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  

Xi often uses the idiom  

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’). We translate it as ‘constantly strive to become 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  

comes from one of the earliest extant Chinese texts, the  

, the first versions of which appeared around 1000 BCE. The  

is still used in divination and it has influenced thousands of years of literature and philosophy, in-
including 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’ 自強運動 lasted from 1861 to 1895.

The motto of Xi’s alma mater, the prestigious Tsinghua University, which
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*, 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 exile 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.