This document is a reflection on my AHS Capstone project in the Spring of 2014. This was a process-oriented project focussed on Chinese language in the context of Chinese chess. Because it was a process-based project, it was difficult to quantify my progress, and so my development was not always outwardly evident throughout the semester. However, upon reflecting on my learning goals set at the start of the semester, I realize that I have been making good progress all along.

Project Goals

My project goals that I set at the start of the semester are threefold: I wanted to develop my language skills in a useful context; I wanted to learn to integrate myself into a chinese chess playing community; and I wanted to develop my chinese chess skills.

The first, I was able to achieve using a combination of various methods. I read chess manuals in Mandarin. I listened to Chinese language videos explaining various aspects of the game and describing famous games, turn by turn. I met with a Chinese tutor, and we discussed various topics including Chinese chess and philosophy and other things. I met and played Chinese chess with other Chinese-speaking friends as well. Throughout all this, I began to familiarize myself with the vocabulary and vernacular of the game. Though internet commentators still speak much too quickly, I can follow along and get the gist of it. When people speak to me directly, I can certainly follow along. I know I could have spent more time on all of the above, but having achieved my goals, I think I deserve at least a B for this part.

My second goal was the community component. After writing my initial project submission, I was advised by my project advisor to take it slow with going out and meeting strangers. I should first become comfortable with the content, and with my peers. I'm glad she advised that, because I would

have been well out of my depth if I had tried from the start. However, as it happens, I only went out to Chinatown to meet with strangers on the final day of the project. I quickly realized that Boston's Chinese population is all from the South East, where the common language is Cantonese. Perhaps this second goal was doomed from the start, given the demographics of the area. Perhaps I should have found out about Boston's Cantonese-speaking population sooner and figured out an alternative.

But, I still have more to say on this subject. This second goal doesn't deal directly with language, only with establishing myself in a community of Chinse chess players. During my visit to Chinatown, I did enjoy the games that were being played, and I could follow the conversation in a very limited fashion (though I could not participate). I felt very comfortable in the community, even though I stuck out for many different reasons (I'm white, I don't speak the language, I'm younger than all of them by two to three-fold, I'm taller than most by a head... the list goes on!). I'd gladly go back, and I think after some time I am confident I'd be able to integrate myself. I did meet a younger man and we struck up a conversation (unfortunately it had to be in English). So maybe I did better at achieving this goal than I thought. Let's not write it off as a complete failure. I give myself a C for not figuring it out earlier, but still taking good steps down this path of lifelong learning.

My last goal involved gameplay. Here is the area in which I can see the most concrete improvement, and so I feel the most confident giving myself an A for the work I've done and the progress I've made. At this point, I can learn from Chinese language tools, too, which is very satisfying.

Overall grade for achieving goals: B.

The Course

Next, I want to discuss my overall experience in the Capstone class. I have to say, I struggled with setting deliverables. I am successful at completing deliverables if they exist (as is the case in other classes) but in this Capstone class, I didn't effectively create deliverables to complete.

I did consistant amounts of work throughout the semester, but none of it culminated in deliverables. I wasn't working towards intermediate goals, despite what was written in the curriculum. For me, Chinese and Chinese chess are both lifelong learning skills. I will continue to study both of these fields after graduation. Neither has any value or merit as a standalone skill to learn for a period of time. The value comes from continued use. So perhaps in that mindset, I never committed myself to a final project, an end date. That mentality doesn't fit well with the course, but it does jibe with the project goals I set at the start.

On many levels, I wish I had aligned my project more closely with the course's goals. I think that documenting progress is a valuable and worthwhile pursuit. Although a process-based language capstone project shies away from concrete deliverables, mine could have benefitted from more reflection. I find it interesting to look back through my past and discover my ability at different periods, to unpack my state of mind, to think about my changing priorities, to analyze my life situation with an outside eye... All of that comes through frequent reflective writing moreso than a series of strict deliverables. If I'd written frequent reflections, I could have concretely tracked my progress, closed the feedback loop and altered my course, and I'd have something beyond memories to look back on in future years.

On the other hand, as a course, the AHS Capstone project has taught me a lot about myself and my

independent learning style. I am very task-driven. If I have a list of things to do, I can bang through it rapidly. The difficulty is creating the list of tasks. If they float around my head, I become overwhelmed and distracted, and I achieve none of them. If I write them down and organize them by priority, I can get a lot done. This semester has taught me that nobody is going to write the syllabus of my life. I need to prepare the short-term and long-term tasks and goals myself. Nobody but me is holding me to them, either. Only I can judge whether I've done well or poorly, and it is solely up to me to make that assessement in the first place! Because of this course and other events in my life this semester, I have developped a number of organizational techniques that I will continue to practice and refine in the months to come after graduation.

Final Project Submission

My final project submission was supposed to be a series of clips from my afternoon in Chinatown interacting with Chinese Chess players in the park. I'd like to answer the question of whether that video would have effectively shown that I had achieved my goals.

If the players had been Mandarin speakers, I am certain that it would have. Although elderly Chinese men are less sympathetic to slow foreigners' brains translating their (often heavily accented) Chinese, I do believe we would have communicated well about their lives, the game and my goals. I'm sure I would have been a novelty to them (I mentioned before how much I stuck out) and yet I recall from my summer in Shanghai how welcoming people can be when they're in the right mood. And people playing games are generally looking for a fun time. (Although they might be upset about losing when they gamble on the games!) The last goal is the only one that I think this video would show absolutely no progress in. These players have been playing Chinese Chess for decades, and I have been playing for a few months. I'm sure any of them could beat me with their eyes closed! But I'd learn from every defeat.

Unfortunately, I didn't film anything that day to capture my work towards my second or third goals, even if I couldn't achieve my first. Instead, I came back to Olin and hurriedly recorded a video with a Mandarin speaking friend. But that submission is not a reasonable final submission for this project. Instead, I'll submit this reflection as a final assessment of my learning. My advisor has always said that since this is a self-directed course, I know better than anybody how I am doing. It's not a very satisfactory final deliverable, but I can't deliver something concrete on such short notice. In a sense, though it does do a very good job of capturing my learning for the semester.

Changes in the course

I wish I had had a more forceful kick earlier in the semester urging me to determine concrete short-term and long-term actionable items. It is included in the syllabus, and it is understood to be a part of the course, but I didn't do a good job of it and it continued to haunt me throughout the semester. Myself, my adviser and the course leader were all very passive on this front, and my project suffered for it.

Similarly, I think more required interaction with peers would have benefitted me greatly. We were all in the same room every week, and yet we rarely spoke about our projects. If we had peers in similar spaces, we were lightly encouraged but not required to interact with them throughotu the semester. I think that I could have learned lots from examining my peers' processes, and it would have helped me perform if I'd been held accountable to my peers. Even if the quality of the work is not being assessed, at least it is helpful to compare work methods.