

“People Born to Live in Their Motherland”: The Encounter of China and the West in Waclaw Sieroszewski’s Novel *Zamorski diabeł*¹

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Abstract

The article analyses methods of presenting the relationships between China and the West in *Zamorski diabeł* [The Overseas Devil] by Waclaw Sieroszewski. The novel presents factors that shape the negative image of relationships between the Chinese and the Europeans, such as stereotyping and fetishisation of the Chinese culture by Western people, their unwillingness to engage in contact with the Chinese as well as their colonialist attitude, visible both at the level of the economic practices and the symbolic definitions of terms such as “progress” and “civilisation”. The article also analyses different versions of the conclusion of the novel and their influence on the moral of the story.

Keywords

Waclaw Sieroszewski, *Zamorski diabeł* [The Overseas Devil], culture of China, colonialism, Boxer Rebellion

The Polish novel discussed in the present article, functioning under the title *Zamorski diabeł* or its Chinese variants *Jan-guj-tzy* / *Jang-hun-tsy* (placed always next to the Polish title), constitutes an interesting fragment of Waclaw Sieroszewski’s (1858–1945) literary writing, as an exception from his usual literary strategies and techniques. Indeed, the most significant and the most often discussed works he authored are texts

¹ This article was originally published in Polish: “‘Ludzie stworzeni, by mieszkać w swojej ojczyźnie’. Spotkanie świata Zachodu i Chin w *Zamorskim diable* Waclawa Sieroszewskiego”, *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 2024, no. 2, pp. 94–109, <https://doi.org/10.31338/2657-599X.ph.2024-2.6>.

(both literary and those with a scholarly verve), in which he explores his experiences of contacts with tribes living in Siberia (e.g., in the novels *Na kresach lasów* [At the Edge of the Woods] and *Ucieczka* [A Flight from Siberia]), or in the ethnographic monograph *Dwanaście lat w kraju Jakutów* [Twelve Years in the Yakut Country]).² These books are a reworking of his personal history as a Siberian deportee,³ and at the same time, a testimony of his search for a new way of describing this region and presenting it to the Polish reader, with ethnographic curiosity, though not deprived of martyrologic streak.⁴ However, no direct relation between personal experience and the text can be found in *Zamorski diabeł*. This novel belongs (together with the short stories “Bokser” [A Boxer] and “Kulisi” [The Coolies]) to a small group of texts treating the subject of the Far East, but composed before Sieroszewski’s great voyage across Asia (including, among others, Northeast China, Japan and Korea),⁵ which he began in 1902 on commission from the Academy of Learning. His impressions from this journey are recorded, among others, in his documentary texts from China published in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* [The Illustrated Weekly], in his book *Korea. Klucz Dalekiego Wschodu* [Korea. The Key to the Far East] from 1905⁶ and in the Japanese motifs scattered in numerous literary works.⁷

This does not mean that the image of China presented in *Zamorski diabeł* is merely a product of the author’s imagination or that the references to this country function solely as an allegory of the Polish society, as was the case in the early humoresques

² Wacław Sieroszewski, *Na kresach lasów*, Lviv: Wydawnictwo Polskie 1920; idem, *Ucieczka*, Warsaw: Biblioteka Polska 1923 (English translation: idem, *A Flight from Siberia*, trans.: s.n., London: Hutchinson 1909); idem, *Dwanaście lat w kraju Jakutów*, Warsaw: Fr. Karpiński 1900.

³ As a student at the Railway Technical School in Warsaw, Sieroszewski had contact with the socialist milieu. On 27 July 1878, when securing the illegal departure of Jan Tomaszewski, a close collaborator of Ludwik Waryński, he was arrested and then accused of propagating socialism. Sieroszewski pleaded not guilty and refused to cooperate with the Gendarmerie. As a result, in August that same year, he was put in the 10th Pavilion of the Warsaw Citadel (see: Andrzej Sieroszewski, *Wacława Sieroszewskiego żywot niespokojny*, published from the manuscript, elaborated and supplemented by Andrzej Z. Makowiecki, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Iskry 2015, pp. 29–37). In 1879, he took part in the prisoners’ revolt, for which he was deported to Siberia (see: ibidem, pp. 43–46). It was not until 1896, after receiving the golden medal of Russian Geographical Society for the novel *Jakuty* [The Yakuts], that he obtained the permission to return to Poland and a year later came back to his homeland.

⁴ See, for example, Adrian Uljasz, “Syberia i Daleki Wschód w oczach polskiego pisarza. Wacław Sieroszewski (1858–1945)”, *Przegląd Nauk Historycznych* 2012, A. XI, no. 1, pp. 137–153.

