

# Austerity drive bad news for family models

Staff reporter

Car smuggling is big business - and not just at the top of the market. The Honda Accord and Toyota Camry are becoming just as hot for the smuggling syndicates as the BMW and the Mercedes Benz.

Austerity campaigns in China have caused a sharp rise in the popularity of lower-end cars, like the Honda and Toyota models, accord-

ing to police and insurance groups.

The austerity campaigns, which target corruption and excessive displays of wealth, have forced wealthy mainlanders to replace their flashy cars with "family models" that are less likely to attract attention.

Chief Inspector Dave Marsh of the Organised Crime and Triad Bureau said earlier this year: "There have been a series of austerity campaigns and

these have resulted in orders on what cars people can drive at which rank.

"We believe this is the reason why there has been such a dramatic upward trend in [the theft of] Accords and Camrys."

The car smuggling syndicates are usually made up of gangs from powerful Hong Kong triads, with each organisation taking responsibility for different aspects of the operation.

"Some might have the con-

nections to steal the car," Marsh said.

"Others will sort out the storage and still others will do the smuggling."

Once the gang has picked out a car, it is usually smuggled into China in a container, making detection difficult.

It is a headache for police, who last month swooped on a gang smuggling Japanese cars to China, seizing 10 unlicensed vehicles.

The rise in carjacking has led to insurance companies forging closer links with the police.

The president of the Accident Insurance Association, Paulus Kam, said his members were very concerned about the growing problem.

"We are working closely with the police and warning owners to try to prevent thefts," he said.

"Car theft dropped in 1992

and 1993 because of police action. But it started to rise again in 1994 with such high demand in China.

"It has really come back again and we must stop it.

"The latest trends are really terrifying."

Luxury cars have always been at the top of the car smugglers list.

But last year, the theft of Honda Accords increased three-fold, from 34 to 92 vehicles.

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