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Spectral Sovereignty: Haunting and the Politics of Postwar Japan

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Abstract: ***This article reconceptualises Japan's postwar sovereignty as inherently spectral, arguing that political agency remains haunted by unresolved legacies of wartime defeat, occupation and empire. Grounded in Derrida's hauntology and memory studies, it advances a novel contribution to international relations theory and practice by revealing how ghosts of the past fundamentally shape contemporary politics. The analysis unfolds across four empirical domains. First, the contested status of Okinawa illustrates how enduring US military occupation and strategic imperatives continue to shadow Japan's autonomy. Second, regional diplomacy is examined through memory disputes, with controversies over Yasukuni Shrine, the 'comfort women', and contested textbooks demonstrating how historical grievances resurface in foreign relations. Third, debates over war remains, including contested heritage and memorials, reveal lingering tensions in national identity and international justice. Fourth, the pacifist Article 9 of Japan's constitution is analysed as an institutional spectre of defeat that persistently shapes security politics. Together, these case studies underscore Japan's unique spectral sovereignty and offer a comparative perspective valuable for other postcolonial and post-conflict states navigating contested histories. This approach highlights the original insight that sovereignty itself can be haunted, and invites broader reflection on the ghosts of history in contemporary politics and international relations more broadly.***

Keywords: spectral sovereignty; hauntology; postwar Japan; memory studies; international relations

1. Introduction

Japan's sovereignty after 1945 is often analysed through a binary lens of constraint versus normalisation. On one side, many observers highlight the pacifist strictures of Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution and Japan's continued dependence on the United States alliance, portraying Japan as a state of "abnormal" or incomplete sovereignty under external constraints[1]. Indeed, Japan hosts around 50,000 U.S. troops on dozens of bases and even cedes control over portions of its airspace to the U.S. military – an extent of extraterritorial privilege unparalleled among American allies[2]. Such conditions have long fuelled claims that Japan's postwar sovereignty is profoundly circumscribed by the legacy of defeat and occupation. On the other side, an emerging body of scholarship argues that Japan has been gradually "normalising" – loosening those postwar restraints and assuming a more conventional military and diplomatic role commensurate with its economic power. Proponents of this view point to Tokyo's expanding Self-Defense Forces (SDF) missions, incremental reinterpretations of Article 9 (notably to allow collective self-defence), and a more assertive security policy in the Indo-Pacific as evidence of a return to normal statehood[3].

This article contends that both perspectives, while capturing important facets, remain inadequate. The conventional focus on whether Japan is *constrained* or *normalising* fails to account for how unresolved historical legacies actively permeate Japan's sovereign politics. Japan's sovereignty is neither simply blocked nor fully restored; rather, it is spectral – haunted by the ghosts of its past. Decades after 1945, the spirits of wartime defeat, foreign occupation, imperial violence, and the war dead continue to unsettle Japan's political life and international relations. In contrast to strictly juridical or realist accounts of sovereignty, a spectral perspective highlights how historical memory and "unquiet" pasts intrude upon the present, blurring the boundaries between present authority and absent presences from the past. Japan's postwar statehood thus cannot be understood in purely legal-institutional terms; it must be seen as haunted sovereignty, with the past erupting persistently into the governance and diplomacy of the state.

To develop this argument, the article introduces the concept of spectral sovereignty grounded in Jacques Derrida's notion of *hauntology* and related theories of memory and ghosts in social life. Sovereignty, conventionally conceived as the present-tense authority of the state, in Japan's case is rendered ambiguous and unsettled by spectres – the persistent, haunting presence of historical traumas and contested memories that refuse to stay buried. Drawing on critical international relations theory and memory studies, the analysis reframes Japan's postwar condition not as a temporary anomaly to be overcome, but as an enduring instance of haunted sovereignty. Empirically, the article examines four domains in which Japan's spectral sovereignty is most evident: (1) the concentration of U.S. military bases in Okinawa, (2) contentious regional diplomatic issues of war memory (Yasukuni Shrine, "comfort women", and history textbooks), (3) the politicised handling of war dead remains, and (4) the contested status of Article 9 of the Constitution. These cases span the entire post-1945 era, with focused attention on the immediate postwar and contemporary periods where echoes of the past most palpably shape current debates. Through this discussion, Japan emerges not as a unique

[1] *Is Japan Sovereign?*, 2024, https://fondationfranceasie.org/en/is-japan-sovereign/.
[2] *Is Japan Sovereign?*
[3] Linus Hagstrom, *Japan's Article 9: Will It Be Revised or Get the Nobel Peace Prize?*, International Relations, June 18, 2014, https://eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/18/japans-article-9-will-it-be-revised-or-get-the-nobel-peace-prize/.

outlier but as a paradigmatic example of how a state's sovereignty can be governed by "unquiet" pasts that continue to generate concrete political and diplomatic effects.

