

Food and Gender Images of the Kam in Guizhou, China

Shu-jung Lin*

ABSTRACT

The Kam people of Guizhou, China construct their gender relationships in the contexts of food production, exchange, and consumption. After examining gendered work divisions to understand how the Kam practice everyday gender relationships, I discuss images of love and sentiment associated with peanuts, which are treated as “women’s food.” Peanuts are usually produced by women in fields that are mostly segregated from those cared for by men, and are generally tended by individual women or women’s groups. During courtship, peanuts are occasionally raised with male cooperation, thereby embodying images of play and of being “a guest” preceding marriage. During the period of marriage exchange, men (as wife-takers) regularly send portions of glutinous steamed rice to the women’s clans until their first pregnancies and eventual transfer to male households. Rice, which is grown in “men’s” fields, must be co-worked by men and women during the harvest season before wives move into their husbands’ households. The harvest ritual expresses a sense of rice as the main substance for “the constitution of the person” as well as social reproduction. In this paper I also analyze such forms of discourse as myths and songs in addition to taboos and rituals to understand the construction of Kam food symbolism and gender image. In myths and ancient songs that are still performed today, the chicken is used as a symbol to express female social reproduction images, while men and their patrilineal groups make annual offerings of pork and steamed rice to local female deities in recognition of the significance of women’s transformative power in ritual action.

Keywords: food, production, personhood, marriage exchange, gender image, social reproduction

* Associate Professor, Institute of Anthropology, National Tsing Hua University