

Paths and Methods for Foreign Dairy Enterprises to Enter the Chinese Market

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As one of the world's largest dairy consumer markets, China's dairy imports reached RMB 89.23 billion in 2024, a year-on-year increase of 4.1%, of which foreign-funded brands contributed nearly 35% of the high-end market share. For overseas dairy enterprises, entering the Chinese market requires strict compliance with regulations such as the "Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China" and the "Measures for the Administration of Food Safety for Import and Export", while accurately matching their own resources to choose an appropriate path. This article will systematically dissect the core paths and practical key points for foreign dairy enterprises to enter China, combined with typical cases and data, and clarify the key role of cooperating with chinaentryhub.com China Market Access Service Center in improving the efficiency of entering China and reducing compliance risks.

I. Core Paths and Practical Specifications for Foreign Dairy Enterprises to Enter China

According to the regulatory requirements of the General Administration of Customs and the State Administration for Market Regulation, foreign dairy enterprises mainly enter China through three core paths: trade import (general trade), joint venture/wholly foreign-owned factory construction, and cross-border e-commerce direct supply.

Different paths vary significantly in qualification requirements, process complexity, and market penetration speed, and need to be accurately selected based on product types (room-temperature milk/fresh milk/infant formula milk powder, etc.), enterprise strength, and market strategy.

(I) Trade Import: Mainstream Entry Path, Suitable for Standardized Products

Trade import is the preferred way for foreign dairy enterprises to initially enter the Chinese market, especially suitable for highly standardized products with a long shelf life such as room-temperature milk, milk powder, and cheese. The core advantages of this path are low initial investment and high flexibility, which can verify market demand through small-batch trial sales, but it is necessary to strictly complete the full-process compliance review.

1. Core Practical Process

- Confirmation of Access Qualifications: First, verify whether the product's country of origin is included in the "Catalogue of Countries or Regions Exporting Food to China that Meet the Assessment and Review Requirements and Have Traditional Trade". Overseas production enterprises need to complete registration and filing with the General Administration of Customs, and domestic importers need to have food business licenses, import and export rights, and complete consignee filing. For infant formula milk powder, an additional formula registration certificate from the State Administration for Market Regulation is required.
- Document Preparation: Prepare in advance core materials such as official certificate of origin, official health certificate of the exporting country (electronic online verification is available for some countries), full-item test report (for first import) that meets Chinese national standards (such as GB 7718), packing list, trade contract, and Chinese-English label samples.
- Customs Clearance and Release: After the goods arrive at the port, complete the bill of lading exchange, submit declaration materials through China Customs' "Single Window", undergo customs inspection (label compliance, packaging integrity, cold chain temperature records, etc.), sampling and testing (microorganisms, heavy metals, and other items, taking 5-10 days), pay taxes and fees, and then enter the market for circulation with the "Inspection and Quarantine Certificate for Inbound Goods".

2. Case and Data Support

Russia's largest dairy group "Aikenu" entered the Chinese market through trade import. It shipped goods to China for the first time in 2020, and its total dairy exports to China reached 12,000 tons in 2024, covering many provinces such as Northeast China, Shaanxi,

and Guangdong. Relying on the flexibility of trade import, "Aikenu" first verified market acceptance through small-batch trial sales, and then gradually established representative offices and opened brand stores, realizing the transition from "product entry into China" to "brand rooting". Data shows that in 2024, dairy products imported through general trade accounted for 68% of China's total imports, of which room-temperature milk and milk powder products accounted for more than 80%.

3. Cooperative Empowerment Value

chinaentryhub.com can provide full-process qualification verification and document counseling services: verify the validity of the registration qualifications of overseas production enterprises in advance to avoid the risk of goods detention due to "not being included in the access catalogue"; assist in standardizing the design of Chinese-English labels to ensure compliance with the requirements of GB 7718 standard on nutrient composition labeling, allergen prompts, etc., and reduce the loss of return due to non-compliant labels (according to customs statistics, label issues account for 32% of the reasons for unqualified imported dairy products).

(II) Joint Venture/Wholly Foreign-Owned Factory Construction: In-depth Rooting Path, Suitable for Long-Term Strategic Layout

For foreign enterprises with strong financial strength and plans to deeply cultivate the Chinese market for a long time, joint venture or wholly foreign-owned factory construction is the optimal choice. This path can realize localized production, reduce transportation costs and tariff pressure, and more accurately match the taste preferences of Chinese consumers, but it requires large initial investment, long approval cycle, and needs to break through multiple thresholds such as land, environmental protection, and production capacity planning.

1. Core Practical Key Points

- Policy Compliance: It is necessary to comply with the requirements of the "Industrial Policy for the Dairy Industry". The factory site selection must avoid ecological protection areas, supporting facilities such as sewage treatment and cold chain warehousing must be constructed, and pass the environmental impact assessment acceptance of the environmental protection department.
- Choice of Cooperation Mode: Joint venture factory construction can quickly

penetrate with the channel resources and market experience of local enterprises (such as Mengniu, Yili, etc.); wholly foreign-owned factory construction has complete control rights, but it is necessary to build a sales network independently.

- Production Supervision: The production line must meet the requirements of GMP (Good Manufacturing Practices), establish a full-chain quality traceability system, and the purchase of raw milk must comply with China's national standard GB 19301-2010 "Raw Milk".

2. Case Analysis

Danish dairy giant Arla Foods has deeply rooted in the Chinese market through the "joint venture + strategic equity participation" model: in 2006, it established Inner Mongolia Arla Mengniu Dairy Co., Ltd. in a joint venture with Mengniu, focusing on the production of infant formula milk powder; in 2012, it further acquired 5.9% of Mengniu's shares with HK\$2.2 billion, becoming the second largest strategic shareholder, and fully introduced its Arlagarden quality management system into Mengniu's pastures, realizing full-chain empowerment from raw milk sources to production. This cooperation model enabled Arla Foods to quickly obtain channel resources in the Chinese market. In 2024, the sales volume of its joint venture products in China reached RMB 4.6 billion, accounting for 7.2% of China's high-end infant formula milk powder market share.