⁵ This journey was an attempt to vindicate Sieroszewski – unjustly accused of organising a workers’ march during the ceremony of unveiling Adam Mickiewicz’s monument in Warsaw – in the eyes of the Russian authorities. Thus, this was a forced journey. More on this subject, see: Andrzej Sieroszewski, *Wacława Sieroszewskiego żywot niespokojny*, pp. 146–160.

⁶ See also: Marlena Oleksiuk, *Korea w twórczości Wacława Sieroszewskiego*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG 2022.

⁷ More on this subject, see, e.g., Zdzisław Kempf, *Orientalizm Wacława Sieroszewskiego. Wątki japońskie*, Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1982.

or some weekly chronicles by Bolesław Prus.⁸ Sieroszewski tried to present a factual image of the events taking place there and of this country's culture. As for the gaps resulting from the lack of his own experience of this country, he supplemented them with knowledge drawn from the notes and texts given to him by Aleksandra Potanina, a Russian explorer and researcher of Central Asia. Sieroszewski first met the scholar and her husband, the ethnographer Grigory Potanin, in the 1890s in Irkutsk and he quickly developed a cordial relationship with them. The first version of *Zamorski diabeł*, written in Russian and published in the magazine *Mir Bozhiy* [God's World], was in fact a literary reworking of Potanina's notes from her expedition to China, and the nature of this edition was indicated by including the scholar and Sieroszewski as coauthors. However, none of the Polish editions, beginning with the first print in the press (*Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 1901), mentions the name of Potanina as a coauthor or a source of inspiration.

The influence of foreign texts on the shape of *Zamorski diabeł* was not limited to the descriptions of local realia drawn from Potanina's works. The motif of commercial expedition, which takes the protagonist to China and constitutes the trigger of the novel's plot, was based, as Piotr Grzegorzczak indicated,⁹ on the journal of Paweł Piasecki, member of the scientific-commercial expedition sent by the Russian government to China in 1874. This book, which at that time in Russia attracted tremendous interest (the first edition from 1880 sold out in an instant, and the second one was published already two years later), would serve not only as a source of inspiration for Sieroszewski in the descriptions of local conditions, but also as a basis for the description of incompetence of the members of the expedition and the revolt that grew within the team, which was the first step towards the demythologisation of the image of the Western world as more developed than the Far East.¹⁰ Hence, it can be concluded that one of the few elements stemming from the author's own artistic invention is the figure of Janek Brzeski, the novel's protagonist, through whose eyes the reader sees China. This literary device, albeit contentious in terms of analysis of originality of a literary text,¹¹

⁸ More on this subject, see, e.g., Jan Data, "O Chinach i Chińczykach w juvenaliach i kronikach Bolesława Prusa", in: *Chiny w oczach Polaków. Księga jubileuszowa z okazji 60-lecia nawiązania stosunków dyplomatycznych między Polską a Chińską Republiką Ludową*, eds. Józef Włodarski, Kamil Zeidler, Marceł Burdelski, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego 2010, pp. 359–366. The possibility of interpreting *Lalka* in the context of China-related symbolism, the presence of which may constitute a touchstone of the common image of this country in the Polish cultural consciousness, is indicated also by Bogdan Mazan (see: Bogdan Mazan "Z obrazów Chin i Chińczyków w piśmiennictwie polskim drugiej połowy XIX wieku. 'Chińskie cienie' w *Lalce* Bolesława Prusa", in: *Pozytywizm i negatywizm. My i wy po stu latach*, eds. Bogdan Mazan, Słowinia Tynecka-Makowska, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Biblioteka Mateusz Poradecki 2005, pp. 317–407).

⁹ Cf. Piotr Grzegorzczak, "Źródło *Powieści chińskich* Wacława Sieroszewskiego", *Ruch Literacki* 1929, no. 9, p. 274.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 273–274.

¹¹ The ambiguity of such device is best confirmed by the attitude of Grzegorzczak himself, who does not venture in his article to answer the question whether Sieroszewski commits plagiarism. Both because

made it possible for Sieroszewski to blur the boundaries between the fictional material and the information drawn from already existing sources, thus rendering the narration more credible.

