

LIFE

How Hakka-Chinese Canadian Artist Ness Lee Crafted Her Own Asian Identity

"I lost a sense of self in terms of identity."

By Brian Trinh

04/11/2018 03:28pm EDT | Updated April 11, 2018



Ness Lee, in her own words, is a "[noodle lovin', pot stickin' son-of-a-bun](#)." Well, at least that's how the Toronto-based artist identifies on her website.

While there's no case of mistaken identity for her signature style — [hand-drawn figures of naked curvy figures adorned with long, jet-black hair](#) — settling on her personal identity wasn't as easy for the daughter of Chinese immigrants who left India for Canada.

"I knew I was Asian but I didn't think I was really any of the Asians that I saw around me," says Lee on growing up in the Scarborough-Markham region of Ontario. Lee identifies as Hakka, a group within the Chinese population that share a common language but have spread around the world due to years of migration. Growing up in Canada without a community to call her own made holding on to her Hakka heritage hard. "Since Hakka people have grown up in different countries, they assimilate and

adapt the cultures and therefore you lose a bit of your own culture. It's hard to maintain. You're too busy trying to fit in," says Lee.

"Nobody really spoke Hakka so in itself I was very isolated. I lost a sense of self in terms of identity."

Lee's "traditional" upbringing didn't help either.

"Growing up with the traditional Asian household, you don't really have that kind of voice or that avenue to express," she says.

So Lee turned to art. And that's when people started noticing. They noticed her murals at the corners of Toronto's Queen and Shaw streets and Church and Dundas streets — the latter in partnership with Netflix to promote their hit series "Orange Is The New Black." They noticed as Lee's iconic imagery began showing up on sidewalk murals and restaurant menus in Toronto's west end eateries. They definitely noticed as more and more of her designs started cropping up on tote bags, stickers and plush little sumo dolls. "I think art — creating the work that I did, exploring where I came from and what that means — I think I gave myself an identity by working those things out," says Lee. For more on how Lee came to terms with her identity through art in her own words, watch her in the video above.