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Medicinal Plant Biochemistry Research for Preventing Degenerative Diseases in Asia

Helda Susanti^{1*}, Poncojari Wahyono², Abdulkadir Rahardjanto³

¹⁻³Master of Biology Education, Postgraduate Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author: **Helda Susanti**

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Abstract

Degenerative diseases—including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, neurodegeneration, and osteoarthritis—are rising rapidly across Asia due to demographic ageing, urbanization, and lifestyle transitions. Medicinal plants are deeply embedded in Asian health systems and cultural practices, creating opportunities for biochemistry research to support prevention through mechanism-aligned interventions (e.g., metabolic regulation, anti-inflammatory pathways, endothelial protection, microbiome-metabolite modulation). However, many plant-based studies remain stuck at early evidence stages (single antioxidant assays or crude extracts), with limited standardization, safety evaluation, and human evidence. This article provides a framework synthesis (≤ 2024) of medicinal plant biochemistry research for degenerative disease prevention in Asia. We integrate evidence on shared biochemical pathways of degenerative diseases (oxidative stress, chronic inflammation, metabolic dysregulation, proteostasis failure), metabolomics and natural products workflows (Fiehn, 2002; Sumner *et al.*, 2007; Wolfender *et al.*, 2019), natural products' role in therapeutic discovery (Newman & Cragg, 2020; Atanasov *et al.*, 2021), and governance under the Nagoya Protocol (CBD, 2011; Oberthür & Rosendal, 2014). Results are presented as two conceptual figures (a pathway map and an evidence-translation ladder) and three implementation tables mapping (1) biochemical targets and assays, (2) evidence ladder and reporting criteria, and (3) challenges with mitigation strategies for higher education institutions. We argue that high-impact prevention research requires moving beyond antioxidant-only screening to multi-target mechanism panels, rigorous metabolite identification, dose-response and bioavailability considerations, contamination control, and staged human biomarker studies. We conclude with an institutional roadmap emphasizing shared analytical cores, reproducible workflows, ethical access and benefit-sharing, and clinical/public health partnerships to generate credible evidence and scalable interventions.

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1. Introduction

Asia faces a growing burden of degenerative diseases. As populations age and lifestyles change, chronic non-communicable diseases increasingly dominate morbidity and health expenditure. Prevention—delaying onset and reducing risk—is therefore a strategic priority, especially for metabolic and cardiovascular conditions where early biomarkers and lifestyle interactions are well established. Medicinal plants are highly relevant in Asia because they are widely used, locally available, and culturally accepted. Biochemistry research can translate this traditional resource into evidence-based prevention strategies by identifying active metabolites, clarifying mechanisms of action, and developing standardized interventions aligned to biochemical targets.

However, current research often suffers from weak reproducibility, uncertain compound identification, and limited clinical translation.

Degenerative diseases share biochemical pathways: oxidative stress and chronic inflammation amplify metabolic dysfunction and tissue damage; proteostasis and mitochondrial decline contribute to neurodegeneration; endothelial dysfunction and dyslipidemia contribute to vascular disease; and inflammatory mediators drive joint degeneration. These shared mechanisms enable a unifying approach to medicinal plant biochemistry: multi-target modulation using well-characterized metabolites and standardized extracts.

This paper synthesizes literature up to 2024 to map the state of medicinal plant biochemistry research for degenerative disease prevention in Asia, with a focus on research design, evidence standards, and translational roadmaps for higher education institutions. The guiding questions are: (1) Which biochemical targets are most relevant to prevention? (2) What challenges constrain credibility and translation? (3) What opportunities and institutional strategies can accelerate progress?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Shared biochemical pathways of degenerative diseases

Degenerative diseases share a set of molecular drivers. Oxidative stress and mitochondrial dysfunction generate cumulative molecular damage, while chronic low-grade inflammation (“inflammaging”) drives insulin resistance, vascular dysfunction, and tissue degeneration. Metabolic dysregulation includes impaired glucose and lipid regulation, altered signaling (e.g., AMPK, PPAR pathways), and pro-atherogenic lipoprotein profiles. Neurodegeneration adds proteostasis failure (e.g., amyloid and tau aggregation), synaptic loss, and impaired clearance pathways. These shared pathways justify multi-target prevention strategies rather than single-enzyme screening.

