

Aoki, the Activist and Intellectual

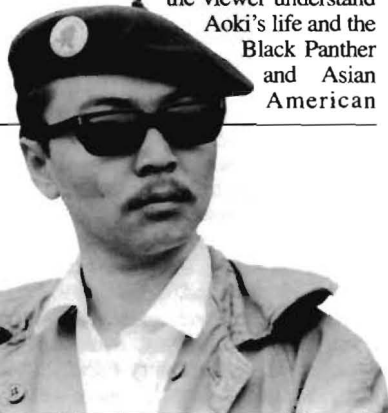
Reviewed by **BEN HAMAMOTO**
Nichi Bei Weekly

"Aoki," the new documentary by Ben Wang and Mike Cheng, tells the little known story of Black Panther Party Field Marshal Richard Aoki. Filmed during the last five years of Aoki's life, the filmmakers weave archival footage with interviews of key players including — Bobby Seale, Kathleen Neal Cleaver and Aoki himself — to create not just a portrait of the man but also the movements he took part in.

The film starts with Aoki — who passed away on March 15, 2009, at 70 years old — discussing his formative years in a World War II concentration camp and then in the impoverished and then largely black American West Oakland neighborhood. We then follow the *Sansei's* life through juvenile delinquency, the military and eventu-

ally politicization. Additionally the film details Aoki's involvement in the Black Panther Party as well as the Third World Liberation movement. It then follows Aoki through his career in academia and into his last years.

Remarkable in scope, "Aoki" covers a lot of ground in its 90 minutes but rarely feels rushed. Instead, it chooses details carefully to highlight the unique aspects of Aoki's story. From an incident in which Aoki and other students jumped their principal at McClymonds High School in Oakland, to Aoki's reputation as a hard-core military trainer for the Panthers, to a comical recounting of Ken Kawaichi defending Aoki in court, the film lets



Richard Aoki

photo courtesy of SFLAAF

the viewer understand Aoki's life and the Black Panther and Asian American

movements in a way that connects emotionally.

Perhaps the film's greatest accomplishment, though, is in painting a candid portrait a man who kept an amazingly low profile. While, in public appearances, Aoki is often stoic and proper, Cheng and Wang capture him at ease, with a loose tongue and a cutting sense of humor. For a man who once set out to be the "toughest Oriental in Oakland," and probably remained a strong contender until his death last year, he could be surprisingly reserved — his fire and passion sometimes coming off almost as fussiness.

"Aoki" unites the pieces of a man who could simultaneously be a loud-mouth and play the background, who could be a thug and an intellectual, an activist and an academic.

"Aoki" will be screened as part of the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival on Saturday, March 13, at Viz Cinema; Wednesday, March 17, at Sundance Kabuki Cinemas and Saturday, March 20, at the Camera 12 Cinemas. For more information, visit www.asianamericanmedia.org.

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 Pacific Film Archive
 2575 Bancroft Way (Berkeley)
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SOM:
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Temple:
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