

# Asian Americans Activists Protest ‘Whitewashing’ AKIRA movie

By Trenton Lee



A popular manga series by Katsuhiro Otomo, “Akira” was made into a Japanese animated film in 1988, and Warner Bros. & Legendary Pictures are looking to cast Caucasian actors in their film adaptation of the manga.

In late March 2011, Racebending.com and several other Asian American organizations sent a letter to Thomas Tull, the chairman and CEO of Legendary Pictures, to protest white actors cast in the leading roles of a remake of an Asian movie. The organizations that supported this action included the Taiwanese American Citizens League, Asian Pacific Media Coalition, Media Action Network for Asian Americans, National Korean American Service & Education Consortium, Asian American Justice Center, and the Organization of Chinese Americans of Greater Los Angeles. Racebending.com is an organization that advocates for increasing the visibility of underrepresented minorities in the entertainment industry. One of the goals is to cast more actors of color into first-billed roles into movies, and eventually, into Hollywood. The purpose of the letter was to emphasize equal casting of all races in movies, starting with the AKIRA live-action remake scheduled for release in 2013.

The letter points out how Asian Americans compose an untapped market of 15 million people with the spending power of \$700 billion by the time that AKIRA is released. However, media reports from last week say that Legendary Pictures has moved the setting of the new AKIRA movie from Neo-Tokyo to Neo-Manhattan, and the considered actors of the first-billed, leading roles of AKIRA will be white. The response to these changes were cries of outrage from the Asian American community as well as from other ethnic minorities.

So why did these changes to the new movie happen? Hollywood has been catering to mainstream culture, and since the majority of the U.S. is Caucasian, the movie had been modified to accommodate for this majority. This process is called “whitewashing”, and it’s a form of censorship, which applies mostly to the media that shows stereotypes and biases that favor one race and disfavor other races. In other words, “whitewashing” is a form of media discrimination. For example, although Warner Bros. has given Asian actors supporting roles in their movies, the company has rarely cast Asian Americans in leading roles over the past decade.

The new AKIRA movie has especially generated protests from Asian American communities because it was adapted from its original manga. Manga originated as an Asian phenomenon, and is what the West calls comics. However, manga has a faster and more developed storyline, to accommodate for all ages. Basically, the leading characters of AKIRA (e.g. Tetsuo and Kaneda) are being taken by white actors, creating a reduction of opportunities for Asian actors, a “glass ceiling” in accessed first-billed roles in Hollywood. The co-founder of Racebending.com and Taiwanese American, Marissa Lee, American, commented, “Actors like Robert Pattinson and Andrew Garfield have the privilege of playing iconic white characters that Asian American actors would never be considered for. When white actors are also asked to play iconic Asian characters, Asian American actors lose their shot at starring in anything.”

Although “whitewashing” and the “glass ceiling” have been problems that have obscured the Asian American community visibility ever since the silent pictures, the Asian American community has had their hopes raised by Legendary Pictures. This company has had a history of hiring actors of other races during the last few years. Thus, this letter was sent to convince Legendary Pictures to “star an American actor of Asian descent in a first-billed, leading role.”

After the letter was sent, two new organizations came in to pitch their support, such as the Korean Resource Center in Los Angeles and Korean American Resource & Cultural Center in Chicago. Additionally, the letter requested of a meeting scheduled with Legendary Pictures to “voice concerns about the casting process of AKIRA and other upcoming Warner Bros. productions.”

(From left to right): Standing in front of the Sather Gate, the entrance to the heart of Berkeley; Blowing balloons to get extra points for small group competitions; Melvin Hsieh wins 1st place in the “Taiwan’s Got Talent” show.

# Music for the Heart

By Vicky Wen

On March 11, 2011, Japan felt an 8.9 earthquake, the worst in history, which was followed by an 8 meter high tsunami. Over 10,000 people lost their lives in those devastating natural disasters. Because of the good nature of humans, these traumatic events started a chain of global humanitarianism, like the benefit concert that 17-year-old Raymond Van from Temple City High School organized.

“I wanted to do something for the Japanese people, but, like all teenagers, I thought, ‘What could I do?’ but I did not let that hold me back,” said Van. “A benefit concert was the best idea I came up with, so I ran with it.” Plans for the benefit concert started as early as three months before the concert date. Van needed to create a flyer, reserve a performance hall, find artists, and complete many other tasks required to pull off a concert. It was too much to handle for one person, and thus Project Heart was born.