2.2. Natural products and the biochemistry of prevention

Natural products remain a major source of bioactive discovery and provide diverse chemical scaffolds and multi-target pharmacology. Large-scale reviews show that natural products have contributed substantially to new therapeutics and remain a crucial discovery reservoir (Newman & Cragg, 2020; Atanasov *et al.*, 2021) [7, 1]. In prevention contexts, plant polyphenols, triterpenoids, alkaloids, and polysaccharides may modulate pathways related to oxidative stress, inflammation, metabolic enzymes, and microbiome-metabolite signaling. However, credible prevention claims require dose, bioavailability, and safety considerations rather than *in vitro* potency alone.

2.3. Metabolomics Standards and Identification Bottlenecks

Metabolomics is essential for profiling medicinal plant extracts and linking chemical profiles to bioactivity. Foundational framing emphasized metabolomics as the link

between genotype and phenotype (Fiehn, 2002) [3]. Minimum reporting standards were proposed to improve transparency and comparability (Sumner *et al.*, 2007) [11]. For natural products research, dereplication and annotation strategies are crucial to avoid rediscovery and to support mechanistic claims. Wolfender *et al.* (2019) [14] describe integrated strategies combining LC-MS/MS, NMR, and computational tools for dereplication, while noting identification bottlenecks due to incomplete libraries and limited standards.

2.4. Governance, ethics, and access to biodiversity

Research on medicinal plants intersects with sovereignty over genetic resources and protection of traditional knowledge. The Nagoya Protocol provides an international framework requiring prior informed consent and mutually agreed terms for access and benefit-sharing (CBD, 2011) [2]. Governance analyses highlight practical complexities in implementation and cross-border research collaborations (Oberthür & Rosendal, 2014) [8]. Ethical best practice in ethnopharmacology and ethnobotany emphasizes community engagement, methodological rigor, and avoidance of extractive practices (Heinrich *et al.*, 2020) [4].

2.5. The evidence-to-translation gap in prevention research

A recurring issue in Asian medicinal plant research is the evidence-to-translation gap: studies stop at early-stage screening without standardized extracts, safety evaluation, or human biomarkers. Prevention research faces additional difficulties compared with treatment trials, because effects may be smaller and require longer observation; however, intermediate biomarkers (e.g., HbA1c, lipid profiles, blood pressure, inflammatory markers) can provide feasible trial endpoints. Translation readiness also depends on quality control, contaminant screening, stability, and supply chain sustainability.

3. Method

This article uses a framework synthesis approach. We integrated peer-reviewed literature and authoritative standards/governance sources published up to 2024 to develop a structured synthesis of medicinal plant biochemistry research for degenerative disease prevention in Asia.

Sources were organized into five clusters: (1) degenerative disease biochemical pathways and prevention biomarkers; (2) natural products and multi-target pharmacology; (3) metabolomics and dereplication workflows; (4) governance and ethics (ABS and traditional knowledge); and (5) translation practices (standardization, safety, formulation, staged human evidence).

We present results as design-oriented guidance: Figure 1 maps degenerative disease pathways and plant intervention points; Figure 2 presents an evidence-to-translation ladder; and Tables 1–3 summarize targets, evidence criteria, and challenge-mitigation strategies applicable to higher education institutions.

