

## Foreword

Almost ninety miles north of Bangkok lies Wat Phra Phutthabaht, the Temple of the Buddha's Footprint. In February 1807, four days before the Magha Puja holiday, members of Bangkok's royal courts set out on pilgrimage for the Footprint, an annual tradition already two centuries old at that time. Among them were high-ranking court officials, sons of the royal family ordained as Buddhist monks, and even a host of palace women hilariously unsuited for the wilderness. Although today the trip takes less than three hours by car, for these pilgrims the Footprint lay three days ahead: the first two by boat, the third on elephant-back.

This motley procession may have been lost to us had it not included in its lower ranks a page named Phu (pronounced “pooH”). Although today he is remembered as Sunthorn Phu, Phu the Eloquent, Thailand's national poet, at the time he was merely a prince's servant facing the dissolution of his first marriage. For reasons that we can only speculate about, his wife had not spoken to him for over a month, and Phu was called away without their having reconciled. Chan was her name, “moon,” and images of moon-gazing, a standard of romantic poetry the world over, fill the poem that Phu wrote in his absence from her.

Phu's poem is a *nirat*, a uniquely Thai sort of verse travel memoir, of which Phu is the acknowledged master: accounts of journeys taken away from, and addressed to, a lover. In addition to straightforward travel narrative, there is in *nirat* poems a constant wordplay or metaphor-making that relates the names and features of the landscape, both natural and manmade, to thoughts of the beloved. In this way, *nirat* poems transcend the specificities of particular locales to map both physical locations and the topography of the heart.

Altogether, Phu's *Poems from the Buddha's Footprint* offer a rare and intimate glimpse into an age bygone today and sequestered in its own time: a royal procession out of Bangkok, then still a young capitol, past the ruined city of Ayutthaya, and into the hills and caves around Thailand's most fabled place of worship—as well as into the private life of Thailand's greatest poet.