Spectral Sovereignty: Hauntology, Memory, and Statehood

The theoretical framework of spectral sovereignty builds on Derrida's concept of *hauntology* – the idea that the present is forever haunted by elements of the past that are neither fully alive nor entirely gone. A "spectre," Derrida argues, is a paradoxical figure: *"that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive"*[4]. Haunting, in this sense, denotes the lingering influence of unresolved pasts – the "absent presences" that actively shape current realities by disrupting our sense of linear time[5]. In other words, a nation's sovereignty may carry within it the trace of past violences, losses or defeats that continue to "ghost" political life. When applied to state sovereignty, this hauntological approach suggests that authority can be *unsettled* and *disrupted* by spectral forces – revenants of history that prevent sovereignty from ever being fully self-contained or securely present.

Sociological perspectives on haunting reinforce this view. As Avery Gordon observes, *"Haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import"*[6]. Ghosts, in Gordon's formulation, are social figures through which repressed or unresolved historical events make themselves known in the present. They signal that something is missing or not at peace – for instance, an injustice unaddressed or a trauma unresolved – and thus demand attention and action[7]. For Japan, the ghosts that besiege its postwar sovereignty are manifold: the humiliation of total defeat in 1945 and the ensuing occupation, the unredressed memories of imperialism and war atrocities in Asia, and the unsettled spiritual legacy of millions of war dead. These spectres "return" in various guises to trouble Japan's political order, indicating that the past has not been laid to rest.

Critical international relations scholarship and memory studies likewise highlight how collective memories and traumatic pasts shape state identity and foreign policy[8]. States are not ahistorical actors; their security policies and political cultures are often deeply influenced by how they remember (or misremember) formative events like wars and atrocities. Memory controversies can thus constrain or motivate diplomatic behaviour. East Asia provides a vivid example, where "the politics of historical memory is a key factor shaping the international relations" of the region, and disputes over wartime history – such as the Yasukuni Shrine or comfort women issues – have had "far-reaching foreign policy implications" for Japan and its neighbours[9]. The notion of spectral sovereignty brings these insights to bear on the concept of state sovereignty itself. It posits that Japan's authority as a state is continually modulated by a dialogue (or struggle) with the ghosts of its past – ghosts invoked in political discourse, embodied in physical sites and rituals, and manifested in policy decisions. Thus, sovereignty in this view is not a stable possession but an unsettled space continually disrupted by these spectres of history.

Below, the article explores four empirical domains where Japan's spectral sovereignty manifests clearly. These cases illustrate how the nation's authority is persistently negotiated through the memory of war and empire. Through them, we see that Japan's postwar sovereignty has been *haunted rather than merely constrained*, and that this condition generates tangible effects in politics and diplomacy.

Okinawa: Occupation's Residue and the Spectre of Imperial Defeat

Okinawa offers a vivid locus of Japan's spectral sovereignty. This southern prefecture, site of one of World War II's bloodiest battles in 1945, experienced a unique postwar fate: unlike the main Japanese islands, which regained sovereignty in 1952, Okinawa remained under direct U.S. military occupation until 1972. Even after its reversion to Japan, Okinawa has continued to host a disproportionate concentration of American military bases – a living reminder of the unfinished business of occupation. Today Okinawa hosts roughly 70% of all U.S. military base land in Japan[10], with tens of thousands of American troops still stationed on the island[11] – a situation that leaves local sovereignty visibly compromised by the residue of occupation. In this respect, Okinawa embodies a sovereignty paradox: it is legally part of sovereign Japan, yet in everyday life authority feels partial and compromised by foreign military predominance.

The spectral residue of the past is palpable in Okinawa's struggles. The heavy U.S. footprint – a direct legacy of Japan's defeat and the prolonged occupation – has long been a source of grievance and protest for Okinawans. Generations of local residents have campaigned against the constant presence of U.S. bases and the attendant problems of noise, accidents, and crime, insisting that their island was sacrificed by Tokyo in 1945 and continues to bear an unfair postcolonial burden[12]. The very landscape of Okinawa is haunted by war and occupation. Old battle sites and base perimeters overlap. Okinawan leaders frequently invoke the island's wartime sacrifice – when Okinawa was effectively abandoned to devastation in 1945 – as justification for greater local self-determination. Conversely, Tokyo's resolve to maintain massive bases in Okinawa fuels local accusations that the central government is replaying the role of an indifferent mainland, once again sacrificing Okinawa's interests to serve

