

**Client: Spencer Dean Stewart**

## BOOK PROPOSAL REPORT

## MEMORANDUM

Thank you for providing your draft prospectus indented for Yale University Press and a sample chapter of your proposed book, *How Cotton Became “Chinese”: Seeds, Science, and Local Society in Twentieth-Century China*, for review.

Your proposal describes a compelling book that has the potential to reach an incredibly broad audience of academic and lay readers in North America and the rest of the English-speaking world—and also in China. Your focus on the rise to prominence of the Chinese cotton industry comes amid heated debates within academia, government, politicians, policymaking circles, and the popular press concerning cotton’s role in the ongoing trade war between the United States and China. There is also increasing controversy over Xinjiang cotton and the ecological impact of cotton by “fast fashion” giants like China’s Shein. Therefore, your “seed-centered” history of Chinese cotton offers a fresh and interesting approach not just for academic readers with an interest in cotton’s history, but also for intellectual lay readers seeking to understand the roots of one of the most important issues in contemporary commerce and trade. The link between cotton and China’s pursuit of its global ambitions—and the impact of those on the rest of the world—is truly fascinating, as you note in your prospectus. With some specific revisions and an eye toward current trends in academic and popular debates, I believe this prospectus will provide an extremely strong pitch for your book.

Within this document, you will find some feedback to consider as you further develop your proposal for consideration by editors at Yale University Press. I have included comments on the draft prospectus itself and followed these up in more depth in the memorandum below. I have pointed out the questions and issues that most stood out to me as I read through your materials. I share these thoughts and suggestions to offer ideas you may wish to consider or to serve as starting points for exploring different ways to present your work. Of course, it is up to you to choose which, if any, of these suggestions will inspire you to revise your proposal.

## BACKGROUND

Although what you have provided is very clear, your prospectus would benefit greatly from some restructuring, which I will detail below. I also recommend that you provide the editor with additional details, in particular, regarding target markets and audiences, competitor books, and publications, as well as about yourself as an author and scholar. This is to assist the editor to immediately grasp what your book seeks to do, why it is an important addition to the existing market, and—crucially—where it sits within that market, including information regarding important and topical narratives regarding Chinese cotton and trade.

In this light, you may want to consider addressing the following issues:

## OVERVIEW

This should be 1000-2000 words in total.

Your overview includes a great deal of compelling detail concerning the background to your proposed book, and the various threads—historical, political, agricultural/biological, and economic—that you knit together to tell the story of China’s rise as a global leader in cotton production. I propose restructuring this section to improve its clarity and assist the editor in better navigation of the document. The aim here is to ensure that the editor can immediately grasp the following:

* Exactly where your book sits within the existing English-language market.
* Exactly what your book is about.
* Exactly what readers will learn from it.
* Exactly who might be its potential audiences.

First, it is crucial to engage the editor’s *immediate* interest and attention by providing a clear, concise, and compelling summary of what your book is about, who it is for, why they need it, and why it should be published at this stage in time. You should also reveal the book’s major takeaway—the key piece of information that you want readers to be left with after they have read it. This would be your “positioning statement.”

Afterward, you can expand on the book’s main arguments, and reveal your conclusions (again, this will help the editor understand what the book is about and where it sits in the market). Next, you should go into more depth regarding your central arguments.

Essentially, you are writing a “mini preface” to your book.

One effective way of doing this is to write the overview in an “inverted pyramid” format. Start with the most important information first—which is often the conclusion. This can be presented as your book’s main “hook” followed by a statement of its most important takeaway/s. The idea is to give the editor this critical information right away, so that they have this clearly in their mind as they continue reading through the more detailed sections.

The “hook” can be a particularly compelling finding from your research, perhaps a real-world example to which the editor can immediately understand and relate. It should connect to the most important point or piece of knowledge that you want your readers to take away from your book. You will know best what this is, but from what I have read in your draft prospectus, this stood out to me as an example:

*In January 2019, China’s lunar lander, Chang’e 4, took a cotton seed to the far side of the moon in a climate-controlled container where it sprouted and grew.*

That is a compelling symbolic anecdote that appears to encapsulate the flavor of your book. It highlights China’s ambitions as a global, technological, space-age power—which subconsciously invokes its rivalry with the United States—and invokes cotton as an important symbol of these concepts. In doing so, it gives a real sense of why the book is important, and why it is important ***now***, i.e., why it is extremely topical—even if it is a book that offers insights into the history of the topic.

