

Food-Medicine Homology:

From Traditional Knowledge to Commercial Opportunity

What food, ingredient and health companies need to know about China's growing functional-food opportunity — and the science, technology and regulatory evidence needed to bring it to market.

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- What food-medicine homology means for modern functional food
- China's market in numbers — health-food registrations, catalogue substances & scale
- Eight ingredients to watch, from goji and ginger to lion's mane and ganoderma
- From traditional use to modern evidence — and four regulatory markets compared
- The six-step pathway to an evidence-based product — and how FOODMED 2026 can help

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TWO WORLDS. ONE OPPORTUNITY.

Why Food-Medicine Homology Matters to the Food Industry

The global food industry is moving beyond the traditional idea of food as simply a source of nutrition. Consumers increasingly want foods and beverages that support health, while companies look for credible, science-based ways to develop products with meaningful functional benefits. China has been exploring this territory for centuries.

A MODERN FUNCTIONAL-FOOD PATHWAY

Modern Western functional food largely developed from food science, biochemistry and nutrition:

Identify a bioactive compound → validate its function → incorporate it into a food format.

Plant sterols, probiotics, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins and minerals are familiar examples.

The approach is often: Science first. Product second.



THE FOOD-MEDICINE-HOMOLOGY PATHWAY

Food-medicine homology begins from a different starting point:

Traditional use → identify the material → characterise its constituents → standardise it → investigate its function → develop a modern product.

China therefore brings something the global functional-food industry increasingly wants:

Centuries of traditional knowledge combined with a large and sophisticated modern market.

The two approaches are now converging. The question is no longer simply whether traditional ingredients work — it is which can be transformed into safe, consistent, evidence-based and commercially successful modern foods.

THE FOUNDATION

What Is Food-Medicine Homology?

藥食同源 (yào shí tóng yuán)

“Medicine and food share the same origin.” The idea that everyday foods can also support health is not unique to one culture — it appears, in different forms, across many of the world's food and healing traditions. China has articulated and developed it most systematically, giving the global food industry a rich, structured starting point.

THE CONCEPT

Certain traditional materials have long been used as foods while also being associated with particular health-related functions.

Examples include goji berry, jujube, ginger, ginseng and astragalus.

The important distinction: this is not simply about adding a medicinal extract to food. It is about materials that have traditionally served both roles.

FROM TRADITION TO MODERN FOOD

Traditional knowledge provides a starting point.

Modern R&D must then establish: What exactly is in the ingredient? How consistent is it? Which constituents may be responsible for observed effects? What preparation and dose are relevant? Is it safe? What evidence does the target market require? Can it survive processing and formulation?

WHY THIS MATTERS

For companies, food-medicine homology is not simply another category of herbal products.

It is a potential source of ingredients, product concepts and scientific questions for the next generation of functional foods.

The opportunity lies in translating traditional knowledge into products that meet modern science, consumer expectations and regulatory systems.

CHINA: A MARKET ALREADY IN MOTION

The Opportunity Is Larger Than Many Realise

China's food-medicine-homology ecosystem has developed over decades — spanning agricultural production, ingredient processing, traditional and modern formulation, food and beverage manufacturing and a large consumer market — and it continues to evolve around quality consistency, scientific substantiation, safety assessment and regulatory requirements.

HEALTH-FOOD REGISTRATIONS

China's SAMR reported more than 13,000 valid health-food registration certificates and over 22,000 valid filing certificates as of March 2025. More than half contain Chinese-medicine raw materials.
Source: SAMR, 2025.

HERBAL BEVERAGE MARKET

Industry estimates put China's herbal beverage market at approximately RMB 41.2 billion in 2023, illustrating the scale of the country's established herbal beverage market.
Source: iiMedia Research, 2024.

FOOD-MEDICINE CATALOGUE

China's National Health Commission lists 106 substances in the national food-medicine homology substance catalogue — an important regulatory basis for their use as food ingredients.
Source: NHC, 2025.

HEALTH AS A PRIORITY

Health considerations increasingly influence food and beverage purchasing decisions across Chinese consumer segments, providing strong tailwinds for evidence-based functional products.

Market estimates vary substantially according to definitions, product categories and data sources. Figures should be independently verified before use in commercial or investment decisions.

THE SUPPLY CHAIN: FROM FIELD TO MARKET

01

CULTIVATION

Quality practices improve raw-material consistency and traceability.

02

PROCESSING

Drying, curing and preparation shape ingredient quality and composition.