The team consisted of Van and 12 high school students from the Chinese American Citizens Alliance Youth Council. Together, with their effortless teamwork, Rebuilding Hope for Japan, the theme of the benefit concert, started to materialize. What was once an idea became a reality by April 23, 2011.

Audience members came from as far as Pomona to watch the concert held in Arcadia. Performers were even more extraordinary in their dedication, coming for places as far as Texas, like 2-U-Neek, the twin, duo rappers. It was a two-hour show with the audience screaming for an encore at the end. “I’d say it was a successful show, and I’m proud of it. The concert was only a student-run production, and yet we managed to raise over \$2,100,” said Van. “I couldn’t have done it without my team. I’m glad that they were on my side throughout the entire process.”

# Next Stop: The Home of the Bears

By Adeney Zo

Taiwan may be about 6000 miles away, but on the first weekend of April, UC Berkeley hosted a conference that brought our homeland just a little bit closer.

After a peaceful night’s rest, conference attendees got up bright and early on Friday morning, ready for a full day of ITASA activities. The most important activity, of course, was the breakfast, which consisted of mouth-watering bagels in every flavor and an assortment of candy and drinks. On the second morning, conference attendees were welcomed with the delicious smell of fried Taiwanese pancakes and soymilk.

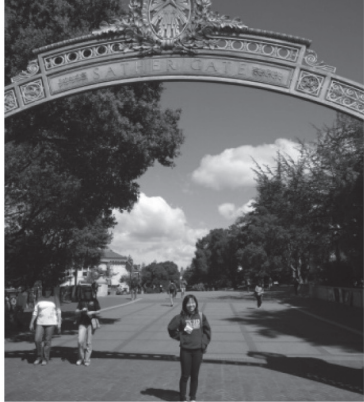
Following breakfast, conference attendees listened to the first keynote speaker, Guitar Hero co-founder Charles Huang, who shared his life story and how a game that nobody believed would sell became the top video game in the country. The second keynote was presented by David Chiu, President of San Francisco’s District 3 Board of Supervisors. He shared his political journey as well as his journey of self-discovery for his Taiwanese culture and identity.

Small groups were the perfect way to meet new people. Small group time was dedicated to icebreakers, campus tours, and plenty of bonding time over the Taiwanese bento lunch. After lunch, all the small groups competed in challenging games in an attempt to gain the most points and win the mystery prize. Running around campus, yelling the team chant, and attempting to undermine the other teams really helped bring team members closer to each other and created friendships that would last far beyond the 2-day conference.

Three workshop sessions taught attendees more about culture, politics, and becoming active in the Taiwanese-American community. However, these were not your typical boring sit-down-and-sleep workshops. Workshop topics ranged from singing to Taiwanese identity to the art of brewing tea to Taiwanese cooking and featured engaging speakers and hands-on activities.

No conference would be complete without some nighttime events, and ITASA WCC was no exception. On Friday night, a night market was hosted by the on-campus Taiwanese clubs. A variety of food vendors to choose from presented a tough choice on how to spend your tickets, and the delicious and authentic Taiwanese food made the night market seem as if we were in Taiwan on a Friday night. After stuffing themselves with food, conference attendees headed over to the Pauley Ballroom to watch ITASA’s own “Taiwan’s Got Talent”. Five finalists were chosen from the online video contest to perform live and compete for the \$150 prize: the acapella singers, Ritards (2nd place); the rock band, Ionia; guitarist/singer Alex Huang; wushu and hip-hop artist, Melvin Hsieh (who took home the prize); and singer Geoffrey Chen (3rd place). Three judges, all acclaimed artists and performers, commented on each group (and gave some guest performances themselves), but the final decision was up to the audience via ballot. Being able to participate in the show through voting, waving glow sticks around, and jumping up and dancing to Johnny Hi-Fi’s cover of “Animal” by Neon Trees, made the whole show a great experience.

Saturday night meant it was time to say goodbye to two days of amazing fun and learning. The evening began with a formal “Soiree de Formosa” banquet, complete with a scrumptious three-course dinner, special guest performances, and two final keynote speakers. Of course, the banquet was not exactly the final closer to the conference – an afterparty (at a top secret location) gave everyone a chance to loosen up after the banquet and dance the night away. Final goodbyes were said (if you were sober enough) and conference attendees went home to pack up for the trip home. However, the ITASA journey doesn’t quite end here . . . Next stop: ITASA Midwest conference at Northwestern University, Chicago!



Flyers for the event were passed around at different schools in order to gather attention for the event, which brought in audience members and performers from all over the area.