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Academic Conferences as Cultural Diplomacy: My Visit to the University of Leeds ^[1]

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A month ago I participated in a conference at the University of Leeds in the UK entitled Journeys and Justice: Forced Migration, Seeking Asylum and Human Rights. The conference, which was sponsored by the School of Geography at Leeds in partnership with Amnesty International, focused on the experiences of refugees in the UK and throughout the world. Additional conference organizers included members of the Leeds Asylum Seekers Support Network and Leeds Met University.

At the conference I presented a paper about the trafficking of ethnic minority women and girls in Thailand entitled National Identity, The Shan and Child Trafficking in Northern Thailand: The Case of DEPDC. I wrote this paper after spending part of the summer teaching music and English in Northern Thailand at an NGO dedicated to child trafficking prevention. While there, I discovered that a large majority of the women and girls who I was teaching were ethnic Shan (one of Northern Thailand's many ethnic minorities), and I wanted to better understand their experiences and circumstances.

Understudied academically, but possessing a large presence throughout Northern Thailand and Northeastern Burma, the Shan, or "Tai" people inhabit what is presently known as Shan State (an "imagined community" in the sense that it does not have autonomy, sovereignty or recognition by the Burmese and Thai governments). Lacking political autonomy in a nation riddled with ethnic warfare, the Shan have populated this large area of Burma since the 12th century, and have migrated into the mountainous regions of northern Thailand, Yunnan China and Laos. While their presence in each of these nations is strong, the Shan are nevertheless known as a "people without country," for their status as citizens remains unrecognized by many Southeast Asian governments, including Thailand's.

I discussed the NGO's activities, the circumstances of the Shan, and how my work at the school was a type of cultural diplomacy initiative. Cultural diplomacy deals with the values, attitudes and beliefs of a society, and how they are manifested and externalized in the cultural aspects of language, the arts, and people's day-to-day behavior. Education itself can be a powerful form of cultural diplomacy. Through teaching music and English (and by speaking Thai myself—the language used by the girls at the NGO), I was able to create connections, build relationships and make discoveries that might otherwise have been difficult to achieve. Cultural diplomacy, in addition to being a profound vehicle for communication, can also be a mechanism for building trust.

The Leeds conference itself was another opportunity to practice cultural diplomacy. While

most of the papers presented at the conference maintained a UK focus, I was happy (and relieved!) when, in the discussion following my presentation, several Thai and Southeast Asian scholars spoke up, contributing interesting and insightful observations. Among these was Usamard Siampukde, a Ph.D. candidate at Leeds who is conducting her research on Thai women who migrate to Japan, as well as the head of a UK-based NGO working with Karen refugees from Burma. I had a great time getting to know these women and learning about the incredible work they're doing in the UK, Thailand and beyond. I left the conference reminded that cultivating these types of friendships and associations is an amazing aspect of academia and a powerful tool for public diplomacy in its own right.

Erin Kamler is a master's degree candidate in Public Diplomacy at USC's Annenberg School for Communication/ School of International Relations. An award-winning playwright, composer and speaker of the Thai language, she is focusing her studies on public diplomacy in Southeast Asia.
