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 rejuvenation

激
Putonghua pronunciation: ji1
Cantonese pronunciation: gik1
Meaning: stir, excite, arouse, provoke, stimulate, violent, agitated, radical

激 (radical 汝 shui3, water) means stir/excite: 激流 (ji1 liu2 = rapid-currents), 刺激 (ci4 ji1 = pricking-excitement), 激動 (ji1 dong4 = agitated-moved). Restaurant wins critics' 激賞 (ji1 xiang3 = great-appreciation/praise), customers 激增 (ji1 zeng1 = rapidly increase).

激素 (ji1 su4 = stimulate-essence = hormones) 激活 (ji1 huo2 = excite-bring-alive) glands' excretions. 激光 (ji1 guang = stir-light-beam) = laser.

激進 (ji1 jin4 = excited-advance = radical) leader uses 激將法 (ji1 jiang4 fa3 = infuriate-general-method = deliberately infuriating language/actions) to 激怒 (ji1 nu4 = irritate-anger) mob, 激起 (ji1 qi3 = stirs-up) 過激 (guo4 ji1 = over-radical = extremist) actions. Sage advises: Restrain 激憤 (ji1 fen4 = heated-anger), 激情 (ji1 qing2 = violent-feelings/passions).