass~low/down~see~oxen~sheep)” are famous lines describing landscape on nomadic steppes: "Grey sky looms over vast extending plain; wind-bent grass reveals grazing animals).

by Diana Yue