

Forty Years of Denim



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Ask me what denim is and I won't start with a definition. I'll start with a feeling.

COTTON, MEMORY AND THE SHIFTING MAP OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

It's the dry, slightly rough hand of an unwashed fabric that has just come off the loom. It's the faint, earthy smell of indigo in a dye house. It's the rhythm of a shuttle loom, a sound you feel in your chest before you hear it. And it's the weight of a finished pair of jeans, stiff at first, then slowly softening into something that remembers the person wearing it. Cloth was close to our heart long before it was a business. In my family, we judged fabric with our fingertips first and our spreadsheets second.

Where My Story Begins

My grandparents left India in the 1930s, during the British Raj, and moved to Thailand looking for a better life. They arrived with very little

money and no network. What they had was the family instinct for trading, and trade became our foundation. In the 1960s my uncle moved Japanese textiles into Thailand, and our family became deeply invested in procurement. I grew up around fabric swatches, hearing stories about mills in Japan and Italy, and learning that cloth was a language. You could read quality in it if you took the time.

I was fortunate to attend an international school from childhood, at a time when very few schools in Thailand offered an English curriculum. My classmates came from every region of the world, and that gave me a global perspective before I knew what to do with it. I later studied biomedical and electrical

engineering at Duke in the United States. But when the US economy hit a severe recession, I had no real choice but to return home, and in 2003 I came back to Thailand.

I worked short stints at banks, IT firms and in hospitality, each of which taught me how businesses actually run. Then my family asked me to help at the mill for a few hours a week. Those hours became a full-time job. At that point the business was still in its infancy, and the idea of building something from scratch pushed me to my limits. I haven't looked back since.

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The 1980s and 1990s: Learning from Japan

To understand where denim is today, you have to understand how it was rebuilt in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the 1980s denim was a global fashion product, shaped by stonewash, acid wash and the rise of designer labels. But the best fabric came from Japan. After the war, Japanese mills took vintage American shuttle looms and studied them obsessively. They treated denim as a craft: selvedge edges, rope-dyed

indigo, uneven slubs, depth of color that deepened with wear. Okayama and Kojima became places of pilgrimage.

Thailand learned directly from this. Japanese machinery, technical knowledge and trading relationships moved into the region. Thai mills started by copying, then adapting, then innovating. It was a relationship built on respect. Japan brought discipline and standards, and Thailand brought skilled people, a stable manufacturing base and a hunger to prove itself.

1997: The Year We Woke Up

Then came 1997.

The Asian financial crisis started in Thailand, and it changed how an entire generation of business owners thought. The currency collapsed, debts ballooned and companies we thought were untouchable suddenly weren't. But the deeper lesson, I think, was about China. That was the moment Thailand became aware of the giant next door: its scale, its costs, its ambition and its speed.

I came to Thailand as that lesson was settling in. The question every mill owner was asking, quietly or loudly, was the same: how do you compete with something that big? The wiser answer, which only a few acted on, was that you don't compete on being the biggest. You compete on being the best at something specific.

We always believed that cotton is the heart of denim.

Specialty Spinning: Where the Real Craft Lives

For us, that something was the yarn.

People often assume that denim is made in the dye house or the laundry. In truth it starts in the spinning mill. The character of a fabric, its slubs, its irregularity, its hand-feel and the way it fades, is born in the yarn. Specialty spinning means working with different counts, unusual slub patterns and blends of fiber. It means treating each yarn as a design decision rather than a commodity.

We always believed that cotton is the heart of denim. I've said it so many times that it's become a kind of personal creed. Cotton breathes. It ages beautifully. It fades with honesty, and it returns to the earth when its life is over. Polyester gives you cheap stretch and cheap price, but it comes with a cost the planet pays for generations. It sheds microplastics, it's derived from fossil fuels, and it makes recycling much harder overall.

The Shift: Indonesia and Vietnam Rise

Through the 2000s and 2010s the regional map changed again.

