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If you pay any attention to developments in Chinese publishing, even if only casually, you have probably come across one or more stories by now about counterfeit sequels to and unauthorized spin-offs to the Harry Potter series. And as I mentioned in my recent post about Wolf Totem, that book, too, has inspired fake Chinese sequels (Wolf King of the Plains, for example, and not just one but two books unoriginally called Wolf Totem 2, both allegedly but neither actually by Jiang Rong) and spin-offs (a series of novels about Tibetan Mastiff that have become best-sellers in their own right, plus non-fiction works about the practical value of following the “way of the wolf”).

But the most intriguing case, to me at least, of a book that not only became a bestseller in China but also gave birth to a plethora of linked titles is Who Moved My Cheese? This work, which offers suggestions on coping with change in the workplace and in life, sold an enormous number of copies when first published in the United States. And it inspired some spin-offs, such as Nobody Moved Your Cheese! But in China, it did much more than that, giving birth to a whole subgenre and having its title make its way into popular discourse in a variety of curious ways.

I first became aware of the book’s impact on a 2002 visit to the great Jifeng Books branch located in a Shanghai subway station, which is among my favorite places to go when in the city to browse the shelves, buy new texts, and check out publishing trends. “Oh,” I thought, when my eye caught a Chinese edition of the management guide, “so they’ve decided to translate that, have they?” But no sooner had the words formed than I saw five or six other books that riffed on the title. I thought this strange, and then soon after returning to the U.S. enjoyed reading a lively July 2007 piece by Sheila Melvin in the International Herald Tribune, “Chinese Smile and Say ‘Cheese,'” that was devoted to “the cheese phenomenon” in the PRC. Melvin said that no fewer than “50 copycat versions” and plays on the title of the original had appeared in China, including ones like I Won’t Move Your Cheese and Who Dared to Move My Cheese? Strangest of all, perhaps, was one with the unlikely title of Attractive and Alluring Cheese (“cheese” entering the lexicon for “profit,” while “moving cheese” signified change).

The Chinese cheese-moving story doesn’t end there, however, for the book’s title has also inspired newspaper articles. People’s Daily, for example, ran a piece not long ago on American complaints about China’s economic rise called “Who Moved Americans’ Cheese?” And Beijing Daily News played on the term in an article about revised versions of one of the best-loved Chinese novels of all time, Journey to the West (also called The Monkey King, something that the author Wolf King of the Plains might have had in mind, or Monkey, for short): 《西游记》 (Who Moved Our “Journey to the West”)?

One of the curious features of this situation is how insignificant the actual food product in question, cheese, is in China. (Living in Shanghai in the mid-1980s, it was a rare thing to be able to find any variety for sale, though we sometimes managed to get a chunk of fairly strange Mongolian cheese or some canned cheese from New Zealand. Now, the situation is quite different and many more varieties—and higher quality ones!—but it is still hardly a central part of the diet of most Chinese.) This is something Melvin noted as an irony in her article, even quoting a publisher in China who joked about the temptation to change the title of the original to “Who Moved My Pickled Cabbage?”
And yet, isn’t it possible at least that it is precisely the exoticness of the “cheese” in the title that adds to the book’s cachet, as a provider of wisdom coming from afar? If so, this would just be a West-to-East variant of an East-to-West how-to guide phenomenon that has grown to curious proportions, shows no sign of going away, and depends in part on the “exoticness” involved (in this case its link to ancient China). I mean, of course, what might be called the “Sun Tzu Fever,” which has led to a dizzying number of English language websites, books, and newspaper articles that use allusions to Sun Tzu’s The Art of War to help Western readers understand a current issue (like John McCain’s campaign strategy), succeed in business (without trying too hard), or win at video and computer games.

Note: I link to Danwei.org pieces at various points in this and my previous post on Wolf Totem, but this is not enough credit to give—the site is simply invaluable to anyone trying to keep track of what is being written, talked about, and published in the PRC.