03

EXTRACTION & CHARACTERISATION

Modern technologies identify and characterise active constituents.

04

STANDARDISATION & SAFETY

Establish specifications, assess contaminants, address consistency.

05

EVIDENCE BUILDING

Mechanistic research and, where appropriate, human studies.

06

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Translate into food formats — sensory, stability and regulatory needs.

FROM TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE TO MODERN EVIDENCE

What Tradition Shows — and What Science Must Establish

Food-medicine homology provides a rich starting point for research. But traditional use and modern scientific evidence answer different questions.

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Centuries of empirical observation
Traditional applications and preparation methods
Historical records and practitioner knowledge
Experience accumulated across generations

MODERN R&D

Chemical and molecular characterisation
Standardisation of preparations
Mechanistic studies
Safety assessment and bioavailability research
Human clinical studies where appropriate
Peer-reviewed, product-specific substantiation

THE IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

Modern science does not assume that a traditional use has been clinically established.

Instead, it tests, characterises, explains, refines — and sometimes challenges — traditional observations.

This distinction is critical for companies developing products for modern consumers and regulated markets.

AREAS OF ACTIVE RESEARCH

GINSENG

Ginsenosides and potential relationships with metabolic, neurological and other pathways.

GANODERMA

Polysaccharides and other constituents investigated for immunological and biological effects.

LION'S MANE

Growing interest in neurobiology, nerve growth factor pathways and cognitive health.

ASTRAGALUS

Research into polysaccharides, saponins and potential immune-related mechanisms.

GOJI & JUJUBE

Bioactive constituents, nutritional properties and functional-food applications.

FOR INTERNATIONAL FOOD, NUTRITION & HEALTH COMPANIES

The Market Is Moving. Are You Looking at the Right Opportunity?

For many international companies, functional nutrition is already a strategic priority. The less familiar opportunity is the large ecosystem of Chinese ingredients, traditional knowledge and consumer acceptance surrounding food-medicine homology. Some international companies have already commercialised products using Chinese botanical or traditional-ingredient concepts.

THREE QUESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL R&D TEAMS

01

WHAT IS ALREADY AVAILABLE?

Which food-medicine-homology ingredients have established food use, supply chains and consumer familiarity?

02

WHAT CAN MODERN R&D ADD?

Can analytical science, formulation technology, clinical research and product development create new formats and stronger evidence?

03

WHAT COULD BECOME A GLOBAL PRODUCT?

Which ingredients have potential beyond their traditional market — and what evidence and regulatory strategy would be required?

Chinese companies bring ingredient knowledge, traditional understanding, local supply chains and consumer familiarity. International companies may bring global R&D, product-development capability, brand-building expertise, international regulatory experience and global distribution. The companies best positioned to participate may be those willing to combine both.

FOR CHINESE FOOD-MEDICINE-HOMOLOGY COMPANIES

You Have the Tradition. To Go Global, You Need the Evidence.

China's food-medicine-homology companies have important assets: traditional ingredient knowledge, established supply chains, manufacturing capability, consumer familiarity and access to a large domestic market. For companies seeking international markets, however, a different set of questions emerges.

CAN THE INGREDIENT BE STANDARDISED?

Partners need to know precisely what they are buying and how consistently it can be produced. Standardisation is both a scientific and a commercial requirement.

CAN IT BE SCIENTIFICALLY SUBSTANTIATED?

Traditional use can inform development, but target markets may require added evidence on safety, composition, efficacy and permitted claims.

CAN THE REGULATORY PATH BE DEFINED EARLY?

Classification varies by substance, preparation, dose, use and claims. This is an early development question, not a final one.

CAN IT BE FORMULATED FOR A NEW CONSUMER?

Exporting is not just translating a label. Taste, format, dosage, sensory experience and permitted claims may all need to change.



Hong Kong provides a location where Chinese scientific and commercial capabilities can interact with international research, regulatory and business networks.

THE INSTITUTION

Where Traditional Knowledge Meets Translational Science

WHY HONG KONG

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

A globally connected financial, commercial and professional-services centre.

LEGAL & IP FRAMEWORK

An established common-law environment supporting appropriately structured commercial and research relationships.

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONNECTIONS

Research programmes can engage with international scientific standards and networks.

GREATER BAY AREA ACCESS

A strategic location connecting to one of the world's largest regional population and innovation clusters.

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIVITY

A natural meeting point for Chinese and international companies, researchers, investors and advisers.