[4] Enis Yucekoralp, "Remembering the Future," *Przekrój.Org*, April 14, 2021, https://przekroj.org/en/art-stories/remembering-the-future/.
[5] Yucekoralp, "Remembering the Future."
[6] Eve Tuck and C. Ree, *A Glossary of Haunting* (Eve Tuck, 2013).
[7] Tuck and Ree, *A Glossary of Haunting*.
[8] Koichi Nakano, *The Ghost of Historical Revisionism in Contemporary Japan*, Japan, September 24, 2014, https://eastasiaforum.org/2014/09/24/the-ghost-of-historical-revisionism-in-contemporary-japan/.
[9] Nakano, *The Ghost of Historical Revisionism in Contemporary Japan*.
[10] Thisanka Siripala, "50 Years After US Occupation, Okinawa Continues to Resist Military Bases," 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/50-years-after-us-occupation-okinawa-continues-to-resist-military-bases/.
[11] *Is Japan Sovereign?*
[12] Siripala, "50 Years After US Occupation, Okinawa Continues to Resist Military Bases."

national security. Here we see how Japanese sovereignty is blurred by a spectral dynamic: the ghost of the Occupation continuously intervenes in present policy, raising fundamental questions about whether Japan is truly "independent" in decisions over its own territory[13]. As one analysis starkly noted, Japan appears as a "sovereign country whose airspace is controlled by an outside power" in Okinawa and beyond[14]. In short, the haunting presence of the U.S. in Okinawa keeps Japanese sovereignty unsettled – neither extinguished (Okinawa is formally part of Japan) nor fully realised (Tokyo cannot exercise exclusive authority on large swathes of Okinawan land). This enduring ambiguity testifies to how the spectre of 1945 continues to cast a long shadow over Japan's statehood in the present.

Ghosts of Empire in East Asian Diplomacy: Yasukuni, "Comfort Women," and Textbook Controversies

Japan's troubled relations with its Northeast Asian neighbours offer another arena where sovereignty is haunted by imperial ghosts. Key diplomatic flashpoints – visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, disputes over the "comfort women" issue, and fights over history textbooks – all centre on how the past is remembered or misremembered. These controversies might seem at first glance to be purely about historical memory, but they have direct implications for Japan's exercise of sovereign diplomacy and international legitimacy. In each case, the unresolved legacy of Japan's wartime empire returns spectrally to disrupt present-day politics, underscoring that Japan's sovereignty is entangled with the ghosts of its imperial past.

Yasukuni Shrine stands as a symbol of this spectral entanglement. As a Shinto shrine in Tokyo that enshrines Japan's war dead – including 14 Class-A war criminals from World War II – Yasukuni has become a lightning rod for regional tensions. Japanese prime ministers' visits to Yasukuni (for example, Nakasone in 1985, Koizumi in the early 2000s) have provoked strong protests from China and South Korea, often resulting in diplomatic freezes and renewed suspicions that Japan is glorifying its past militarism[15]. In Beijing and Seoul, such visits are seen as evidence that the "ghosts" of Japanese militarism are far from exorcised. Thus, Japan's sovereign decision to honour its war dead domestically cannot escape entanglement with its past aggression: every Yasukuni pilgrimage by a leader seemingly summons the spectre of Imperial Japan's unrepented crimes, destabilising Japan's foreign relations. The shrine has accordingly been described as "the symbolic epicentre" of an ongoing diplomatic dispute – an embodiment of a past that remains present in East Asian international affairs[16] [17].

The "comfort women" issue – Japan's military sexual enslavement of women from Korea, China, and other territories during the war – has likewise become a protracted source of contention. Despite official apologies (such as the 1993 Kōno Statement) and compensation gestures, it remains emotionally charged and at times the single biggest diplomatic dispute between Japan and South Korea. South Koreans (and others) see the issue as emblematic of Japan's unaddressed wartime guilt, and periodic flare-ups occur when Japanese politicians make revisionist remarks or when new memorials and statues to the comfort women are erected. Each such incident unleashes long-simmering ghosts: protests on the streets of Seoul, recalls of ambassadors, and freezes in bilateral talks have all occurred in response to perceptions of Japan's historical insincerity. Tokyo's efforts to put the matter to rest – for example, a 2015 bilateral agreement intended as a "final" settlement – have repeatedly been undermined by the deeper spectral reality that the victims' trauma and public memory cannot simply be negotiated away. In effect, the comfort women's plight has become a ghost that haunts Japan's diplomacy: an unresolved moral debt casting a shadow over Japan's legitimacy in the region.