Indonesia moved first, with its enormous domestic market, competitive labor costs and aggressive investment in integrated textile capacity from spinning to garments. Vietnam followed, even more dramatically. Chinese capital, along with investment from Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong, poured into new, large-scale and highly modern plants, many of them built from scratch with the latest machinery. Trade agreements gave Vietnamese exporters real advantages in key markets.

The geopolitical backdrop accelerated it. As tensions between the United States and China grew and tariffs came into play, brands diversified their sourcing. Vietnam became the natural beneficiary: a place where Chinese supply chain expertise and capital could operate under a different flag.

Thailand, meanwhile, hesitated.

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Why Thailand Missed Out

I say this with love for my country. We didn't lose because of a lack of skill. Our people are

brilliant. We lost momentum because of mindset.

Many mills were led by an older generation who built their businesses through hard work and good judgment, and they earned the right to be proud. But the decisions that worked in one era didn't work in the next. Investment in new machinery slowed. Succession planning was avoided. Sustainability was treated as a cost rather than an opportunity. Traceability technology was dismissed as a fad. And in a business where capital and speed decide who wins, hesitation is expensive. The newer players were young, hungry and well funded, and they took risks that Thai mills wouldn't.

Sustainability Is Not a Trend. It's the Business.

If there's one thing I wish the industry had understood sooner, it's this: sustainability was never a marketing layer on top of denim. It's the future of denim itself.

Denim is one of the most resource-intensive fabrics in the world. Growing cotton takes water. Dyeing indigo takes water and chemistry. Finishing and laundry have historically taken even more. For years, that was simply accepted as the cost of making a pair of jeans. I never believed it should be.

Our goals were practical and measurable: cutting water use at every stage, reducing chemical load, moving toward carbon

neutrality, and investing in traceability, including blockchain technology, so that a customer could follow cotton from field to finished garment.

Sustainability also meant durability. The most sustainable pair of jeans is the one you never have to replace. When a garment is made from honest cotton, spun carefully and woven well, it lasts. Our USP was always durability, reliability and a sustainability-focused product. That's the same quality that made denim endure when miners and cowboys wore it in the late 1800s.

Transparency is no longer a differentiator. It's the entry ticket.

What the American Customer Taught Us

Almost everything in this story ultimately comes back to the United States. For decades it has been the most influential denim market in the world, and what American consumers and regulators demand shapes the whole supply chain.

The US customer once wanted price and volume. Today they want something more complicated: a story, proof, and fabric that lives up to its promises. Brands are being asked to show where their cotton came from, how much water was used, which chemicals

touched the cloth and what the carbon footprint looks like. Customers who once asked me about price now ask about traceability. Transparency is no longer a differentiator. It's the entry ticket.

Southeast Asia Is Still the Engine

Despite everything, I remain optimistic about Southeast Asia. The region has what the world's brands need: scale, skill, integrated supply chains and proximity to growing consumer markets. Vietnam and Indonesia will keep expanding, and newer players like Cambodia are emerging. And Thailand, if it chooses to, can still take its place, not as the cheapest, but as the most thoughtful: premium, technically sophisticated, sustainable and trusted.

That path requires something difficult: a willingness to let a new generation lead.

Denim began as the cloth of miners and cowboys. It has survived because it's honest.

Where I Stand Today

Today I'm with Gherzi, a consulting company that supports textile and spinning mills around the world. After years of running a mill and living through the pressures of this industry firsthand, I now get to help others navigate them: modernizing operations, improving efficiency, planning investment and building businesses that last.

My message to every mill owner I meet is the same. The mills that thrive over the next forty years won't necessarily be the biggest or the oldest. They'll be the ones that invest early, respect their people, stay true to good materials and earn trust through transparency.

Denim began as the cloth of miners and cowboys. It has survived because it's honest. If we run our industry with that same honesty, I believe the best chapters are still ahead.



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