This would also seem to align with your novel “seed-centered” approach to the history of Chinese cotton. This sentence from your existing overview could be used to segue into that section of information:

*Seeds have been significant forces of historical change. Their circulation has facilitated economic growth, ecological change, and social catastrophe.*

These sentences also seem to describe a key point from your book that could segue into describing what your key takeaway might be:

*Cotton cultivated in China can now be found all around us in our clothing and furniture to packaging and coffee filters. While China might be a subplot to the history of cotton prior to the twentieth century, it has risen to be one of the major actors over the past century.*

Next, you could explicitly say what your major takeaway message would be from the book. A good way to think about this might be to imagine that you have been asked to tell a potential reader what your book is about in just three sentences. What do you want them to know? What is new and significant about your book and why do readers need to know about it?

Next, in a new paragraph, you can summarize your main arguments and the book’s main conclusions. Again, the editor needs to know these upfront so that they can understand where your work sits within the English-language market as they read the rest of your prospectus. Here, you are informing them more about what your book contributes to the field, i.e., why they need to publish it.

Following this, focus on the central question that you pose in the book. Explain briefly why previous authors have not addressed it, and your own unique approach to the topic. You do not need to go into detail concerning competing books here since you will be doing this in a later section.

This seems to be an important aspect of your approach (I have edited it slightly for clarity):

*I [take] a “seed-centered” approach to history, highlighting the global circulation of seeds and information about them, and exploring how attempts to understand and control seeds have precipitated significant social, political, and economic changes at a local level.*

What is this approach exactly? Why is it considered novel and of importance? How does it tell the story you want to relate to? Above, I have suggested how you might choose to set the stage for telling the editor about this approach by introducing seeds into your “hook.” This helps give your prospectus a unifying thread from which you can keep referring back to where needed.

### Sub-Headings and Shorter Paragraphs

Consider also breaking the text into shorter paragraphs and introducing sub-headings so that the editor can see the structure of the *Overview* at a glance This would also assist them in understanding the journey on which you are taking them. To some extent, this will mirror the journey they will embark on when they read the book.

Suggested sub-headings could be:

* **Book Pitch/Positioning Statement/About this Book**

This is for your “hook” and where you describe your main takeaway.

* **Main Arguments**
* **Approach**

Of course, you might think of others.

It could also be worth considering adding a sentence or two concerning how your book adds background and depth that can help inform key wider issues around Chinese cotton. In particular, it is important to mention the ongoing trade war between the United States and China (in which cotton continues to be a major issue) and the growing awareness of, and backlash against Chinese cotton as a result of its connection to forced Uyghur labor in Xinjiang. This could then be explored further in the section on how your book contributes to current debates in the scholarly literature and in the wider, popular press. This would also neatly link back to your “hook”—if you chose to use that example—since it is related to China’s ambitions to be a world leader, not just in cotton. This might be a good way of tying your overview together.

As an aside, one question that came to mind was whether the book is a reworking of your doctoral dissertation? If so, I would disclose this information to the editor upfront so there is no space for potential confusion and explain what you have done to rework the dissertation into a marketable book.

## THE AUTHOR

A short biography has been included here that contains information relating to you, which is pertinent to the book. However, this section is a bit too thin, and it would benefit from additional details being included. The aim is to inform the editor who you are as a writer and scholar, as well as demonstrate why you are the best—or only—person to write this book. Essentially, this can be seen as a sales pitch. Your personal profile will help the publisher to market and sell your book. In this light you might consider adding the following details:

* Expand more on your published works and add some details concerning how these have been received and distributed. It would be a good idea to provide information regarding some of your most recent or most significant publications.
* Add information about your social media presence, and about any media exposure you may have had in the recent past. This is of great, if not central, importance to editors and publishers.

Other key points that you should consider adding to this section, if relevant:

* Have you taught internationally and worked as well as developed networks with scholars in other countries including in China (since these are also a potential market for this book)?
* That you and your work have international exposure. This is also important when considering marketing and selling your book beyond the United States.
* Details of the most important or influential conferences in which you have participated.
* If you have had any publications in non-academic journals or newspapers, then provide details of these publications. Media exposure is incredibly helpful in terms of raising your profile—which again feeds into marketing the book.
* If you speak and/or read Chinese and to what level—and/or any other languages if relevant.