Similarly, history textbook controversies in Japan have periodically inflamed tensions with China and South Korea, reinforcing the sense that the past is not fully reconciled. When Japanese school textbooks have been seen to whitewash or downplay Imperial Japan's wartime atrocities (for instance, by using euphemisms for the Nanjing Massacre or omitting mention of "comfort women"), neighbouring countries have reacted with outrage, accusing Japan of resurrecting nationalist revisionism. These recurring battles over historical narrative demonstrate how the ghosts of empire continually unsettle Japan's foreign relations. They indicate that Japan's sovereign function of educating its youth is still, in a sense, co-authored by its former victims' memories: Beijing and Seoul closely monitor and protest what Japan teaches about the war, effectively forcing Tokyo to consider external sentiments in a domain normally reserved to domestic decision-making. In sum, Japan's pursuit of a "normal" diplomatic profile in Asia is persistently complicated by these spectres of empire. The state's present conduct is bound up with its remembrance (or misremembrance) of the past – a past that refuses to stay in the past. Sovereignty here is haunted sovereignty: Japan's international relations cannot escape the shadow of its historical ghosts, which constantly demand recognition and redress.

War Remains and the Unquiet Dead

Among the more literal manifestations of Japan's spectral sovereignty is the politicisation of *war remains* – the physical bones and ashes of those who perished in World War II. The handling of soldiers' remains might seem like a purely humanitarian or ceremonial matter, but in Japan it has been deeply entangled with questions of national memory, responsibility, and diplomacy. Long after the guns fell silent, the very bones of the war dead act as spectral agents in Japan's domestic and international politics. They remind the country that the war's end was not a neat closure; something of the past remains literally *embodied* in the present, often in unsettling ways.

[13] *Is Japan Sovereign?*
[14] *Is Japan Sovereign?*
[15] Nakano, *The Ghost of Historical Revisionism in Contemporary Japan*.
[16] "Yasukuni Shrine Heats up Tokyo-Seoul Tensions," 2019, https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/42336-yasukuni-shrine-heats-up-tokyo-seoul-tensions.html.
[17] "Yasukuni Shrine Visit Debates," accessed September 24, 2025, https://fiveable.me/key-terms/history-japan/yasukuni-shrine-visit-debates.

Even today, the remains of over 1 million Japanese war dead lie unrecovered in foreign lands[18] – a staggering fact that underscores how the war remains "unfinished business" even decades later[19]. Since the 1950s, the Japanese government and various civic groups have undertaken missions to locate and repatriate remains from former battlefields across Asia and the Pacific. Ostensibly, these efforts aim to bring closure – to honor the dead, provide relief to bereaved families, and demonstrate Japan's resolve to remember its fallen. Yet the process has often had the opposite effect, reiterating historical fault lines rather than healing them. Japan's missions to collect remains in former war theaters (from Southeast Asia to remote Pacific islands), though intended as acts of reconciliation, have at times stirred ambivalence or resentment among local communities. As one scholar observes, the recovery of bones often "instead of offering reconciliation… emphasises existing rifts and creates new ones"[20], highlighting how war's scars persist for all sides. Digging up foreign battlefields in search of Japanese bones can reopen old wounds among former victim nations, serving as a stark reminder of the loss and suffering caused by Japan's invasion. For example, some attempts to recover remains in the Philippines and other sites have met with local criticism that the Japanese appeared more concerned with their own dead than with acknowledging local war victims. Rather than neatly resolving the past, these undertakings can inadvertently reanimate grievances, with the unearthed bones acting as ghostly witnesses to unresolved history.

Meanwhile, Japanese volunteers in recent years have disinterred and repatriated the remains of Korean forced labourers who perished on Japanese soil, directly confronting a long-neglected imperial-era injustice[21]. Their efforts underscore that not only Japanese soldiers but also colonial victims form part of the war's "unfinished business". Overall, Japan's attempts to lay the war's ghosts to rest – by recovering remains or memorialising the dead – often demonstrate how the past refuses to be neatly resolved, inserting itself again into present-day politics and diplomacy.

Article 9 and the Haunted Constitution

No discussion of Japan's postwar sovereignty is complete without examining the country's Constitution – specifically Article 9, the famous clause by which Japan renounced war and the maintenance of armed forces. Article 9 functions as a *spectral law*: a constitutional provision that carries a ghostly presence in Japanese politics, revered and invoked as a legacy of the past even as its practical interpretation is hotly contested in the present. The pacifist clause was a direct product of the postwar settlement – drafted under Allied occupation in 1946 as a repudiation of Japan's militarism. Yet ever since, it has hovered over Japan's sovereign decisions on security, a site where the ghosts of World War II continually make themselves felt.