4. Results and Discussion

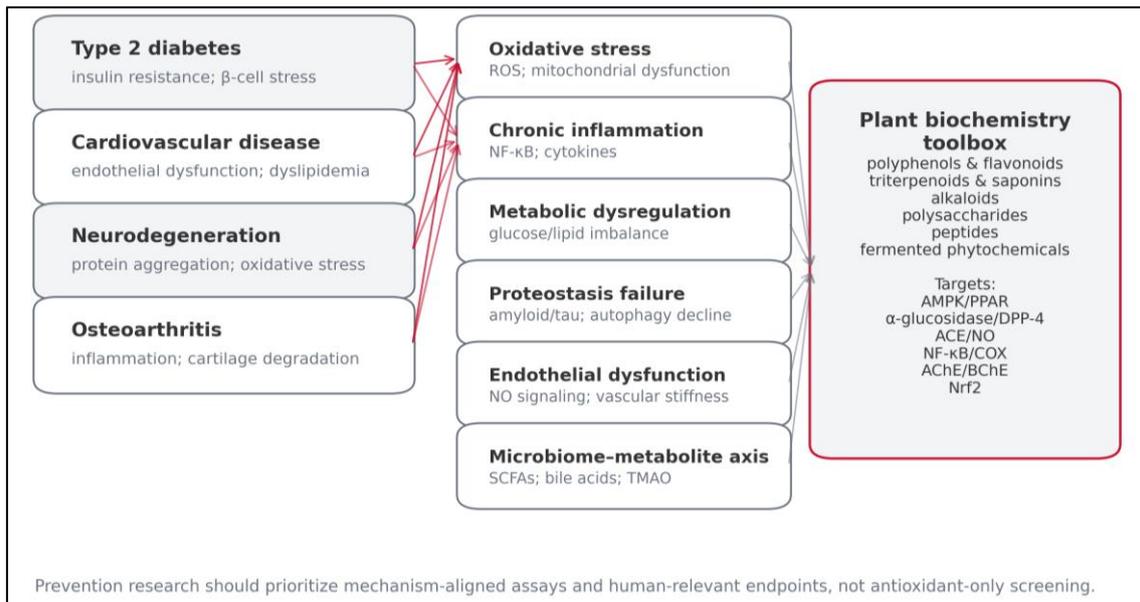


Fig 1: Degenerative disease pathways and plant biochemistry intervention points

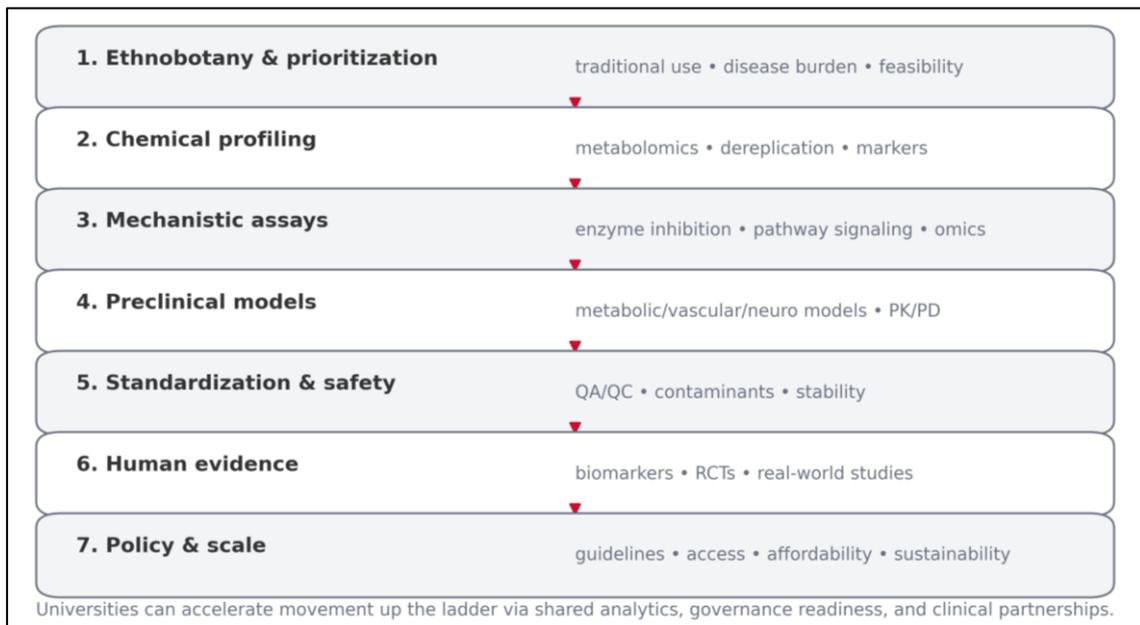


Fig 2: Evidence-to-translation ladder for prevention-oriented medicinal plant biochemistry research

