Where Time Begins: Time Measurement and the Establishment of the Prime Meridian in Tokugawa Japan

Dr. Yulia Frumer, Associate Professor of History of Science and Technology, Johns Hopkins University

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Terrace Room, Claudia Cohen Hall
(249 S 36th St)

Reception to follow

The ability to claim the prime meridian is a matter of political prestige. After all, the prime meridian marks the central line on the face of the earth, the place where time begins. It is thus not surprising that the late 19th century saw several European countries vying for the privilege of serving as a reference point for the rest of the world. Japan was not one of these contenders, yet prior to the Meiji reformation of 1868 Japanese scholars aspired to see the world centered — geographically and temporally — around Kyoto. Nevertheless, despite the political implications of establishing the prime meridian, the surveying enterprise that eventually located Kyoto at the zero longitude on Japanese maps was not motivated by politics. Rather, this enterprise began with attempts by Japanese astronomers to solve astronomical puzzles, and only later acquired political dimensions. This talk will explore the interplay between astronomical time measurement practices and political intentions in the process of establishing the prime meridian on late Tokugawa-period Japanese maps.

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