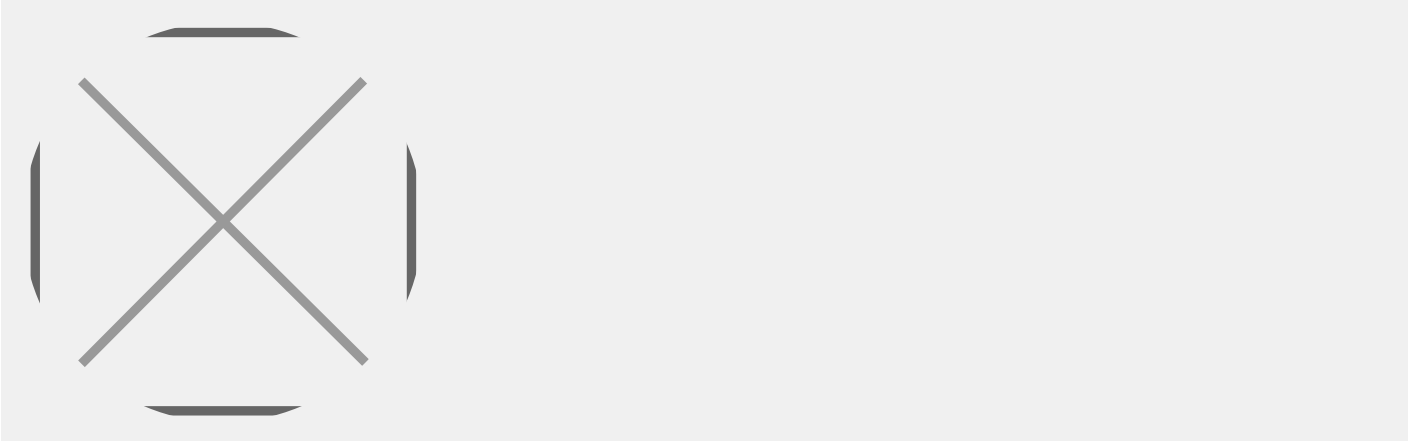
Interview: Shining Hsu, Chairman & Ya Chun Wang, CSO, TCM Biotech, Taiwan



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The Chairman and CSO of TCM Biotech offer perspectives on the potential of botanical drugs, and chart their biotech company's trajectory in bringing these drugs to both the Chinese and US markets.

Mr. Hsu, can you please introduce our readers to yourself and to TCM Biotech?

Shining Hsu (SH): I have devoted myself to pharmaceutical marketing and sales for the last 27 years of my life, and have long been fascinated by this industry. I always say that I would pursue this career in the next life as well—because, as the head of a pharmaceutical organization, I am helping people achieve better health. There is nothing more important in the world!

I joined TCM Biotech four years ago. Established in 1998, TCM is today a leader in Taiwan, specialized in innovative research and the development of botanical drugs, health food, and functional ingredients.

We are focused on the prevention and treatment of liver and joint diseases. Our vision is to cooperate with domestic and foreign medical experts in these fields, and become an internationally recognized, vertically integrated company with strong capabilities in R&D, production, and marketing.

Although its innovative botanical drug pipeline is still in the development stage, TCM Biotech has already penetrated overseas markets such as the United States and China with products such as fine ingredients and functional food. How would you characterize your overseas strategy?

SH: TCM recognizes that the Taiwanese market is simply too small—extending our reach internationally is a necessity for us to sustain capital growth and support our innovation efforts.

Our first step abroad was to China. The market is not only tremendous, but is also attractive for its cultural similarities to Taiwan. We have built up partnerships in China that are extremely strong, and these ties have allowed us to demonstrate that we are trustworthy and worthwhile collaborators. We have leveraged this track record as we've expanded to other Asian markets, as well as to the US.

Once we complete the Phase III trial of our lead clinical candidate, we will look to take our philosophy of partnership to an even higher level, and align with Big Pharma companies to target Western markets with innovative compounds.

Dr. Wang, do you feel Big Pharma truly believes in the potential of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) drugs?

Ya-Chun Wang (YCW): We have already seen them express their interest. Companies like Pfizer and GSK, which have established drug development programs in this region, have contacted us to discuss potential future collaborations. They see that we are serious about demonstrating the efficacy of botanical products, and that we are working with regulators in the US, Taiwan, and China to do so. TCM compounds have been in use for thousands of years, and have proven efficacious in practice—it is only the formal clinical data that is lacking. If we can combine this anecdotal efficacy with solid proof, Big Pharma will be very interested in trying a new solution to help solve the development bottlenecks plaguing their R&D efforts.

Would you say that your drug development aim is to complement, or replace, existing treatments?

YCW: Our initial strategy is to complement existing treatments. As you know, multinational drug companies dominate most therapeutic areas, and their marketing and sales machine is very difficult to compete with.

On the other hand, once we penetrate the market, and once physicians and regulators gain more experience working with botanical products, we can begin to create a market for ourselves. Where

at first we complement and offer combination therapies, we can one day replace existing products and offer the drug of choice for certain diseases.

What do you think constitutes the main difference between the Western approach and the traditional Chinese approach?

SH: In my view, there is no difference in outcome—good drugs are good drugs! The difference is in how you control the product and how you ensure quality.

Do you believe that botanical products will ever enjoy the same success in the West that they enjoy in the Greater China region?

YCW: I believe they will. The only challenge we face is really an image problem. As I began to mention previously, until today, there was little sound empirical data to back up anecdotal evidence. But these compounds have addressed illness in Asia for many years, and, by utilizing rigorous clinical testing, we can demonstrate their efficacy within the parameters of accepted international scientific paradigms.

Sooner or later, botanical drugs will become popular globally—personally, I have no doubt about it. Botanicals are set to revolutionize medicine all over the world!

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