At the same time, this compels us to read *Zamorski diabeł* in a different way than Sieroszewski's Siberian texts. The Chinese novel should not be treated as a reportage or an autobiographical text¹² (even if we cannot deny the author's reliability in the presentation of facts), but as a literary text, in which the description of China serves mainly to problematise the question of possibility of establishing relationships between the East and the West, and even to create a political allegory referring to the situation of Poland at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.¹³ In *Zamorski diabeł*, much more important than factual accuracy is the encounter of two substantially disparate cultural systems and the resulting chances and risks. Indeed, Sieroszewski chooses a different path than, for example, Henryk Sienkiewicz did in *W pustyni i w puszczy* (*In Desert and Wilderness*), when he presented the culture of Egypt from the perspective of a coloniser penetrating a virgin land and clearly approved of such perception.¹⁴ Instead, the author of *Zamorski diabeł* looks at China with respect and does not hide his negative attitude to the colonising inclinations of Western people, thus deconstructing the rhetoric of appropriation that was used to justify the ongoing process of economic exploitation of China. For this reason, it would be worthwhile to analyse the ways of creating the situations of encounter of the two cultures, beginning from the start, that is, from the characters' knowledge about China, through the perspective from which they view the culture of that country, ending with the ambivalence related to the two worlds colliding (seen not only from the perspective of a man entering the Middle Kingdom, but also from the point of view of the Chinese themselves facing the influx of foreigners).

of the textual limits (the journal counted over a thousand pages) and the formal ones, Piasecki's influence, most visible in the initial parts of the novel, gradually diminishes. Therefore, Grzegorzczuk chooses to analyse instead how the introduction of the figure of Brzeski adds nuance to the narration imposed by Piasecki and, from this perspective, he appreciates the novel as a successful text, which uses material drawn from other sources to broaden the author's own point of view (*ibidem*, p. 275).

¹² Although, at the most general level, we could find similarities between the experiences of Janek Brzeski and Sieroszewski's numerous encounters with foreign cultures, the argument against interpreting the novel in this key would be, above all, the fact that he chose as the place of action a country that he could not have known yet from personal experience. This decision, in conjunction with the specific origin of a large part of the novel, could be interpreted as a sign of his cutting off from literary reworking of his own biography in the way he did, for example, in *Na kresach lasów*. For these reasons, I also decided not to refer to Sieroszewski's egodocuments, which cannot constitute an interpretative context for the novel.

¹³ See: Aleksandra Kijak, *Odkrywca innej Syberii i Dalekiego Wschodu. O prozie Wacława Sieroszewskiego*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2010, pp. 89–90.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Anna Cichoń, “W kręgu zagadnień literatury kolonialnej – *W pustyni i w puszczy* Henryka Sienkiewicza”, *Er(r)go. Teoria – Literatura – Kultura* 2004, no. 8, pp. 91–108.

Starting point – the (lack of) knowledge about China

The first step necessary to present the relationships between the East and the West is the choice of perspective in the novel. The protagonist of *Zamorski diabeł*, through whose eyes the author will be viewing the world of China, is Janek Brzeski, a nineteen-year-old Pole living with his mother in the heart of Russia. The boy's decision to depart with a commercial expedition and to accept employment in a tea factory run by his uncle gives him the first opportunity to broaden his horizons. This is particularly important if we take into account that Brzeski's and his mother's knowledge about China is best described as "rudimentary", based mainly on stereotypes, false convictions and sometimes even on harmful prejudices:

It's unthinkable that you should stay with no penny on you in a country so distant and wild...

– Mum, China is not a wild country! Their civilisation is older than ours...

– So I have heard, but still I do not trust them a bit. They wear God knows what, men braid their hair, they greet each other on all fours, eat dogs, cats, worms... It's true, they have good porcelain and silk, I admit, but you, Janek, when you are among them, I beg you, beware of unchristian customs...¹⁵

In the characters' imaginarium, China is reduced to a cluster of images that favour the exoticisation of that country. The symbols invoked by Brzeski and his mother, deprived of their original semantic context, blend together, revealing in fact more about the persons pronouncing those judgments than about the country they describe. Men's queue braids mentioned by Brzeska serve as a good example, because they are not an integral part of that culture, but constitute a symbol of subjugation imposed by the Manchu peoples, who took control of China in the 19th century.¹⁶ Without this knowledge, the woman, although she aptly notices the cultural gender ambiguity of this hairstyle worn by men, yet she lacks the cultural and political context. Therefore, she takes the queues for a sign of blurring the characteristic differences between sexes, which constitute an integral part of Western culture, and she refers to male braids in similar categories as culinary customs.

At this point, it is worth indicating the difference between the attitude of Janek Brzeski and that of his mother. The image of China in the woman's eyes, despite certain positive attributes, constitutes above all a reflection of fears of this Polish woman devoted to tradition and living in a foreign country (this explains the importance of her recurring exhortations to Janek that he must cultivate elements of Polish tradition and Christian religion, for this should warrant that the boy will maintain his identity).¹⁷ Yet

¹⁵ Waław Sieroszewski, *Zamorski diabeł. Powieść*, Kraków: Spółka Nakładowa "Książka" 1909, p. 10.

