From the late nineteenth century until at least the end of the Second World War and the immediate postwar period—in a period marked by uncertainty and rapid development—East Asia was flooded with a new set of terms, originally belonging to European and North-American historiography. These words described specific, often opposed, conceptions of change in its relationship to time, space and agency, by means of expressions such as “evolution,” “revolution” or “enlightenment.” They were not simply introduced into the local parlances, but where also resignified and appropriated, and in the process Japan often played the role of the revolving door between “East” and “West.”

This talk will explore a relatively late case of this phenomenon: the Japanese discovery of the European Renaissance in relation to local desires for resurgence, regeneration and reconstruction. It will focus in particular on how Japanese intellectuals, mass media and public officers translated and used the Renaissance as well as historically linked concepts—humanism, civism, and so on—in their struggle to come to terms with epochal changes.

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Regeneration and Reconstruction in the Modern Period