Domestically, Article 9 has attained an almost sacrosanct status among large segments of the public. It has even been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of Japan's pacifist ideals[22]. This public veneration of Article 9 reflects the widely held resolve never to repeat the horrors of war, and any move to revise it is met with powerful historical anxieties among the populace. Images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the ordeal of Japan's cities in 1945, and the collective memory of "never again" are immediately invoked whenever Article 9's revision is on the agenda. For many Japanese, the constitutional renunciation of war is not merely a legal norm but a living memorial – a cherished embodiment of national atonement and peace. Political groups opposed to revising Article 9 regularly leverage these memories, warning that altering the clause would risk awakening the ghosts of militarism that the postwar nation vowed to banish.

Conversely, conservative nationalists have long cast Article 9 as a shameful constraint – an embodiment of the occupation's imposed defeat – and sought to overturn it. Abe Shinzō and others explicitly argued that Japan must move beyond the "postwar regime" and become a "normal" country, in essence exorcising this spectre of imposed pacifism[23]. Yet despite holding power for many years, revisionists have been unable to formally amend Article 9; instead they resorted to cautious reinterpretations (e.g. a 2014 cabinet decision allowing limited collective self-defence) that only underscore how enduring and controversial the pacifist legacy remains[24]. Even under a government determined to expand Japan's military role, the ghost of Article 9 has constrained policy: any security legislation must be justified as consistent with the "spirit of Article 9", and public backlash has limited how far changes can go. In effect, any significant security policy decision in Japan is still shadowed by the legacy of Article 9. Political actors on both sides invoke historical memory – whether the devastation of WWII or the humiliation of defeat – to bolster their case. This ensures that the "spirit" of Article 9 continues to haunt policy discourse, a constant reminder of the past that must be either honoured or overcome.

From an external perspective, Japan's pacifist constitution has also been a barometer of trust. Neighbouring countries have traditionally viewed Article 9 as a symbol of Japan's postwar commitment to peace, and moves to dilute or abolish it are greeted with alarm in Beijing and Seoul. This external wariness feeds back into Japan's domestic debate, reinforcing the spectral presence of the past: Japanese leaders know that any perceived resurrection of militarism will activate the ghosts of history in the international arena, further constraining their freedom of action. Thus, even as Japan today is a wealthy democracy with formidable self-defence forces, it remains, in a profound sense, *haunted* by Article 9 and all that it symbolises.

2. Conclusion

Japan's postwar trajectory demonstrates that sovereignty is not merely a legal status or material capacity, but also a

[18] Beatrice Trefalt, *Collecting Bones: Japanese Missions for the Repatriation of War Remains and the Unfinished Business of the Asia-Pacific War*, 2017, https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2017/06/13/collecting-bones-japanese-missions-for-the-repatriation-of-war-remains-and-the-unfinished-business-of-the-asia-pacific-war/.

[19] Trefalt, *Collecting Bones*.
[20] Trefalt, *Collecting Bones*.
[21] Trefalt, *Collecting Bones*.
[22] Hagstrom, *Japan's Article 9*.
[23] Hagstrom, *Japan's Article 9*.
[24] Hagstrom, *Japan's Article 9*.

condition shaped by historical memory. Even over seventy-five years after 1945, Japan's politics remain continually modulated by the ghosts of its past. By reframing Japan's condition as *spectral sovereignty*, we see that Japan is not a bizarre anomaly but rather a vivid example of a state haunted by unresolved history, where "unquiet pasts" continue to generate concrete political effects in the present.

Conceptually, this perspective pushes debates beyond juridical or functional notions of state authority to consider how historical haunting conditions sovereignty; it also reconceives Japan's postwar state not as an abnormal or transitional case but as an enduring instance of haunted sovereignty; and it opens comparative horizons for studying other states – from Germany and Eastern Europe to South Korea and beyond – where unresolved histories continue to shape present sovereignty. Japan's experience illustrates that the past is never truly past. The ghosts that wander through Japan's postwar story – of defeated militarists and their victims, of occupation and resistance, of the fallen and the bereaved – are not mere historical footnotes. They sometimes constrain, sometimes propel, and always complicate the exercise of sovereignty. Recognising this spectral dimension enriches our understanding of Japan's politics and foreign relations. Ultimately, in global affairs the past often retains an "undead" hold over the present.