¹⁶ See: Norbert Bociański, "Chiny w XIX i na początku XX wieku. Zarys sytuacji politycznej i społecznej", *Przegląd Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Społeczny* 2014, no. 1, p. 5.

¹⁷ See: Waław Sieroszewski, *Zamorski diabeł*, p. 153.

her son, facing his first adventure of a lifetime, although he also constructs his image of China based on stereotypical snapshots, he clearly romanticises and even, to some degree, fetishises the unknown land:

So, he is going to see China, the enchanted land, where men wear queues and skirts, the land of women with slanted eyes and small feet, the land of bizarre ceremonies and bizarre customs, the land where tea is flowering, where the famous teacups are made, where they smoke opium, and shoot at the sun during eclipses...¹⁸

The images creating the vision of China in Brzeski’s conceptual system overlap only to some extent with his mother’s imaginarium (and this usually concerns those components that can be deemed as positive or at least neutral), but they compose a mosaic of scenes formed in the perspective of superiority, in which cultural differences are instances of “bizarreness”. Moreover, the gender aspect is more strongly represented here, revealing not only the incompatibility of Eastern models and Western customs (through the recurring figure of men’s braided hair), but also the erotic potential hidden in the foreignness, based – again – on the lack of knowledge about the cultural context (indeed, the “small feet” that ignite the boy’s imagination are nothing else but the result of feet binding, which was practiced from the youngest age in girls of higher social status to ensure that men will find them attractive and, in consequence, to increase their chances of getting married). However, in this case, the fetishisation of oppression, which was the feet-binding procedure, is reinforced by thoughtless exoticisation of China, only partially attributable to Brzeski’s young age.

Progress and colonialism

If such mechanisms seem natural in Janek and his mother, as resulting from lack of direct contact with the civilisation of China, yet it may be surprising that equally low level of cultural awareness can be found in the boy’s uncle, Tomasz Śnietycki, who manages a tea factory and has a regular contact with the Chinese, so he has had many opportunities to revise his views. Yet the possibility of broadening his horizons after confronting a different cultural system does not even appear in his conceptual repertoire. Instead, the uncle encourages Brzeski to join the expedition mostly due to the chance of making fast earnings, which he indirectly presents almost as a patriotic deed (“When you make quite a sum, we’ll all meritoriously return to our country. Because the country is poor and we need to bring it money, to be an aid for it, not a burden”¹⁹). He does not give his nephew any guidelines that could help him adapt to

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 16.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 7.

the new conditions, and at the same time, he only underlines the benefits that Brzeski can gain from the journey, by which he adds the coloniser's perspective to the boy's set of images of China. From this point of view, the efforts made to get to know the country of arrival matter only inasmuch as they help construct the domination of the Western world (hence, e.g., the credit given to Janek for studying Chinese language, as this is necessary to do business, with a concurrent reluctance to maintain any further contacts, for they could bring the risk of losing one's own European identity). Yet this approach is a natural consequence of the dominant attitude among the Europeans in China, first expressed in the novel by Śnietycki.²⁰ Limiting contacts with the Chinese exclusively to business and otherwise total isolation are the result of the Western people's perspective of superiority, resulting from the conviction that their understanding of progress is the only right one and, therefore, absolutely has to be implemented in all parts of the world.

The unfettered feeling of superiority of the people of the West over Eastern culture, which is counterproductive to the expedition's goal, constitutes an immediate consequence of colonialism. The scene in which the characters meet with Chinese dignitaries in a tent prepared for the members of the expedition and allow their dog inside seems to be symptomatic. Despite full awareness that the Chinese do not accept these animals in public space, the characters not only commit a faux pas (though perhaps we should rather call it a purposeful violation of the norm), but they also stubbornly defend their position through the use of unfounded arguments:

Finally came Siuj and Dor, which, against the Chinese etiquette, was allowed into the room. He did not fail to leap at the opportunity and instantly began to sniff the shins and other parts of the body of the assembled dignitaries. They did not betray their disgust even with the slightest gesture, although their eyes blazed with angry thunders.

– The dog must be removed... It is a violation of Chinese decency... Chinese politeness does not allow for a dog to... – the topographer remarked impetuously.

