A compelling read at every turn, *Life and Death in the Garden* weaves together Chinese, Japanese, and English language sources to construct a narrative of wartime Manchurian society’s hidden side. It offers readers a glimpse into the lives of drug addicts, thieves who stole to feed their habit, prostitutes who sold their bodies to do the same, police officers who pathologized such behavior, and merchants who profited from it. The book therefore exposes the underbelly of colonial Harbin and takes just a bit of the glory out of war.

A very unique document written in 1940 by two Japanese police officers and one scholar in colonial Harbin made this book possible to write. A three-volume report to the Japanese colonial state, *Autopsy of the Garden of Grand Vision* illustrates the daily movements and criminal activities of Harbin’s poorest class in order to affirm Japanese cultural superiority over the colonized who clearly needed the members of a higher race to guide them to modernity. Or so the authors thought, though they mixed their racial confidence with sympathy for the people they studied and a nearly morbid fascination with the gritty underworld in which they lived, worked, and died.

Most likely as a result of insurmountable source limitations, Meyer relies almost exclusively on this colonial police report, meaning that she as researcher and readers as audience both lack the means to properly assess the report as a mixture of truth and fiction (or culturally inflected interpretation of that truth). While Meyer is careful only to quote the report directly in strategically placed chapter epigraphs to illuminate its authors’ racial and cultural biases, she takes much of the descriptive portion of the text at face value and seems to relay it directly to her own readers as a statement of facts. Except in a few brief passages, she does not interpret or analyze the report as the product of a colonial state or the expression of Japanese beliefs unique to that time period and
the cultural space of Manchukuo. Rather, she points to these beliefs to ensure that her readers notice them, but then proceeds in textual interpretation as though they did not exist.

The author may have made a conscious decision to focus on storytelling rather than theory-driven interpretation so as to render her text more inviting to students, which it certainly is. Before delving into the police officers’ account, Meyer offers a several-chapters-long introduction to Manchuria from the late Qing through the Japanese colonial period. In addition to geography, climate, and regional geopolitics, Meyer covers the assassination of warlord Zhang Zuolin, the ascension of his son Zhang Xueliang to power, and Japanese rule through the last Manchu emperor Henry Puyi as puppet ruler of the colony Manchukuo. This level of detail makes her book a good teaching tool for advanced high school or college students who like a good story but need context in order to understand it. For specialists, it makes the book somewhat repetitive, particularly since the first few chapters are not sufficiently edited to remove repetitions between chapters (and occasionally within them, particularly Chapter 2). Notwithstanding the in-chapter repetition, this too may have been a deliberate decision on the part of the author, because it renders each chapter a discrete essay that a teacher could easily assign in the classroom.

One piece of context that this reader greatly appreciated was Meyer’s detailed narration of the movement of opium and opium derivatives, heroin and morphine, through Manchuria (where any opium sold outside the colonial state supply chain was illegal) and into North China (where the drug was legal and fetched much higher prices). This fascinating chapter explains how the reliance of warlords, Japanese colonial rulers, Communist guerrillas, and the Nationalist Party on opium income also fed a thriving market in low-grade opium-derived products sold in fifty-cent packs to the poorest residents of colonial Harbin. Because it deadened pain, prostitutes rubbed this type of opium on their sore genitals and the poor took it to numb their suffering from cold, hunger, and general deprivation. In this way opium doubly propped up the Japanese colonial state that profited from the drug sales (albeit only those made in government shops) yet failed to support the most needy residents of Harbin (who were duly numbed into submission by an omnipresent drug). Meyer also shows that trade in opium and weaponry were tightly interwoven, and that well-connected Japanese traders who gave regular donations to the military police (Kempeitai) and the Special Service Agency of the colonial state were therefore able to operate their “illicit” trade quite openly with no fear of repercussion. These highly placed individuals made the true profits, while Korean middlemen assumed the risk of distributing the product to users and suffered occasional police sweeps. Meyer explains that Korean opium traffickers