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:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th 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 艍 = 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.

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