– Please, spare us your remarks... I ain't in a Chinese lodging, but my own! – retorted the baron angrily.²¹

The absurd comment of the baron, who forgets that the lodging was made available to him by the sheer politeness of the Chinese, shows that he thinks about the territory on which he stands in terms of a conquered land. However, this attitude contributes to the growing tension between the members of the expedition and the Chinese, which can be seen in spite of the strict code of Asian politeness revealed in ceremonial smiles. In consequence, this also disrupts the rhythm of negotiations.

The specific treatment of the Chinese, also by the Western managers of the factory, stems from the Eurocentric attitude, which forces them to look at China merely as a land of cheap workers, and at Europeans as the conquerors bringing illumination and civilisation (conceived, of course, in European categories) to the ignorant folk.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 7–8.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 45.

This seemingly good gesture is, in fact, a false pretence, meant to justify the Western expansion, the aim of which is to impose on the autochthons the European technological achievements, the “proper” cultural code and the conviction of superiority of the foreign political powers over the Far East. To this end, it is necessary to revalue the image of the foreign culture and, at the same time, to disguise one’s own intentions:

– It is time for China to regain itself – perorated the manager. – This land of classic stagnation used to live and to develop, until bonzos and mandarins put it in the threefold chain of destitution, ignorance and fanaticism. Now, it is caught in a vicious circle: fanatic because ignorant – ignorant because fanatic. [...] Europe, by the natural course of the development of its civilisation, is called to break the vicious circle of the unfortunate folk.²²

This rhetoric serves only to falsify the reality by rejecting the achievements of Chinese culture and privileging the technological dimension in the definition of progress, thus justifying the expansive actions of Western countries. The remedy to the alleged ills of the Chinese would be the unification of this nation’s culture with the world of the West. Concurrently, the attitude instilled in the autochthones should be that of humble servility towards the white man. As a result, “superfluous” knowledge about China (i.e., knowledge going beyond stereotypes) would constitute an obstacle to those tasks, since it would require a revision of negative stereotypes.

Between the two worlds

Brzeski could easily adopt the Eurocentric way of thinking about China, but he chooses a different path – partly of his own will, partly by necessity, for the purpose of acquiring the competencies he needs to complete the tasks he has been given. The decision to limit contacts with other industrialists and to penetrate deeper into the foreign culture by living with the family of a Chinese teacher forces him to confront the unknown reality every day. Moreover, the adoption of a proactive attitude (studying the history and culture of China, participating in the family life of the hosts, taking part in the New Year ceremony) allows him to qualify – or, in fact, to form from scratch – his opinions on the relationship between China and the Western world.

Brzeski’s teacher, Wań-Siń-Li (whose name means “Ruler of Western Gates”), proves to be a perfect example of a person suspended between the two worlds. The former official is fascinated with the culture of the West,²³ as it is confirmed by his

²² Ibidem, p. 189 (emphasis mine).

²³ However, it has to be underlined that Wań’s relations with the West are of a different nature than the adoption of elements of foreign culture by the rich Chinese men whom Brzeski met during his short visit in the embassy: “Here all national things are cheap, but all that is European is extraordinarily expensive. Yet in the embassy even European servants would be ashamed to use local objects. You must

rudimentary knowledge of French, relatively good relationships with the Catholic missionaries (Father Paolo from Italy and Father Płoński from the Poznań region), as well as the implementation of elements of European culture in his children's upbringing. The most blatant example of the latter is the fact that he decided not to bind the feet of his daughter Lień (even if the girl herself identifies with the cultural heritage of her own country more than her father does, which will be manifested by her wearing the traditional make-up).²⁴

However, full Europeanisation cannot be completed in his case, mainly due to the influence of his wife, Chań-Wań – an opium addict descended from an eminent Chinese family. Any deviation from tradition is for her a clear testimony of the moral decline of the whole family and, therefore, a deterioration of her own situation after she married Wań. Particularly important proves to be her objection to her husband's methods of upbringing their daughter Lień, because – in line with the patriarchal view of the world – they may restrict the girl's chances to get married, and thus make it significantly more difficult or even impossible for her to survive in the society. Hence, Chań-Wań is the guardian of the patriarchal tradition, which may seem surprising, considering her sex, but results mainly from her own upbringing. In a society that cannot keep pace with the cultural changes introduced by Wań under the influence of Western people, any deviation from the imposed norms leads to the exclusion of the deviating individual. Therefore, Chań-Wań's attitude constitutes for her, above all, a survival strategy.