WHY HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY (HKBU)

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

School of Chinese Medicine

Research expertise in Chinese medicine and related sciences

TRANSDISCIPLINARY R&D

Faculty of Science and Technology · Beijing Normal–Hong Kong Baptist University

AI, data science and food science expertise

SCIENTIFIC TRANSLATION

Wu Jieh Yee Institute of Translational Chinese Medicine Research

HK\$230M endowment, established 2024

MECHANISTIC & MULTI-OMICS RESEARCH

Bio-extraction, Characterisation & Multi-Omics

Investigating biological activity and mechanisms

CLINICAL TRANSLATION

Clinical Research Capabilities

Evidence around specific interventions and preparations

INNOVATION & INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

Institute for Innovation and Translation (IIT) · Knowledge Transfer Office

Linking research with policy, commerce and knowledge transfer

FOOD SAFETY & QUALITY

Food Safety Consortium (FSC)

HKBU knowledge-transfer vehicle · IAFP HK Affiliate · FAO/WHO Codex Observer · WHO Alliance for Food Safety Member · Charitable Organisation in Hong Kong

REGULATORY LANDSCAPE

Four Markets. Different Rules. One Strategy From Day One.

Depending on the ingredient, preparation, dose, intended use and claims, a product may be regulated differently across jurisdictions — for example as a conventional food, dietary supplement, health food, food with authorised claims, medical nutrition product or traditional medicine.

UNITED STATES

Food ingredients may require an appropriate safety pathway such as GRAS, depending on circumstances. Dietary supplements operate under a different framework, including specific requirements for structure/function claims. The acceptability of evidence depends on the product, intended use and pathway.

EUROPEAN UNION

Health claims are subject to the EU's authorisation system. Novel Food requirements can apply to ingredients without the required history of significant consumption in the EU before the relevant cut-off. Determining regulatory status is therefore an early — not final — development question.

CHINA

China has its own evolving framework governing food, health food, food-medicine-homology ingredients and related products. It continues to develop around ingredient standards, safety assessment, testing methods, product registration, quality requirements and permitted claims.

HONG KONG

Hong Kong has its own regulatory framework while maintaining close commercial and scientific links with Chinese Mainland and international markets. Its position can be useful for companies exploring cross-border research, partnerships and product-development strategies.

THE IMPORTANT POINT: *There is no single piece of evidence that automatically satisfies every market. Build regulatory strategy into product development from Day One — regulation should not be the final step.*

INGREDIENTS SPOTLIGHT

From Traditional Ingredient to Modern Product

The ingredients below illustrate materials relevant to the broader Chinese botanical and functional-food opportunity. Their regulatory status, permitted uses, evidence base and appropriate claims differ substantially by jurisdiction, preparation and product format.

INGREDIENT	REGULATORY CONTEXT	WHY INDUSTRY IS INTERESTED	POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS
Goji Berry <i>Lycium barbarum</i>	Catalogue: Yes	Polysaccharides, carotenoids and other constituents; strong consumer familiarity and established food use	Beverages, snacks, bakery, dairy alternatives
Jujube <i>Ziziphus jujuba</i>	Catalogue: Yes	Natural sweetness, dietary fibre and growing research interest in food applications	Beverages, snacks, confectionery
Ginger <i>Zingiber officinale</i>	Catalogue: Yes	Gingerols and shogaols; extensive traditional use and substantial modern research	Beverages, teas, functional foods
Astragalus <i>Astragalus membranaceus</i>	Catalogue: Yes	Polysaccharides and saponins; research interest in biological activity	Teas, soups, beverages, functional foods
Ginseng <i>Panax ginseng</i>	Catalogue: Yes	One of the most extensively researched Chinese botanicals; ginsenosides widely studied	Beverages, nutrition products, functional foods
Ganoderma / Reishi <i>Ganoderma lucidum</i>	Treatment varies	Polysaccharides and other constituents; substantial research interest; formulation challenges	Beverages, powders, functional formulations
Lion's Mane <i>Hericium erinaceus</i>	Treatment varies	Growing research interest in neurobiology and gut-brain applications; consumer interest developing	Beverages, nutrition bars, functional foods
Dendrobium <i>Dendrobium nobile</i>	Catalogue: Yes	Polysaccharides and research interest in several biological pathways; solubility challenges	Beverages, health-oriented foods and drinks

Catalogue: Yes = listed in China's National Health Commission food-medicine homology substance catalogue (106 substances), which permits use as both a food and a food ingredient.
Treatment varies = not (or not uniformly) on the catalogue; status differs by jurisdiction, preparation and intended use.

