portrayed the bad, primitive and ugly side of China. The communists resented her failure to sympathise with their cause as the hope for China – revolutionaries played little part in her trilogy or anywhere else. The intellectuals, even Lu Xun, our most famous 20th-century writer, were arrogant enough to say the best writing on China had to be by the Chinese – she was just "an American woman missionary who happens to have grown up in China".

The loss was ours. I believe she understood China as well as anyone could – "the people I knew as I knew myself", she wrote. She was as puzzled by the Virgin birth as the Chinese, who "had no sympathy for Mary, and felt sorry for Joseph": they thought Joseph was a cuckold. In fact, Buck was the first western writer to describe ordinary Chinese as they really were, with warmth and depth. China owes her a considerable debt. One should remember the western stereotype of the Chinese that prevailed before her – unbelievably strange and dangerously cunning, like Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu. The characters that stand out in her writing are honest, strong, simple, kind, even noble.

Buck humanised the Chinese, and as the Nobel committee put it, opened "a faraway and foreign world to deeper human insight and sympathy within our western sphere – a grand and difficult task". Despite the grim realities she lived through, she was able to see China "as the inevitable future leader of Asia, and as a monumental force in herself with her unmeasured resources, both human and material". China would "exert a tremendous influence upon the future of the world".

It was in the ordinary people like Wang Lung of The Good Earth that Buck put her hope, not communism, nor the Christianity preached by her excoriatingly zealous father. "We are no better than anyone else, any of us," she wrote.

Her sadness is that when she was in China, she hated her life and all the misery around her, but after she left Nanjing for America in 1934 to care for her disabled daughter, she was never allowed to return, and gradually lost all the energy, the anger and emotion that fired her work. She never felt at home in America, a land she did not know well, a people whose idiom and thoughts and behaviour were alien to her. The dislocation haunted her. She threw herself into writing, supported by her second husband, Richard Walsh, her publisher, who discovered her and then became her anchor. Her life unravelled after his sudden death in 1960. She slowly gave up campaigning for China and racial tolerance, and abandoned the six children she had adopted. Her last days resembled those of the Dowager Empress Cixi, the heroine of her Imperial Woman, living in isolation in Vermont with a younger man and his hangers-on. She was deeply hurt when the Chinese rejected her request to accompany Nixon on his historic visit in 1972, and she died the following year.

Hilary Spurling has drawn a fine portrait. She is a terrific storyteller, bringing us vividly into Buck's world, and keeping up the pace, unveiling like a good detective the individuals who were models for her prolific fiction. Having aroused our interest in Buck's writing, however, she makes you wish there were more quotes from Buck's work; and I found the inconsistent transliteration of Chinese names quite confusing. But these are very minor grievances. Spurling should be applauded for bringing this remarkable woman back to us. We could do with another Pearl Buck for the China of today.

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