Decisions taken by Wań, even though they influence mainly himself and his family, are seen as a kind of political act also by the Catholic missionaries, whose willingness to grant financial aid to the Ruler of Western Gates depended on whether he sent his son Ma-czzy to the school run by the missionaries. Wań's decision to send his son to a Chinese school, although made also for pecuniary reasons (as it resulted from his fear of losing orders from companies reluctant to cooperate with a deviant)²⁵ was perceived by them as turning away from the path of progress. From this perspective, their will to help Wań, which in the spirit of Catholic religion should be disinterested, becomes another step contributing to the reinforcement of colonial expansion of the West, based mostly on the transfer of material goods.

Yet Wań and his family are not merely victims, they can take advantage of their position – not only by charging Brzeski for the lessons (that is, by selling their competencies), but also through the later manipulation of the boy, when Chań-Wań, seeking funds to buy opium, simply plays with the erotic tension stemming from the

always take what is best and most expensive: walking on foot is unfitting, you should rent a palanquin straightaway" (ibidem, p. 111). The choice of European objects instead of those produced locally does not result from the acceptance of the presence of the foreigners and their influence on China, but from the limited availability of those goods, allowing for the representatives of higher social classes, who are wealthy enough to obtain them, to nourish a sense of superiority. By the same token, this becomes an important index of social stratification.

²⁴ Waclaw Sieroszewski, *Zamorski diabeł*, pp. 200–201.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 156.

limiting of contacts between the boy and Lień.²⁶ The specific position of the characters, who, on the one hand, are victims of the West and, on the other, prove skilful at using the situation for their own benefit, stimulates Brzeski to change his views, as he gradually discerns new aspects of the picture so carefully cultivated by the Europeans.

However, Wań's attitude, based on deeply opportunistic intentions, is an exception. The Chinese and the Europeans alike believe they are two opposing groups fighting for domination or at least for the right to autonomy. Besides the domains of business and religious missions, representatives of both groups form enclaves; they do not participate in the other group's feasts or parties, and they do not enter into romantic relationships. Therefore, Janek's choice, although understandable for the factory workers from the economic point of view and acceptable as a means to obtain skills necessary to do business, was treated with some suspicion, because too close integration with a foreign, weaker culture constitutes a degradation for a European.

In the meantime, being in contact with the Chinese and sharing their life becomes for Janek not only a chance to broaden horizons, but also to question his earlier convictions. His unique perspective makes it possible for him to maintain distance from the programme of “civilising” China promoted by factory owners, because he does not see the alleged positive impact of the Europeans on the development of China that would justify the attitude of superiority adopted by the people of the West. It is precisely the contact with the autochthones and the study of their history and culture that lead him to the key conclusions constituting the message of the novel:

He learned what immense efforts, what a struggle with nature and aggressive neighbours brought the Chinese to achieve the high level of culture and customs that he observed among this whole race. Brzeski understood that such a nation could not give up self-perfection or progress, but it has taken a different path towards them than the Europeans and follows it in slow, little steps, but in its entire enormous volume.²⁷

In this horizon of thought, progress is no longer a neutral category – its understanding begins to be culturally determined and may even, in specific cases, become subject to instrumentalisation. From this perspective, Brzeski's advantage would consist not in perceiving either of the cultures as superior to the other, but in seeing the value of pluralism, which is, however, possible – as the ending will show – only upon the condition of maintaining each culture's autonomy. Although Sieroszewski does not show it in a direct manner, Brzeski's attitude may result to some degree from his identity as a member of a nation that has been deprived of its own statehood. Even though for the Chinese people Janek is just another representative of the colonising culture, he himself, belonging to a nation dominated, among others, by the Russian Empire, could more easily identify with the nation experiencing foreign expansion than with the colonisers' mentality of his “kinsmen”.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 166–170.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

At the same time, in consequence of such an attitude, Brzeski's status becomes somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, immersion in the Chinese culture, realised not only on the level of language and history, but also in the purely physical dimension, by wearing local clothing, constitutes a necessary condition of his development. However, this approach contributes to his isolation from the Europeans. On the other hand, none of his efforts can prevent the Chinese from perceiving him as a foreign element – one of the “overseas devils”, who will be at best abused, at worst – rejected immediately. This leads to the boy's internal conflict, and the only solution will be to escape.

Private and systemic tragedy. Variants of ending

We need to point out that two versions of *Zamorski diabeł* used to function almost in parallel, each with a different ending. Although in both variants, Brzeski – and, with him, the project of a closer relationship between China and the West – is doomed to failure, the essence of the conflict and the ultimate cause of this defeat are outlined in a different way.

