INTRODUCTION

In the context of Anglo-Japanese relations, Utsunomiya Tarō is remembered as Japan’s military attaché in London during the years 1901–05, and he is probably best known for his supporting role in the so-called ‘Akashi Operation’ (Akashi kōsaku) in Europe during the Russo-Japanese War.

In North and South Korea, Utsunomiya is more controversially remembered for his role as the local military commander during the wave of strikes and demonstrations that accompanied the declaration of Korean independence in Seoul on 1 March 1919, and has long been associated with the Japanese policy of suppression that ensued. But far from being an unthinking agent of repression, he emerges from his diaries as an embattled advocate of Pan-Asianism and has received a not unsympathetic reappraisal in the South Korean press.
EARLY CAREER

Utsunomiya Tarō was born on 23 December 1861, the eldest son of Kamegawa Shimpachi, a samurai of the Saga domain who held an important position in the Nabeshima clan overseeing armaments production. Before he was even nine years old, however, Tarō was forced to witness the break-up of his family. Through the machinations of a political rival, Shimpachi was disgraced and forced to commit *seppuku*, and his family was expunged from the clan records. Shimpachi’s widow and children were taken in by various relatives and entered in different family registers. Tarō received his new surname from a paternal cousin, Utsunomiya Jūbei. After several years in the care of Kamegawa relatives, Utsunomiya Tarō was finally reunited with his mother and younger brother in Tokyo in 1874.

Utsunomiya had received little formal education, and when he first attended regular school at the age of thirteen, he was in the humiliating position of being placed in a class with children half his age; within two years, however, he skipped seven grades. Despite this sign of early promise, Tarō had to leave school without graduating, and for a year or so he received a basic education in English, classical Chinese composition and mathematics from private tutors, until, in 1877, he secured a place at a preparatory school for the Naval Academy. A naval career seemed to be the next logical step; whatever Utsunomiya’s personal feelings were towards the former Saga domain, he had to accept that his regional background defined his identity in the clan-based politics of the Meiji era, and in the newly-established Imperial Navy bright young men from Saga were already carving out a niche for themselves. However, after graduating in 1879, Utsunomiya made the surprising decision to enter the Imperial Army instead.

His motivation remains unclear: whereas the navy offered Saga men good career prospects, the same could not have been said of the army, where the rival Chōshū clan was dominant. Possibly, Utsunomiya had already had enough of the clan politics that had destroyed his father and uprooted his family, and he was determined to pursue a career on his own merits. Utsunomiya certainly appears to have relished the challenge of making his own way in a service in which he could expect no favours on the basis of clan affiliation. For the remainder of his career, Utsunomiya would show a remarkable capacity for hard work and quick study.

Utsunomiya’s later distinctions, firstly of being the first officer from his region to advance beyond the rank of colonel and then of being the first of only three Saga men during his lifetime to wear the three stars of a full general, are therefore all the more impressive. One suspects, however, that these achievements mattered more to Utsunomiya both as vindication of his hard work and exoneration