You should also consider attaching a recent copy of your professional curriculum vitae to your prospectus when you submit it to the editor. This will give them additional background information regarding you and your work.

Consider including links to additional information about yourself, for example:

<https://www.cla.purdue.edu/directory/profiles/stewart-spencer-dean.html>

## AUDIENCE AND POTENTIAL MARKET

This section should include information concerning the potential readership for your book. The information you have provided is a useful starting point, however, you should consider expanding on this in much more depth. The aim is to highlight all of the market segments that would find value and interest in your book.

These will likely include the following ( and you may think of more):

### Academic Audiences:

* English-speaking academic audiences in North America, Europe, and around the world with an interest in China, Chinese history, Chinese agricultural history, and Chinese economic history.
* English-speaking academic readers in North America, Europe, and around the world with an interest in general economics, political science, agricultural science, globalization, and global trade.
* Chinese academic audiences with any of the above interests.
* Academic libraries in North America, the UK and Europe, Australasia, etc.
* Undergraduates and postgraduates taking courses related to China, Chinese history, economics, and Chinese economics.

### Policymakers:

* Policymakers and policymaking organizations in North America, Europe, Australia, and China.
* “Think tanks” that produce material relating to China and the United States.

### Intellectual/ Informed Lay Readers:

* Informed members of the general English-speaking public with an interest in the same topics as listed above, in particular, Chinese history, economic history, agricultural history, and China in general.
* As a result of the huge significance of the ongoing trade wars between the United States and China, and since cotton is a central part of that dispute, your book will go beyond an academic audience. The book also straddles the area between trade publications and academic work. One large audience would therefore be members of the public with an interest in the trade war between the United States and China, the origin of the Xinjiang cotton industry, and how those feed into contemporary narratives surrounding human rights and the rise of fast fashion.
* Larger, non-academic libraries that include academic books of interest to a wider, informed audience.

## COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS

Your section “Competitive Analysis” includes a selection of incredibly useful introductory information concerning where your book fits into the existing literature on cotton. This will assist the editor to situate your book within the English-speaking market.

However, significantly more should be done here to structure, draw out, and highlight this information, providing a more comprehensive picture of where your book fits within the existing market, and demonstrating that it fills an important gap in the literature of this kind. It might be helpful to think about this section as being a marketing-focused literature review. The editor needs to know as much detail as possible regarding your book’s positioning, as well as how it stands out and breaks new ground vis-à-vis the existing market—why will people want and need to buy and read it?

Here you should discuss in some detail existing books or publications, what they cover, and the key lacunae that your book will fill, and/or where your book takes a new approach that brings fresh information and a novel perspective. The aim is not to be negative or critical about other books or scholars. The aim would be more to show the editor why your work stands out and why it is saleable in comparison to what has already been published in this area of study.

Include full references to each book you discuss here so that the editor can clearly identify them and note your points of reasoning. Describe in a few short sentences the focus of that work and its key takeaway. You can then discuss how your book builds on this or differs from it in scope and approach, and what are the gaps that your book will bridge.

As an example, you might structure this section as below, with discussions under the title of each relevant book:

***Sven Beckert (2014). Empire of Cotton: A Global History. New York: Alfred G. Knopf.***

*Beckert’s book uses a wide variety of sources and archival materials to tell the story of the emergence and evolution of modern capitalism…My proposed book builds on Beckert’s important work but takes a different and unique approach by….and is focused entirely on the case of China…[etc.]*

Again, for clarity and to help the flow of ideas here, consider structuring this section with sub-headings for each category of competing works, perhaps like this:

* **Books on the history of cotton**

This will include, for example, Beckert’s volume. Here you can list each major work on this topic—as described above—and discuss what each does and how yours is different.

Following this, you can then explain more about how these works have demonstrated that there is an interest in works exploring this topic.

Non-academic books should be considered as well. A quick search revealed the following examples but there may well be potentially more suitable options books on the market you could identify:

* Anthony Burton (2023). A History of The Cotton Industry: A Story in Three Continents
* Stephen Yafa (2006) Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber. London: Penguin.
* **Books on cotton/ the cotton industry in China specifically**

Here you can discuss the existing works that cover China specifically. As above, please provide full details for these works, including the full title, and publisher/date, so the editors can have a complete picture of competing works. It is good to include other works such as dissertations (you mention Yuan Yi’s dissertation), but you should also offer the full details of these such as the title, date, university, language if not English, and whether these works have been published for a wider audience.

