



Hermès 'Silla de Gaucho' scarf 90, \$845.

Smooth operator

Silk is inextricably woven into the very fabric of fashion history. And the traditional Chinese *cheongsam* exemplifies the material's timeless appeal, finding favour with mid-century Hong Kong's most fashionable and on the runways and red carpets of today

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

via touch, sight, even sound, silk – a material that has signified high status since its very invention – telegraphs luxury.

“Silk feels fantastic on the skin and absorbs colours in a remarkable manner,” says Cameron Silver, the founder of Decades, a legendary luxury vintage and contemporary designer boutique on LA’s Melrose Avenue and author of 2024’s *Caftans: From Classical to Camp*.

The material gave its name to the fabled Silk Road, the ancient trade route connecting China to central Asia and beyond. “Silk textile exportation from China officially began around 140-134 BC,” says Dr Emma Lynas, a lecturer and researcher at RMIT’s School of Fashion and Textiles. “While silk represented just a fraction of traded goods, its significance was profound. Our understanding of sericulture’s [silk farming] origins continues to evolve with archaeological innovations, with Chinese sericulture now dated to at least 5000 years ago, if not earlier.”

Silk is produced by silk larvae (commonly known as the silkworm), with most farmed silk deriving from the *Bombyx mori* moth. “Since the late 1800s, humans have attempted to replicate silk through semi-synthetic and synthetic chemical filaments,” notes Lynas. “Other silk-producing organisms include spiders and molluscs and there’s even a vegan alternative derived from the

lotus plant. These natural alternatives are niche and cannot service the mass market.”

There are ethical concerns wrapped up with the material’s production: notably, the most expensive silk requires the silkworm to be boiled and ultimately killed to keep the filament intact.

According to Lynas, today silk remains “a marginal player in global fibre production”. In their 2024 Materials Market Report, not-for-profit fashion and textile advocacy group Textile Exchange detailed that the material accounted for 0.07 per cent of the approximately 124 million tonne

global fibre production in 2023, with China and India together accounting for about 95 per cent of global silk manufacture. Various market research reports estimated the global silk market’s value in 2022 at around \$23-26 billion, a figure slated to grow to \$44 billion by the end of the decade.

Jim Thompson earned the moniker of “The Thai Silk King” for having, as *TIME* magazine put it in a 1958 profile, “almost singlehandedly saved Thailand’s vital silk industry from extinction”. After representing the US in sailing at the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam, Thompson trained as an architect before joining the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a precursor to the CIA, as a spy. It was in this capacity that he headed to Thailand to establish the OSS’ Bangkok outpost where he became interested in the then-flagging local handmade silk trade, which had suffered with the advent of cheaper, machine-made silks. Thompson later employed more than 2000 Thai artisans, whose silks became world-renowned, with costume designer Irene Sharaff using their wares in the 1956 film *The King and I*. In 1967 (the same year he disappeared

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Image: courtesy of Hermès.

without trace in Malaysia's Cameron Highlands, sparking one of Asia's great unsolved mysteries) he opened his first boutique in Bangkok. Today, there are more than two dozen Jim Thompson boutiques across Thailand selling the brand's colourful silk men's and women's ready-to-wear and accessories, as well as Jim Thompson showrooms in the US, Paris and London that showcase the brand's extensive collection of silk furnishing fabrics, which feature in luxury hotels worldwide. They include the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok, of which Thompson was once a part-owner.

Silk, of course, stars in Hermès' signature *Carrés* (scarves), a cornerstone of the house's offerings since 1937. But younger brands are also focusing in on the fabric, including American brand Rose Society Atelier, which debuted its line of silk robes at Paris Couture Week in June 2024, and Australia's Silk Laundry, which employs 'mud silk' (which requires plant dyes and mud to achieve its rich colour) in their creations.

A celebrated example of silk's use in fashion is the *cheongsam*, sometimes referred to as the *qipao*. "The fundamental structure of the *cheongsam* is a round-neck, right-opening, straight-hemmed robe, which can be traced to the [Chinese] Tang dynasty," says Dr Haze Ng of Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Fashion and Textiles. The product of a "cultural exchange between the Han and neighbouring minorities", the classic *cheongsam*, which was historically reserved for men, settled into its eventual form around the late Qing and early Republican Era at the turn of the 20th century.

