

BOOK REVIEW

The Journey to Petchburi: A Poem by Sunthorn Phu

Author: Sunthorn Phu

Translated By: Sawanee Nivasabutr

Petchpoom Printing Co. Ltd., Petchburi, Thailand: 2013

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By Absorn Meesing*

Overview

This work is an English translation from the Thai of the poem titled “*Nirat Muang Phet*”, or The Journey to Petchburi, written by Sunthorn Phu (1786-1855). Sunthorn Phu is Thailand’s best known royal poet, the People’s Poet of Thailand. For his bicentennial in 1986, he was honored by UNESCO as a great world poet (Tourism Authority of Thailand, Sunthorn Phu Monument, retrieved Jan 2016). Critics equate him to Shakespeare and Chaucer in the range, quality, and national importance of his works (Chanpeon, Kenneth, 2003). In schools, Thai students study and recite Sunthorn Phu’s poems, including *Phra Abhai mani*, which is one of his masterpieces. Despite his honoured literary status among Thais, Sunthorn Phu is virtually unknown outside Thailand because his works have not been translated.

Sawanee Nivasabutr started her translation career at the age of 70 after retirement from many years of work at the World Bank in Washington D.C. Her works include translation from English to Thai and from Thai to English in a wide range of genres: novels, short stories, documentaries, academic articles, legal documents (laws), government contracts, poems, and literary works of well-known and/or award-winning authors. She received an outstanding translator award in 2014 from the Translators and Interpreters Association of Thailand (www.thaitiat.org).

Sawanee picked “*Nirat Muang Phet*” (The Journey to Petchburi) with two purposes in mind and two groups of readers, local and international. She wanted to make at least one of Sunthorn Phu’s outstanding works known outside Thailand, and to help Thais in general and students in particular become interested in translation from Thai into English. Her twofold purpose is well met as she skillfully translated the Thai poems into English poems beautifully retaining the content, style, and tone of the original. *Nirat Muang Phet* was selected from nine *Nirat* pieces by this great poet, because it is the best and the longest.

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The book contains both the original Thai and the translation side by side, Thai on left page and English conveniently on the right. All together there are 252 verses, each with 4 lines. Nirat is a travel journal. The author writes about his feelings and expresses his thoughts when he passes by people and places as he travels. Sunthorn Phu wrote this piece so well that he turned a travelogue into a work of art. And so did the translator.

Review

In the Nirat genre, it is a travelogue of the author depicting what he sees and his feeling and thoughts arisen while traveling. From embarkment of Bangkok until arriving to Petchburi, the author describes the geographical features, historical aspects, the biodiversity of fish, animals, plants and trees, the cultures, and ways of life, and the beauty of the countryside in Petchburi. There is no plot, no characters and no story. Thus, the value of the Nirat is solely the quality as a literary work. People find it a pleasure to read this beautiful Thai poem that describes the environment and, through the language used, interacts with the author's emotions and imagination.

For a global audience who cannot read Thai, the translation is adequate in terms of content and amazingly good in terms of language, especially very often in beautiful poetic form. Thai readers who can compare both versions side by side will be amazed at her simple yet elegance of translation. It is the translator's intention to keep her translation in the style of the Thai original. That is, this work is a *people's* poem, not a *palace* poem.

As there is no plot the book is not divided into chapters of events or topics. The reviewer therefore has chosen to give readers selected samples of poems of different contents and moods in Thai and English.

No.2 Purpose of the Journey

อนาถหนาวคราวอาสาเสด็จ
ไปเมืองเพชรบุรีที่ถิ่นหวาน
ลงนาวาลำวัดนมัสการ
อธิษฐานถึงคุณพระกรุณา

How cold it was when I volunteered a quest
To Petchburi for His Royal Highness¹.
Embarking a boat at the temple², I prayed,
Remembering his royal patronage, as always.

¹ Prince Isares Rangsan, or Phra Pin Klao, Son of King Rama II, younger brother of Kings Rama III and IV.

² Wat Aroon Rajwaram, also known as Wat Jaeng or Temple of Dawn, situated on the Chao Phraya River, Bangkok

This 2nd verse clearly tells why he took a journey to Petchburi. It also displays his loyalty to the King (His Royal Highness) and his attachment to Buddhism—praying at a temple at the start of his journey. It is amazing how the translator could manage to keep all the content while putting it into an English poetic form. Please note that all the footnotes are added by the translator for the purpose of explaining to foreign readers and there are none in the original version.