Results are presented as a synthesis of targets, evidence standards, and institutional strategies. Figure 1 summarizes shared biochemical pathways of degenerative diseases and indicates plant-based intervention points and targets. Figure 2 provides a staged evidence-to-translation ladder for prevention research, emphasizing standardization and human biomarker evidence.

4.1. Mechanism-aligned targets for prevention research.

Prevention claims should be linked to biological mechanisms and measurable biomarkers. Across degenerative diseases, upstream oxidative stress and inflammation are common drivers, suggesting roles for Nrf2 pathway activation, NF-κB inhibition, and mitochondrial support. Metabolic regulation targets include AMPK and PPAR pathways, carbohydrate digestion enzymes (α-glucosidase) and incretin metabolism (DPP-4), and lipid metabolism modulators.

Neurodegeneration-related targets include cholinesterase inhibition and proteostasis modulation, while vascular targets include ACE inhibition, NO signaling support, and endothelial inflammation reduction. These targets can be operationalized into assay panels rather than single tests.

4.2. Addressing the “antioxidant-only” trap

Many Asian plant studies rely heavily on DPPH/FRAP-style antioxidant assays. While useful as supportive chemistry evidence, such assays do not establish disease prevention efficacy. Robust studies should include cell-based and pathway-aligned assays, dose–response curves, cytotoxicity checks, and identification of active metabolites. Metabolomics standards and dereplication workflows improve credibility by clarifying chemical identity and supporting reproducibility (Fiehn, 2002; Sumner *et al.*, 2007; Wolfender *et al.*, 2019)^[3, 11, 14].

4.3. Bioavailability, microbiome, and food-based delivery

Preventive interventions often involve long-term consumption, making safety and bioavailability central. Many plant polyphenols undergo extensive metabolism and may exert effects via microbiome-mediated metabolites rather than parent compounds. Therefore, prevention research should include bioaccessibility and metabolite tracking, as well as consideration of food matrices or fermentation that alter phytochemical profiles. Universities can integrate metabolomics and microbiome analytics to connect consumption to biomarker changes.

4.4. Standardization and safety as prerequisites for human evidence

Translation requires reproducible composition and safety assurance. Standardization strategies include marker panels and chromatographic fingerprints, contaminant screening (heavy metals, pesticides, adulterants), and stability testing. Without these, human studies become uninterpretable. WHO guidance provides a framework for quality control of herbal materials and should be integrated into research workflows (WHO, 2011)^[12].

4.5. Governance and ethics

ABS compliance and ethical engagement with traditional knowledge are necessary for legitimate research. The Nagoya Protocol requires PIC/MAT, and governance analyses emphasize national variability and implementation complexity (CBD, 2011; Oberthür & Rosendal, 2014)^[2, 8]. Ethical best practice also emphasizes community engagement and transparency in ethnopharmacology research (Heinrich *et al.*, 2020)^[4]. Institutions should build governance readiness and benefit-sharing templates as a core capability rather than a project-by-project burden.

4.6. Institutional roadmap for higher education

Universities can accelerate credible prevention research by investing in shared analytical cores (LC-MS/MS, NMR), curated spectral libraries, reproducible SOPs, and mechanistic assay platforms. Partnerships with hospitals and public health agencies enable biomarker-based trials and real-world evidence studies. Stage-gates aligned to the evidence ladder (Figure 2) help prioritize projects and allocate resources efficiently.

Table 1: Key biochemical targets for degenerative disease prevention and recommended assays in medicinal plant biochemistry.

