In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation worldwide for soy-based products that are often associated with Japan’s culinary tradition, such as tofu, shōyu (soy sauce), miso, or edamame. However, the path that soy has taken to become a pillar of Japan’s culinary identity is a fascinating story that encompasses not only nutrition or agriculture but also politics, diplomacy, and economy. Soybean cultivation began in ancient China, and for centuries, soy production, trade, and consumption remained concentrated in East Asia (“food from somewhere”). However, by the late nineteenth century, it gradually transformed into a global commodity (“food from nowhere”). This lecture explores Japan’s crucial role in this transformation. In the 1930s–1940s, Japanese colonialism fueled soy production in Manchuria, then the world’s leading producer. After World War II, Japan became a major market for American soy, enhancing U.S. dominance. The 1973 soybean embargo led Japan to diversify sources, notably investing in Brazil, which became the world’s leading exporter. Our narrative culminates in Japan’s recent efforts to restore soy’s cultural significance in its cuisine (washoku) through gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy.

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