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Looking to the East: New Professor Anya Bernstein Has A Deep Interest in Taiwan and China

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Looking to the East
New professor Anya Bernstein has a deep interest in Taiwan and China

As a sophomore studying religion at Columbia College, and needing to fulfill a distribution requirement, Anya Bernstein wandered into a class in Chinese philosophy and, she says, “got wrapped up in it.”

She went on to pursue a certificate program in China at the Johns Hopkins-Nanjing University Center, then earned a Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Chicago, with a dissertation on political participation in Taipei, Taiwan. But, Bernstein says, “I came to feel like anthropology wasn’t really getting me at the questions I wanted to get at. I’m interested in how the state is organized and how people within the state operate, questions that I think are essential to help understand government and law in general. I thought studying law might help me get there.”

Bernstein received her J.D. from Yale Law School in 2010. After a year spent clerking for Judge Guido Calabresi in the federal Court of Appeals, Second Circuit, in Connecticut, she taught legal research and writing and Topics in Chinese Law as a Bigelow Fellow at the University of Chicago Law School.

Now Bernstein is joining the faculty at SUNY Buffalo Law School, and she says she’s delighted to be in a place where scholars bring social science disciplines to bear on questions of law. “In most places a Ph.D. in economics or political science is pretty standard,” she says. “What I think is remarkable about Buffalo is the diversity of the intellectual training that people have had— including anthropology, sociology, philosophy, even literature.”

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Bernstein is looking next to a project of reading case law about the boundaries of government. As government functions are increasingly being outsourced to private contractors, she says, the Supreme Court has struggled to draw the line between what is government and what is private industry.

Bernstein comes to Buffalo with two children – Isaiah, 4, and Mila, almost 1 – and her husband, Nicholas Day, a writer of narrative non-fiction who has just published his first book, Baby Meets World: Suck, Smile, Touch, Toddle (St. Martin’s Press). Their downtime, she says, tends to be spent at zoos and children’s museums, but, she says, “we’re really looking forward to exploring upstate New York.”