The initial intention was to place the conflict above all on the private level. In the press edition, the key obstacle for Brzeski was the feeling of love that began to grow between him and Lień. Although the girl, after her father's disappearance, sees the young Pole as her benefactor, Brzeski shuts out the possibility of getting involved with the Chinese girl – partly due to the expected resistance from the Western environment, partly because he would find it difficult to accept the fruit of this relationship, no matter whether their future children were brought up as Chinese or as Europeans. However, his lack of response to the infatuated girl's advances and to her proposal of conceiving a child with her leads Lień to commit suicide and Brzeski to escape out of fear that the Chinese would seek revenge.²⁸ This resolution of the novel's conflict agrees with the pattern of presenting Asian women in Sieroszewski's writing. As Ida Sadowska indicates, he describes those women mainly as young, devoted to tradition, honourable and noble.²⁹ In consequence, Lień is characterised above all in the context of her relationship with Brzeski and her role should be regarded as subservient to the development of the protagonist's consciousness. The heroine is also clearly exoticised, as her attractiveness is strongly correlated with her foreignness.

However, already in the first book edition, Sieroszewski does not pay much attention to Janek and Lień's relationship and presents Brzeski's departure as a necessary escape

²⁸ Cf. Waław Sieroszewski, *Jang-hun-tsy. Powieść*, in: *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1901, no. 52, pp. 1022–1023.

²⁹ See: Ida Sadowska, “Mit kobiety egzotycznej w literaturze Młodej Polski – inspiracje azjatyckie i daleko-wschodnie”, in: eadem, *Wśród swoich i wśród obcych. Waława Sieroszewskiego portret wielokrotny*, ed. Grażyna Legutko, Kielce: Instytut Filologii Polskiej Akademii Świętokrzyskiej im. Jana Kochanowskiego w Kielcach 2007, p. 122.

from the Boxers’ attack on the factory. Thus, it is not merely a consequence of personal youthful mistakes, but his conflict of identity is inscribed in the current political context³⁰ (not only by reference to the events in China, but also through the suggestive allegory of the Russian 1905 Revolution, which could now be mentioned, because the Tsarist censorship has been eased in the post-revolutionary period). The Yihequan society, whose name is literally translated as “Righteous and Harmonious Fists” (hence the nickname “Boxers” given by the Europeans), represented mainly anti-feudal and anti-dynastic views, yet from the very beginning, it manifested tendencies to oppose foreigners and the Christian religion. Members of this movement were recruited above all from the peasant milieu, but there were also soldiers and the urban poor among them. Their activity found fertile ground because of the circumstances: the crisis within the ruling dynasty in China, the increasingly intense interventions of Western countries in the Chinese internal politics and economy (and the economic crisis resulting from those actions), the natural disasters and finally the awakening of national consciousness among the Chinese.³¹ The Boxer Rebellion constituted an important topic in the Polish press at the beginning of the 20th century. This might have resulted – as Józef Bachórz indicates – above all, from the involvement of the three partitioners of Poland in the fight with the Boxers, which meant that Polish men who were enlisted in the partitioners’ armies took part in those riots. The manner of presenting the events in each magazine depended on its adopted worldview. The conservative press mostly described violent attacks by the Chinese and the damage they caused, in order to instil fear in the readers and, in consequence, to convince them to reject the purposes of the uprising. Whereas socialist periodicals and Aleksander Świętochowski’s *Prawda* [Truth] sought to unmask the colonialist desires of European political powers and opposed the exploitation of the resources and the people of China conducted by those countries.³²

Sieroszewski chose a similar direction (he even published in *Prawda* a short story dedicated to that event, entitled “Uang-Ming-Tse”, later incorporated under the title “Bokser” [Boxer] in the collection *Powieści chińskie* [Chinese Stories]). In *Zamorski diabeł*, the author presents the events from the perspective of a man from the West, but deprived of agency. For the Boxers, Brzeski is merely a representative of the hateful group of “overseas devils” exploiting the Chinese resources and thereby contributing to the downfall of China. Paradoxically, this makes it possible to present the protagonist in a slightly more positive light – as a young idealist, whose actions cannot bridge the yawning cultural gap between the two groups.

³⁰ See also: Mariusz Kulik, “Obraz powstania bokserów w twórczości Wacława Sieroszewskiego”, in: *Wacław Sieroszewski. Zesłaniec – etnograf – literat – polityk*, eds. Antoni Kuczyński, Mirosław Marczyk, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Katedry Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2011, pp. 167–173.

³¹ See: Witold Rodziński, *Historia Chin*, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1992, pp. 512–514.

³² See: Józef Bachórz, “*Prawda* Aleksandra Świętochowskiego o chińskim powstaniu bokserów”, in: *Chiny w oczach Polaków*, pp. 351–352.