Disease domain	Key pathways/targets	Plant intervention examples (classes)	Recommended assays/biomarkers
Type 2 diabetes	AMPK/PPAR; α -glucosidase; DPP-4; oxidative stress	polyphenols; triterpenoids; polysaccharides	α -glucosidase/DPP-4 assays; glucose uptake; HbA1c (human); oxidative markers
Cardiovascular disease	ACE/NO signaling; endothelial inflammation; lipid metabolism	flavonoids; saponins; alkaloids	ACE inhibition; endothelial markers; lipid profile; blood pressure
Neurodegeneration	AChE/BChE; oxidative stress; proteostasis/autophagy	polyphenols; alkaloids	cholinesterase assays; neuronal stress models; cognitive endpoints in trials
Osteoarthritis	NF- κ B/COX; cartilage catabolism; oxidative stress	polyphenols; terpenoids	inflammatory cytokines; cartilage degradation markers; pain/function scores
Cross-cutting	Nrf2 activation; NF- κ B inhibition; microbiome-metabolites	fermented phytochemicals; dietary fibers	pathway reporters; metabolomics; microbiome metabolites (SCFAs, bile acids)

Table 2: Evidence ladder and minimum reporting for preventive medicinal plant biochemistry studies.

Evidence level	Minimum deliverables	Quality criteria	Common pitfalls
Profiling	Voucher + metadata; LC-MS/MS/NMR profile	QC, identification confidence	No voucher; poor metadata
Mechanistic assays	Target-aligned assays + dose-response	Controls; cytotoxicity; reproducibility	Antioxidant-only; assay interference
Preclinical models	Relevant disease models + PK/PD	Ethics; endpoints; replication	Unrealistic dosing; single model
Standardization & safety	Markers/fingerprints; contaminants; stability	Validated methods; batch control	Unstandardized extracts
Human biomarker studies	Pilot RCTs; biomarker endpoints	Blinding; adherence; safety monitoring	Underpowered; weak endpoints
Real-world translation	Access, affordability, sustainability plan	Supply chain; governance compliance	Overharvesting; inequitable access

Table 3: Challenges and mitigation strategies for Asian universities conducting prevention-oriented medicinal plant biochemistry research.

Challenge	Impact on research	Mitigation strategy	Evidence anchor (≤ 2024)
Annotation bottleneck	Weak mechanism/novelty claims	Dereplication workflows; build local libraries	Wolfender <i>et al.</i> (2019)
Reproducibility & batch effects	Non-replicable results	QC samples; SOPs; reporting standards	Fiehn (2002); Sumner <i>et al.</i> (2007)
Governance & ABS	Delays; legitimacy risk	PIC/MAT templates; ABS office; benefit-sharing	CBD (2011); Oberthür & Rosendal (2014)
Traditional knowledge ethics	Community harm; reputational risk	Co-design and transparent engagement	Heinrich <i>et al.</i> (2020)
Quality & contaminants	Safety risk; translation failure	WHO-aligned QC; stability testing	WHO (2011)
Limited clinical partnerships	No human biomarker evidence	Hospitals/public health partners; staged trials	Translation best practice

5. Conclusion

Medicinal plant biochemistry research can contribute meaningfully to preventing degenerative diseases in Asia, but only if studies progress beyond early-stage antioxidant screening to mechanism-aligned assay panels, rigorous metabolite identification, standardization, and human-relevant biomarker evidence.

This synthesis provides a practical toolkit: a pathway map (Figure 1), an evidence-to-translation ladder (Figure 2), and tables mapping targets, evidence criteria, and institutional mitigation strategies. Higher education institutions can enhance impact by strengthening shared analytics, governance readiness under ABS frameworks, quality control systems, and clinical/public health partnerships for biomarker-based trials.

Future research should expand region-specific metabolite databases and reference standards, evaluate long-term safety and adherence in preventive contexts, and test governance and benefit-sharing models that protect biodiversity and community rights while enabling responsible innovation.

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