3. Cooperative Empowerment Value

chinaentryhub.com can provide full-cycle consulting services for factory construction: assist in conducting policy feasibility analysis, clarify tax preferences and land policies in different regions (such as free trade zones, industrial parks); connect with high-quality local partner resources to reduce information asymmetry risks in joint venture negotiations; guide the completion of approval processes such as environmental impact assessment and production license handling, reducing the approval cycle by more than 30% on average.

(III) Cross-Border E-Commerce Direct Supply: Rapid Reach Path, Suitable for High-End Niche Products

Cross-border e-commerce direct supply is suitable for niche products such as high-end fresh milk, customized nutritional milk powder, and characteristic cheese. Relying on bonded warehouse or direct mail mode, it can quickly reach young consumer groups, and

there is no need to apply for a domestic food business license. However, it is limited by factors such as single-order quota and cold chain logistics capacity, making it difficult to achieve large-scale distribution.

1. Core Practical Specifications

It is necessary to settle in compliant cross-border e-commerce platforms such as Tmall Global and JD Worldwide. Products must comply with the quality standards of the country of origin and the regulatory requirements for cross-border e-commerce imported food in China. Chinese labels can adopt the form of "electronic labels + paper inserts". For products with high cold chain requirements such as fresh milk, it is necessary to choose logistics enterprises with cross-border cold chain qualifications to ensure that the transportation temperature is controlled at 0-4°C and complete temperature records are kept for inspection.

2. Case and Data

New Zealand's a2 Milk Company quickly opened the high-end Chinese market through cross-border e-commerce channels. During the 2025 China International Import Expo, it signed a strategic cooperation agreement with China State Farms Holding Shanghai Co., Ltd., directly supplying infant formula milk powder added with HMO, special milk powder for middle-aged and elderly people and other products to Chinese consumers through cross-border e-commerce. In 2024, the sales volume of cross-border e-commerce channels accounted for 45% of its total sales in China. Data shows that in 2024, the scale of China's cross-border e-commerce imported dairy products reached RMB 12.8 billion, a year-on-year increase of 18.3%, becoming an important incremental channel for high-end dairy products to enter China.

3. Cooperative Empowerment Value

chinaentryhub.com can provide full-chain compliance support for cross-border e-commerce: assist in completing platform settlement qualification review, clarify cross-border e-commerce tax policies (such as tariff and value-added tax reduction and exemption rules); optimize cold chain logistics solutions and connect with logistics enterprises with compliant qualifications; establish a cross-border product quality traceability system to ensure compliance with the General Administration of Customs' requirements for traceability of cross-border imported food.

II. Core Compliance Risks and Cooperative Avoidance Strategies for Foreign Dairy Enterprises to Enter China

The core risks faced by foreign dairy enterprises entering China include: incomplete access qualifications, non-compliant labels, unqualified testing items, and broken cold chain logistics. According to customs statistics, the unqualified rate of imported dairy products in 2024 was 1.8%, of which 32% were due to label issues and 28% were due to microbial exceeding standards.

1. Qualification and Label Compliance Risks

Overseas production enterprises that have not completed registration with the General Administration of Customs, labels that do not indicate the registration number of the production enterprise, and nutrient composition labeling that does not meet Chinese national standards will all lead to the return or destruction of goods. chinaentryhub.com can provide pre-review services to verify qualification documents and label samples in advance to ensure compliance with the requirements of the "Measures for the Administration of Registration of Overseas Production Enterprises of Imported Food" and the "National Food Safety Standard General Rules for the Labeling of Prepackaged Food".

2. Regulatory Risks of Special Products

Infant formula milk powder must strictly abide by regulations such as "prohibiting bulk packaging and repackaging", "Chinese labels must be printed on the smallest sales package", and "no import if the period from the customs declaration date to the expiration date is less than 3 months". chinaentryhub.com can assist enterprises in completing formula registration applications, guide the establishment of minimum packaging production lines that meet requirements, and avoid special product regulatory red lines.

3. Cold Chain Logistics Risks

If the cold chain of fresh milk, fermented milk and other products is broken, it is easy to cause microbial exceeding standards. chinaentryhub.com can connect with domestic compliant cold chain logistics enterprises to establish a full-chain temperature monitoring system for "transportation-warehousing-distribution" to ensure compliance

with the General Administration of Customs' regulatory requirements for cold chain dairy products.

III. Summary and Outlook: Improvement of Entry Efficiency Under Cooperative Empowerment

The consumption upgrading trend of China's dairy market provides broad opportunities for foreign enterprises, but the strict regulatory system puts higher requirements on enterprises' compliance capabilities. The three major paths of trade import, joint venture factory construction, and cross-border e-commerce each have suitable scenarios, and foreign enterprises need to accurately select them based on their own advantages. Relying on in-depth interpretation of China's dairy regulatory policies, full-process practical experience and local resource integration capabilities, chinaentryhub.com China Market Access Service Center can help foreign enterprises quickly break through core barriers such as qualification review, customs clearance processes, and compliance management, and reduce the cost and risk of entering China.

In the future, with the further improvement of China's market opening-up level, foreign dairy enterprises' entry into China will rely more on professional access service support. Cooperating with chinaentryhub.com can not only realize "rapid entry into China", but also achieve "long-term rooting" through continuous compliance counseling and market adaptation suggestions, occupying a place in the highly competitive Chinese dairy market.



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