“Clear the Plate Campaign”: China’s one solution to grain issue

Since August 2020, the “Clear the Plate Campaign” has been carried out in various forms (including online and offline) from all sectors of society in China. Promoting the spirit of frugality, the “Clear the Plate Campaign” hopes to alert and respond to the increasingly severe grain issue in China, also around the world.

The “Clear the Plate Campaign” has been carried out vigorously after the speech themed frugality delivered by President Xi Jinping. And on Weibo, the topics relevant to the campaign has been read by more than a billion times.

To promote the campaign, the catering industry has introduced ways to reduce food waste like displaying conspicuous slogans, encouraging post-meal packing and offering discounts if customers cleared their plates. Meizhoudongpo Restaurant, a large chain restaurant in China, introduces a policy nationwide that customers can choose to order foods in small sized servings. And those who finish all their meals will be rewarded with coupons. “Customers will be suggested with appropriate quantity of food,” said Zhang Yanmei, the manager of Meizhoudongpo, “we also provide free packing box if customers have leftovers.”

College canteens also take active participation in this campaign. Jiangxi University of Technology introduced a policy that students can exchange fruits with their empty plates. In Nanchang Hangkong University, students can collect stamps when clearing their plates and exchange the stamps for a set of postcards. In other colleges, there are volunteers serving in canteens accompanied with slogans and banners displayed on campus.

With the COVID-19 pandemic underlining the fragility of food systems, and worsening food loss and waste in many countries, António Guterres, Secretary General of the UN called for “new approaches and solutions” to solve the challenges in 2020.

In China, the total amount of food wasted every year is equivalent to about 50 billion kilograms of grain, accounting for one tenth of the country’s total grain output. As much as 200 billion yuan worth of food is wasted on the table every year.

Professor Lin Yuan from the School of Marxism Studies of Communication University of China was interviewed and according to her, frugal culture not only exists in China, but also in the culture of most countries and regions all over the world, having different forms though.

At the same time, Lin pointed out that attention should be paid to balance the effectiveness, legality and rationality of the measures adopted in the “Clear the Plate Campaign.” She suggested that soft incentives should be given priority and measures that blindly pursuit notable results and harm the rights and interests of consumers should be avoided.

It is also important to note, Lin argues, that the campaign should not be explained in such a narrow and rigid way that not a single grain of rice is allowed to be left behind. Actually, the real purpose of the “Clear the Plate Campaign” is to encourage people to experience the culture of frugality and to incorporate that spirit into their future lives.