The bell rings, and David Chen cues up some music.

Students start filtering into class, greeting Chen with “ni hao,” a Mandarin Chinese greeting roughly translated as “you good,” as they enter.

Some start humming along, and eventually most of the class begins to sing along.

“Is this still your favorite song? I’m so sick of it,” Chen said, but soon starts leading students in “Welcome to Beijing,” the theme song to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games.

“This is not a show,” said David Pillar, principal at Jackson Creek Middle School. “This is how it is every day.”

New class

It’s the first year for Chinese at Monroe County Community School Corp. schools, and Chen teaches all of the classes. Jackson Creek has 40 students, and there are 20 each at Tri-North and Batchelor middle schools, said David Pillar, principal at Jackson Creek.

Chen is the only Chinese language teacher right now, but the hope is to expand the program to MCCSC high schools. The goal is to have an 80 percent retention rate for students studying the language, Pillar said.

“The hope is that kids will be excited to learn,” he said. “If they make it to China or if they make it to Chinatown in San Francisco, they can communicate.”

Pillar, along with Janice Bergeson, director of secondary education for MCCSC, actually traveled to China and studied language classrooms in the country.

Bergeson emphasized the excitement the school district had at starting this program, and added that Chinese was a difficult, but interesting language for students to learn.

“The way they say it, it makes a difference in meaning,” Bergeson said. “We speak very flat, but in Chinese, they’ll put emphasis to create a different word.”

Calvin Prenkert, a seventh-grader in the class, chose to take Chinese because it presents a greater challenge than French or Spanish.
“Chinese is hard, but as long as you’re working and you practice, you can get it,” Calvin said. “It’s definitely not an easy language, but it’s not hard if you commit.”

Chen’s goal is to make sure students learn all aspects of Chinese, from speaking to writing to culture.

So far, students have been working to master a handful of basic words that they could use to create hundreds of simple, but important, phrases.

“At this point, I could throw them in China and they could survive,” Chen said.

**Food and culture**

Today, students in Chen’s class are working on calligraphy, with Chen showing them illustrations of how to write each Chinese character playing on a projector. In the background, music plays.

“They’re learning in a very natural way,” Chen said. “Instead of teaching in a pretend land, I teach them what will help them get by in China.”

Some of the first words students learned were jio, or dumpling, and shu, or water, and today they add another food word: shu gu, or fruit.

In China, food is a large part of the culture; when he visits his own family, Chen said all they do is eat. It’s these lessons about culture that help students connect and learn languages more easily.

“You could say ‘Hello,’” Chen said, “but it’s easier to say, ‘Have you eaten?’”

Logan Sweeney, a seventh grader in Chen’s class, said one of the most interesting aspects of the class is learning the differences between the cultures. In America, for example, a farmer might wear a big hat, overalls and boots; but in China, they would add a veil or gloves to protect more of their skin.

Chen plays a song that uses some English mixed with the Chinese. It was a very popular song a few years ago, he said, and it was the cool thing to add random English verses into songs.

The song starts with the singer saying, “Girl, you make me sneeze all the time,” which Chen explains is a Chinese saying. If you sneeze, it means someone is thinking about you.

“What do you say in America? I thought that was a saying everywhere,” Chen said.

Students explain that in America people say your ears are burning instead.

As students continue their calligraphy, Chen has them practice words that they will be tested on later in the week.
It’s the second time the students will take a test over the words, but Chen said he won’t move on until everyone in the class has mastered them.

In class, they go over the same things over and over again as a part of the mastery.

“I go bell to bell every day; I don’t want to waste a second of class,” he said. “Every day is so important. I make sure the whole hour is full of reinforcement.”

Students don’t mind this reinforcement, said seventh-grader Emma Heintzman, because it feels like they are really learning.

Chinese class is her favorite, Emma said, thanks to, in part, the energy and enthusiasm that Chen brings every day. And the language is kind of cool too.

“It’s always fun to write down the calligraphy too, and people are like, ‘What?’” she said.

Logan agreed that calligraphy was one of the coolest parts of the class. He also thinks that there will be more opportunities later in life for him to use Chinese, which is one of his main reasons for choosing the language.

“I know that I’m learning something that’s going to help me later in life,” Logan said.