In this version, the role of Lień is also significantly modified. She helps Brzeski escape, opposing in a way her own culture. The girl's affection for Janek and her gratitude for the help he had granted to her family after Wań's disappearance made it impossible for her to side with the Boxers. Yet, the decision to help Brzeski is not tantamount to accepting the possibility of cultural integration of the East with the West. This is best revealed in her final speech, which also expresses the message of the novel:

Run away and... in your own country, the happy country... remember sometimes the poor black-haired Lień!... But do not come back, never come back!... People born to live in their motherland... We suffer from foreigners when they're evil and we suffer double when they're good... After all, there's no way you could become a Chinese?!? So why have you come here?!³³

Thus, the girl shuts out the possibility of a peaceful co-existence of both cultures side by side, because friendly relations would require either of the sides to renounce its own identity. As a result, the project proves to be utopian, and both Brzeski and Lień are well aware of it. It is worth noting, however, that the new ending contributes to the autonomation of the heroine's position in the plot. She is no longer a mere trophy for Brzeski, reduced to sheer beauty and exotic femininity, but a subject capable of expressing her own opinion and defending the integrity of her nation.

However, in the next edition, Sieroszewski returned to the first ending, perhaps, as Aleksandra Kijak suggests, with the intention to avoid the literalness of the anti-colonial message. According to the researcher, the episodes of the Boxers' attack, the escape of Brzeski and his companions, and finally the above-quoted message spoken by Lień are artificial, due to their purely technical character, and in consequence, they diminish the artistic value of the text.³⁴ Yet, the modification of the original ending may also be perceived as an attempt to give the Chinese people greater autonomy by the intermediary of Lień, and thus to level the balance of power between them and the people of the West. The conclusions drawn by Brzeski, concerning the necessity to respect the different pace and direction of progress in China and in Europe, find clear confirmation in the words of the girl, who thereby also gains autonomy as a person.

Conclusion

None of the characters of *Zamorski diabeł* believes it would be possible for the Chinese and the Western world to coexist on the same territory – neither Brzeski, nor the members of the expedition and tea factory workers, nor Wań-Siń-Li or his family. In Sieroszewski's system, the side-by-side presence of representatives of two

³³ Waclaw Sieroszewski, *Zamorski diabeł*, p. 244.

³⁴ See: Aleksandra Kijak, *Odkrywcza innej Syberii*, pp. 85–86.

so very different cultures can only result in a fight for domination, not only in terms of technological level, but also of cultural superiority. The isolation of the two civilisations, stemming from the conviction that everyone should live in their motherland, constitutes for the author the only possible solution in those specific historical circumstances. This pessimistic conclusion of *Zamorski diabeł* is the outcome of an analysis of the political situation of China at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries and is based on the reflection on the development of colonialism. A scenario in which representatives of two so radically disparate cultural systems could live side by side assumes mutual respect, which is impossible without mutual cognition. This, however, would require not only to relinquish the expansion plans, but also to redefine the concepts used to create the image of cultural superiority of the West, above all, the concepts of progress and civilisation, which underpin the European culture. Such a redefinition of identity was at that time a sheer impossibility, hence the firm attitude expressed through the figure of Lień in the second version of the novel’s ending.

Nonetheless, we should not forget that this presentation of relations between the East and the West and such a clear-cut disapproval of the colonialist pursuits constitute not only a reevaluation of the epoch’s discourse, but also an evolution of Sieroszewski’s views. In the Yakut times, as Jegor P. Antonow indicates, the writer

adopted [...] the attitude of a civilised observer – a European living among autochthonic Yakutian communities, which had achieved neither the level of a written culture, nor a sense of national identity. Thus, he contributed to the creation of the universal idea of a speechless Asia, which in its development had not yet achieved the level of self-cognition.³⁵

We could, therefore, venture the hypothesis – somewhat against the message of the novel – that paradoxically, in *Zamorski diabeł*, it was precisely the lack of direct contact with the Chinese culture that resulted in the author’s adoption of a different perspective – one in which the worlds of the East and the West, although they cannot become partners, are no doubt equal and deserve mutual respect – albeit shown from a distance.

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³⁵ Jegor P. Antonow, “Poglądy Wacława Sieroszewskiego w perspektywie dyskursu kolonialnego”, trans. Veronika Belayeva, Ivan Peshkov, in: *Wacław Sieroszewski. Zesłaniec – etnograf – literat – polityk*, eds. Antoni Kuczyński, Mirosław Marczyk, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Katedry Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2011, p. 380.

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