"After the May Fourth Movement [an anti-imperialist, student-led protest movement that began in Beijing in 1919], it became fashionable for female students to wear men's robes, signifying women's demands for gender equality," continues Ng. The loose-fitting robe soon incorporated more feminine features,

like a more pronounced waistline as well as decorative trims such as binding, piping and frog buttons.

After the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, many tailors fled Shanghai for Hong Kong and developed a signature style which merged, as Ng explains, "traditional Chinese tailoring techniques and western cutting methods", heralding the *cheongsam*'s high-water mark of popularity in the city.

But in the '60s and '70s, the influx of ready-

made, western-style clothing and increasingly frenetic pace of everyday life dampened the appetite for traditional, tailor-made garments. In 2017, the 'Hong Kong *Cheongsam* Making Technique' was recognised on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, drawn up by Hong Kong's Intangible Cultural Heritage Office.

The silhouette has long played a starring role on the silver screen, notably in Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), which premiered – and was nominated for the Palme d'Or – at that year's Cannes Film Festival. Set in Hong Kong in 1962, the film charts a doomed romance between two married Shanghainese expats. Beyond the haunting score by Japanese composer Shigeru Umebayashi, the 20 *cheongsams* worn by co-lead character Su Li-zhen, aka Mrs Chan (played by Maggie Cheung) – a different one for almost every scene – steal the show. They were created by costume designer William Chang, and although alike in cut (short-sleeved, figure-hugging and with a high neck), feature a dazzling variety of prints, colours and trims.

Scotty So is a Hong Kong-born, Melbourne-based multimedia artist whose work has been exhibited both domestically and abroad, including at the National Gallery of Victoria and Somerset House in London. Born and raised in Hong Kong, he mines the rich sartorial tradition in which he was brought up, notably sewing *cheongsams* for his drag alter ego, Scarlett. In So's eyes, the most iconic *cheongsam* in cinema is the high-collared dress crafted from

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Image: Alamy.

In the Mood for Love, 2000.



Kidman at the 69th Academy Awards, 1997.

At the 1997 Oscars, Nicole Kidman wore the now-iconic ‘Absinthe’ [chartreuse-embroidered] *cheongsam* from Dior’s Spring/Summer 1997 couture collection, John Galliano’s first for the house

black-and-white silk worn by actress Ruan Lingyu in the 1934 silent film *The Goddess*. “The movie was one of the first feminist films in China, about a single mother who is a sex worker,” says So. “[Lingyu’s *cheongsam*] embodies the modernist, geometric design from the ’30s [yet] still has the form and elegance of [traditional] Chinese culture.”

At the 1997 Oscars, Nicole Kidman wore the now-iconic ‘Absinthe’ *cheongsam* from Dior’s Spring/Summer 1997 couture collection, John Galliano’s first for the house. Although the subject of some criticism at the time (the late comedian and fashion commentator Joan Rivers was characteristically disobliging in her on-air commentary about its “ugly” colour), the chartreuse-embroidered gown frequently ranks on lists of the best red-carpet moments of all time.

Kidman wore another memorable *cheongsam* – this time, vintage – to the 54th Cannes Film Festival in 2001 to promote *Moulin Rouge!*, which opened that year’s showcase. The dress was sourced from Cameron Silver at Decades. “Nicole’s stylist at the time, the late L’Wren Scott, had the most extraordinary eye,” recalls Silver. “The colour, fabric and effortless elegance of this vintage *cheongsam* was the perfect match for Nicole’s burgeoning reputation as a major international tastemaker and phenomenal actress.”

When a *cheongsam* is worn by those of non-Chinese origin, can things slide into cultural appropriation? Yes, if “done in a fetishised or ‘Halloween costume’ way,” notes So. “Mass-produced, tourist-shop *cheongsams* can bring negativity to the understanding of the *cheongsam*. But I am very open if the *cheongsam* was tailor-made by craftsmen in a traditional way. I do think that when a non-Chinese celebrity, or even a non-Chinese ordinary person, wears a *cheongsam*, [it can be] seen as a celebration, if done tastefully and for the right occasion,” he says, citing Grace Kelly at the 1956 Golden Globes and Elizabeth Taylor on a 1957 trip to Hong Kong as noteworthy examples.

Ultimately, few materials can rival silk’s millennia-spanning appeal and versatility. As Silver reflects: “[It’s] a seasonless fabric that lends itself to the extremes of fashion offerings, from casual to couture”. HB