No.13 The power of money

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| ไทยเหมือนกันครั้นมาขอเอาหอห้อง | When Thai men proposed these fair maidens to wed, |
| ต้องขัดข้องแข็งกระด้างเหมือนอย่างเหล็ก | Tough like cold iron, they played hard to get. |
| เอาเงินจัดคัดจ้างเหมือนอย่างแจ็ก | To men loaded with money like the rich Chinese, |
| ถึงลวดเหล็กกลนร้อนอ่อนละไม | Soft like hot iron, they became easy to please. |

In this verse, after passing by houses of the rich Chinese who had beautiful young wives, the poet bitterly compares success of the poor man and the rich man in winning the heart of a pretty girl. The latter would always win with his money.

No. 32 Describing a rich nature at night in beautifully written Thai poem

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|----------------------------------|--|
| กรอดๆกรียดเขียดกบเข้าขบเขี้ยว | Ob, ob, the frogs croaked fiercely, |
| เหมือนกรับกรั้วกรอกริดะหวัดเสียง | Like castanet tempos, they screeched horridly. |
| หรี้งๆหรี้งแม่หมายลงในเรียง | Chirr, chirr, crickets chirped with friends. |
| แซ่ซ่าเนียงหนาวในใจรัญจวน | Insect orchestra chilled my heart again |

Thai-English bilingual readers will take full advantage of this book to compare and contrast the two verses in quality and to deepen their understanding in both languages.

No. 44 Parental love

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|--------------------------------|--|
| ไอ้พ่อแม่แต่ชั้นลิงไม่ทิ้งบุตร | Oh, parental love, even for poor monkeys, |
| เพราะแสนสุดเสนหานิจจาเอ๋ย | Offspring they loved ever so dearly. |
| ที่ลูกอ่อนป้อนนมนั่งชมเชย | Mother lovingly breast-feeding their wee ones, |
| กระไรเลยแลเห็นน่าเอ็นดู | They were so cute, watching them was fun. |

No. 62 The 32- bending canal

ถึงคลองนามสามสิบสองคดคู้
ดูเวียนวู้งวอ้อมค้อมหนักหนา
ให้หนูน้อยคอยนับในนาวา
แต่หนึ่งมาถ้วนสามสิบสองคด

At Klong Samsib-song Kod⁵¹ we arrived.
Many canal bends winding left and right.
From the boat, I asked young Noo⁵² to tally.
The total was thirty-two-bends exactly.

“Samsib-song Kod” means 32-bends (of the canal). Imagine the author’s journey from Bangkok to Petchburi by boat in local canals along the coastal border of the Siam Gulf back over 200 years ago: fertile soil, biodiversity of the vegetation and animals as well as the virgin nature of the Central Plain region of Thailand.

No. 124 Biodiversity of plants in Petchburi

ต้นไม้ไทรไม้้งอกตามซอกหิน
อินทนิลนางแย้มสอสดแซมสี
เหล่าลำต้นทมร่มรอบขอบคีรี
สุมาลีหล่นกลาดดูดาษดิน

Among stone crevices, grown bhodi and banyan trees,
Intanil⁸⁷ and nang-yam⁸⁸ bloomed colorfully.
Over the mountain, shady lanthom⁸⁹ trees stood around
Scattering flowers all over the ground.

In this verse alone, 5 different trees are mentioned, all of which are still commonly known among Thais nowadays. Many verses in the book are devoted to describing vividly the biodiversity of animals, flowers, trees , and fish.

Conclusion

Here are just six examples out of 252 beautiful verses in Thai and in English written by highly skillful authors. Readers, international or Thai, will find this book a pleasure to read. Thai students and teachers of English will find the book an exemplary translation with well written English poems in simple language. If more of this genre are to be translated in the future, the reviewer would strongly recommend Ms. Sawanee as translator. In addition, Ms. Sawanee or others of equal competence could kindly be invited to consider translating Thai proverbs in poetic forms by famous Thai authors, e.g. Lokanit Kham Kloang (โลกนิติคำโคลง), excerpts from further masterpieces of Sunthon Phu, or selected invaluable royal speeches of His Majesty the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

⁵¹ Klong Samsibsong Kod: a canal connecting Maha Chai and Tha Jeen Rivers, meaning a canal of thirty-two bends.

⁵² Noo: common name for young person, in this case he was one of Sunthorn Phu’s sons.

⁸⁷ Intanil – Pride of India

⁸⁸ Nang-yam = fragrant clerodendrum

⁸⁹ Lanthom = pagoda trees.

What is left to ponder

Given that it is impossible to do everything when translating poetry from another era, into a language with almost no links to the original in structure or conventions, we can ask only a general question: Is this translation a satisfying read that retains at least some of the sentiments and flavour of the original in a modern poetic style? Another question is, as it is obviously a cross-cultural matter to translate from one language into another: Should the translated version be completely free from the original's culture or vice versa?
