

CONSTANTLY STRIVE TO BECOME STRONGER

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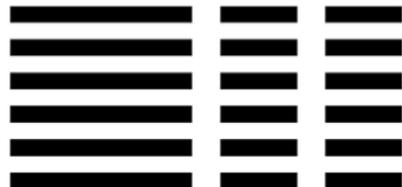
ON 10 APRIL 2018, Xi Jinping gave a speech at the closing ceremony of the annual Boao Forum for Asia, China's geopolitical forum for global elites. Having expressed his desire for China to work with other nations in addressing the world's challenges, towards the end of his speech he noted:

In the New Era, the Chinese people will continue to constantly strive to become stronger *zhiqiang buxi* 自强不息

Xi often uses the idiom *zhiqiang buxi*, commonly translated as 'self-improvement'. In a speech in Rwanda in July, he referred to the citizens there as also having 'ceaselessly self-strengthened' (translated in the official English version as 'unremitting efforts').¹ We translate it as 'constantly strive to be-

come stronger' to better encapsulate the full meaning of the original Chinese text, which alludes to self-strengthening, self-renewal, and national and personal self-improvement — a striving to become ever more powerful.

The expression *zhiqiang buxi* comes from one of the earliest extant Chinese texts, the *Book of Changes*, or *I Ching* 易经, the first versions of which appeared around 1000 BCE. The *Book of Changes* is still used in divination and it has influenced thousands of years of literature and philosophy, in-



Book of Changes, Hexagram 1 and Hexagram 2
Source: commons.wikimedia.org



A wall decal sold online for nineteen yuan stating 'constantly strive to become stronger'

Source: item.jd.com

cluding political philosophy. *Ziqiang buxi* appears in the commentary surrounding the first hexagram, 乾: 天行健，君子以自强不息，and can be translated as: 'The action of heaven is strong and dynamic. In the same manner, the noble man never ceases to strengthen himself'.² Another translation, by John Minford, is: 'Strong is the Movement of Heaven/ Tirelessly/ The True Gentleman/ Tempers himself'.³ There are so many possible interpretations of the *Book of Changes*' pithy and allusive commentaries that they have remained relevant throughout the millennia, taking on meanings suitable for

successive eras. Xi's 2018 reference, which implies the continued strengthening of the nation, echoes the use of the expression by a number of reform-minded intellectuals in the nineteenth-century Qing court. In the wake of the devastation of the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion, they argued that China needed to 'self-strengthen', by learning from powerful foreign nations, especially about military technology and strategy.⁴ China's 'Self-Strengthening Movement' 自强运动 lasted from 1861 to 1895.

The motto of Xi's *alma mater*, the prestigious Tsinghua University, which

Liang Qichao appears briefly in the 2018 Chinese film, *Forever Young*, a four-part drama depicting China's modernisation process, with Tsinghua University linking characters and stories together

Source: twoeggz.com



was founded at the start of the Republican period in 1911, implores students to ‘ceaselessly self-strengthen’. The second line of the motto, drawn from the second hexagram in the *Book of Changes*, *kun* 坤, reads ‘with great virtue one can take charge of the world’ 厚德载物. The motto comes from a speech given at the university in 1914 by Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1924), who had recently returned from ex-

ile after the ill-fated Hundred Days of Reform in 1895. By using ‘constantly self-strengthen’, Xi consciously (or perhaps, even, unconsciously) places himself in an intellectual lineage of modern reformers and institutions, while demonstrating his *bona fides* as a student of Chinese history. The extant to which China will successfully continue to strengthen in Xi’s New Era will have far-reaching implications.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook 2018: Power*,
edited by Jane Golley, Linda Jaivin, Paul J. Farrelly and Sharon
Strange, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2019.00A