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.

This week: Words about policemen

賊 (radical 貝 bei = money)
Pronunciation: zei (Putonghua, 2nd tone), chaak (Cantonese, 6th tone)
Basic meaning: thief, thug

貪 = 盜匪 (dao fei = robber-criminal). 做賊 (zuo zei = be-thief) is to 偷 "呃" [Cantonese meaning] 拐騙 (tou e guai pian = steal-deceive-kidnap-cheat = commit theft/fraud), 殺人放火 (sha ren fang huo = kill-person-release-fire = commit homicide/arson).

賊賊 (zei zang = thief-loot) = loot, 小偷 (xiao tou = small-steal) = burglars, 扒手 (pa shou = sweep/grab-hand) = pickpockets. Bonnie and Clyde are 大賊 (dai zei = big-thieves = 大盜 da dao = big-robbers).

賊頭賊腦 (zei tou zai nao = thief-head-thief-brain) means suspicious-looking. Sighting burglars, we cry “有賊!” (you zai = has/there-is-thief). 賊喊捉賊 (zei han zhu zei = thief-yells-“catch-thief!”) describes a wrong-doer condemning others to shift suspicion/blame.

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