THE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAY

From Traditional Knowledge to an Evidence-Based Product

For both Chinese companies seeking international markets and international companies exploring Chinese botanical ingredients, successful development follows a common logic.

THE PATHWAY FROM KNOWLEDGE TO PRODUCT

01

Define the Consumer Need

Health need, consumer, product format, target market.

02

Screen the Ingredient

Research evidence, safety, composition, regulatory status, supply chain.

03

Formulate & Test

Extraction, standardisation, sensory, solubility, stability, bioavailability.

04

Build the Evidence

Characterisation, mechanistic research, human studies where appropriate.

05

Develop the Regulatory Strategy

Determine pathway and evidence requirements for each market. Early, not last.

06

Prepare for Market

Labelling, claims, quality, IP, manufacturing, commercialisation.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES

- Variable composition
- Chemical complexity
- Compound interactions
- Bioavailability
- Bitterness and earthy flavours
- Colour and aroma
- Solubility
- Processing stability
- Shelf-life stability
- Batch-to-batch consistency
- Supply-chain authentication
- Regulatory classification

WHERE HKBU CAN PARTNER Ingredient characterisation & standardisation · Bio-extraction · Multi-omics profiling · Mechanistic research · Human clinical research · Food formulation · Evidence development · Regulatory-oriented research support · IP & commercialisation

FOODMED CONFERENCE 2026

From Science to Application

5–6 November 2026 · Hong Kong Science Park

FOODMED brings together the people needed to move food-medicine-homology opportunities from discussion toward development: food & beverage companies, ingredient companies, R&D leaders, researchers, regulators, pharmaceutical & nutrition companies, investors, entrepreneurs and students.

**FOR INTERNATIONAL FOOD,
NUTRITION & HEALTH CO.**

Explore China's ecosystem. Identify ingredients, technologies and research for your innovation pipeline; meet Chinese ingredient companies and HKBU capabilities.

**FOR CHINESE FOOD-
MEDICINE HOMOLOGY
COMPANIES**

Learn what it takes to go global — standardisation, evidence, formulation and regulatory strategy — and find international research and commercial partners.

**FOR R&D, INNOVATION &
REGULATORY LEADERS**

Come with a real development question. Identify scientific capabilities, discuss ingredient and formulation challenges and explore research partnerships.

**FOR STUDENTS & EARLY-
CAREER RESEARCHERS**

See where food science, Chinese medicine and industry meet. Explore research directions, meet potential supervisors and partners, and find where your skills fit.

**FOR INVESTORS &
ENTREPRENEURS**

Meet the companies, scientists and startups building the sector. Explore ingredients, technologies and ventures where credible science becomes scalable product.

TWO-DAY PROGRAMME AT A GLANCE

DAY 1 · FOUNDATIONS Regulatory frameworks · Safety & quality · Scientific validation · Evidence-based approaches · Industry perspectives · Networking reception

DAY 2 · TRANSLATION & OPPORTUNITY Translational Chinese medicine · Investment & entrepreneurship · Startup pitching · Future of Food as Medicine · HKBU research & facility visit

R&D CONVERSATIONS AT HKBU

Registered corporate delegates may arrange focused one-to-one discussions with HKBU research leads. For inquiry, kindly contact the Institute of Innovation and Translation:

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JOIN THE FOOD SAFETY CONSORTIUM (FSC)

An HKBU knowledge-transfer platform connecting food companies, researchers and international food-safety networks. For more information about membership, please scan the QR code or visit: www.fschk.org/en/index/home



It is not just to understand food-medicine homology. It is to ask how to capture the opportunities ahead.

*FOODMED 2026 is designed to bring these questions into the same room.
Science · Ingredients · Food technology · Regulation · Industry · Investment.*

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION · FOODMED 2026 · 5–6 NOVEMBER 2026 · HONG KONG SCIENCE PARK

[REGISTER NOW](#)

What's your next Food Innovation Opportunity? Have a Food as Medicine Idea or Challenge?

Bring It to FOODMED.

Whether you are exploring a new ingredient, tackling a formulation challenge, seeking research support, or exploring the potential of food-medicine-homology, FOODMED connects you with the scientists, companies and partners who can turn ideas into action. Discover what's possible. Make new connections. Develop and bring the next generation of healthier foods to market. Scan the QR code to register.



NEXT ISSUE

China's Food-Medicine Revolution · 藥食同源 — the companies, supply chains, science, regulation and innovation shaping China's food-medicine-homology market.

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