A quick search reveals that there are more books on this topic, so you might consider whether you wish to discuss these or others.

E.g. Bjorn Alpermann (2010). China's Cotton Industry: Economic Transformation and State Capacity (Routledge Studies on China in Transition Book 34). London: Routledge.

* **Books on cotton and trade wars**

This is another category of book that is related, even if not directly, to your own so it is worth adding it here. This will show the editor your knowledge of the wider market and how this relates to audiences for your book. It is another opportunity to describe how your book adds extra information and value to this immensely important and topical debate.

A quick search came up with e.g., Amy A. Quark (2013). Global Rivalries: Standards Wars and the Transnational Cotton Trade. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Additionally, you might find this review of Quark’s book useful: [Book Review: Global Rivalries: Standards Wars and the Transnational Cotton Trade (lse.ac.uk)](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/55361/1/__Libfile_repository_Content_LSE%20Review%20of%20Books_2013_November%202013_week%203_blogs%20lse%20ac%20uk-Book_Review_Global_Rivalries_Standards_Wars_and_the_Transnational_Cotton_Trade%20%282%29.pdf)

In light of the above literature review, you could consider adding further information regarding your work and how this would be considered breaking new ground and filling a gap in the market.

## CONTRIBUTION TO CURRENT DEBATES (SCHOLARLY AND POPULAR PRESS)

You may wish to weave this into the information provided above in your competitor analysis literature review, or you could consider a standalone section if you would prefer.

Regarding popular debates, as noted immediately above, your book will likely be of great interest to readers seeking a deeper grounding in key aspects of Chinese economics and trade in light of major global economic and political trends. Cotton continues to be a key issue in the ongoing trade war and ideological rivalry between the United States and China. There is increased global sensitivity toward, and backlash against, Chinese cotton’s connection to forced labor by Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and to “fast fashion” more generally, including the increasing prominence of Chinese companies such as the likes of Shein. While this is not directly a focus of your book, it is an important part of its background, and readers interested in this issue will find value in your contribution.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

*The Table of Contents* is particularly useful and provides the editors with a sense of the structure of the book. My suggestion would be to consider removing the details of chapter length and expected completion time and moving *The Table of Contents* to come before the *Chapter Summaries* so that the editors can know what each chapter is about in a nutshell before they move on to read more details in the summaries. The details concerning word counts and expected completion dates should be moved to the very end of the prospectus under *Specifications*.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES:

You have provided appropriately detailed summaries of each chapter of your book. These are incredibly important as again, they help the editor to navigate the nuances and historical specifics of your argument and clarify the book’s position in the English-speaking market.

However, it is a good idea to ensure that the summaries include the following:

* As noted in the comments I have made on your draft, you should structure this section so that each chapter has its own heading—the title of the chapter and any associated subtitles. I would suggest avoiding running them together or segueing from one into the other. The titles will help you explain how each chapter functions as a piece of the overall puzzle of your book as a whole. This is particularly important as your book is arranged chronologically. The chapter headings will assist the editor in understanding what is being explored in each particular chapter.
* It would be of benefit to use the chapter titles to begin explaining each chapter’s major “thrust”: what it will accomplish, who the key figures are, what the key facts and developments are, as well as why these are important to the story you are telling and to your overall argument.
* I suggest that you elaborate briefly on how these key developments/figures point back to the overarching thesis of your book. Here, you can show how each chapter illustrates your main interest—the rise to global prominence and influence of the Chinese cotton industry and the wider implications of this for global trade.
* It would be better to avoid simply narrating everything that happens in each chapter. A preferable option would be to show how each chapter relates to the previous one and the next in a logical flow of ideas. Otherwise, the chapter summaries read more like the description of a dissertation rather than a book.

## SPECIFICATIONS

As noted in the comments to the prospectus, more technical details about the book need to be provided: type of publication (book, digital), length, technical contents (text, photographs, figures, index, etc.)

## EXPECTED COMPLETION

 I would suggest adding this under a separate heading here rather than including it in *The Table of Contents.*

## POTENTIAL REVIEWERS

Provide details of the titles and affiliations of each reviewer to indicate to the editor why these individuals will be suitable reviewers, specifically for your book. You should not assume that the editor will know who they are. Please also supply contact details for each of them as this makes the task of the editor easier to accomplish.