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**HEADLINE:** A NEW WORLD HE'S 52 AND SINGLE, BUT THAT'S NOT STOPPING ED **MAHL** OF HARPER WOODS FROM ADOPTING A LITTLE GIRL FROM CHINA

**BYLINE:** MEI-LING **HOPGOOD** FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

**BODY:**

Ed **Mahl** always wanted to be a father.

He hoped to marry a loving woman, raise three children and grow old with a family. But at 52, he was alone, and he feared that the window for fatherhood was closing quickly.

In late February, he packed his bags and headed to China to adopt a daughter. A spirit named An-Ping, age 5, who might fill the gray, lonely spots in his life with color. A child he could raise, who might give his life focus. He knew she might be scared of him or disinterested in growing up with a single, white lawyer who has lived alone for more than 35 years.

Anticipation and anxiety gripped him.

Ed filled his bags with Tootsie Roll pops, girls' black sneakers and a Viewmaster. He packed an old tape recorder and cassettes of a Chinese friend explaining who Ed was and what it would be like to live in the United States.

That crisp morning, he left his Harper Woods home, climbed into his brother's van and headed to Metro Airport.

Ed **Mahl**, the lifelong bachelor, was about to become a father.

Ed's female friends excitedly threw him a shower. Some friends are scared for him and deluged him with parental advice. His mother is thrilled.

"I think he felt he needed a family or someone to love or someone to love him," said June **Mahl**, his mother, who showered him with advice and girl's outfits. "I think this is wonderful for him."

Still, some people -- often strangers who don't know him -- wondered about his intentions. They doubted a single man's motives for adopting a young girl, even wondering whether she would be safe.

"I want to do it for the same reason other people want kids," Ed said. Christmas mornings. Birthday parties. Summer vacation and ice cream cones.

"When you have a child, you experience the world again."

He would have done it differently. He wanted to get married and have children. Several years ago, he dated a fellow lawyer, but she ended the on-and-off, 2-year relationship. About a year or two ago, he put singles ads in the paper, though he seemed to want a mother for a child rather than romance, his friends said. Ed had dates, but none worked out. His friends and family said he is picky. He is a genius, said one, but is also awkward, introverted and eccentric.

"I was lazy," he said. "I should not have kept to myself for so long. I always intended to look, but I never got around to it. It's the story of my life."

Perhaps he worked too hard as a debt-collection lawyer in Southfield. Perhaps he looked up too late and realized that he might not meet that special woman with whom he could raise a family.

Being older and alone does not mean he'll be a bad father, he said.

"It is not a perfect situation," he said. "But it seems better on the whole to be here and raised by me, than to be in an orphanage in China. I think."

Ed is rare among adoptive parents. Thanks to a healthy economy, publicity and acceptance of single-parent adoptions, more single women are adopting internationally. But single men do not inquire and generally are not encouraged to adopt, many agencies say.

Of the about 450 families that adopt children each year through Chinese Children Adoption International in Englewood, Colo., the agency Ed used, most are married couples. Twenty to 25 percent of the parents last year -- compared with about 15 percent in 1994 -- are single, said its founder, Joshua Zhong. Other adoption agencies, such as Holt International Children's Services, report similar trends.

Only one or two each year are single men.

China is one of the few countries that accepts single men or single parents older than 50. Chinese law states that an unmarried man can adopt a girl if he is more than 40 years older than the child.

Even so, Zhong said he prefers couples or single women to single men.

"It's a mother's nature, it's God-given more to women than men," he said, echoing stereotypes.

"But it's always better to find home for homeless children than leave them there."

A mix of poverty in rural China, the government's one-child policy and the Chinese desire for male heirs continues to fuel the abandonment of children, especially girls. No true numbers are known. Chinese officials said they do not keep tabs. Adoption agencies and reports have estimated that 100,000 to several hundred thousand abandoned children are scattered throughout China. Over the last few years, China and Russia have alternated as the two top countries from where U.S. parents have adopted.

Ed pondered adopting from China for eight years. He wanted a family and he wanted to help a child in need. He was interested in China and Chinese culture. But he hoped to find a wife first.

Then, in 1998, he saw a picture in a small community newspaper of a single woman who had adopted a child from China through CCAI.

He decided that if she could do it, he could, too.

He researched and called agencies. He contacted the woman featured in the newspaper. He joined Metro Detroit's Families of Chinese Children, a support group, to see how children would react to him.

The adoption, including travel, would cost about \$15,000, compared with \$18,000 to \$22,000 for many foreign adoptions. That was more than one-third of his annual gross pay. He would have to work to save the money. But he decided he could not wait any longer. Despite his lingering questions about his age and readiness and ability to be a parent, Ed applied for a child in August 1998.

He met the basic requirements: No criminal record. Financially stable. Good health. Three friends and Ed's boss wrote recommendations. The adoption agency required him to pay for a local agency to evaluate him and his home.

The staff at Morning Star Adoption Agency in Huntington Woods looked closely at Ed, director Rose Williams said. She and her female staff were wary about a single male applicant because they are so rare. They reminded each other not to perpetuate cynical stereotypes about men. Williams went to a meeting of the Families of Chinese Children and watched Ed interact with the children and the parents. She interviewed other parents. Though awkward, Ed seemed to be kind and nurturing. The staff found someone who was not on Ed's recommendation list, a lawyer who knew him, who said Ed could be a fine parent.

Ultimately, agencies are not looking solely for people who already are good parents. They also want to help people with potential.

The staffs at CCAI and Morning Star were comfortable that Ed could do this.

CCAI staff called Ed at his Southfield office to ask whether he would take an older child. That way, they told him, you can get a child faster than the usual 2 years, and the age difference would not be so great.

He agreed. In November, the agency told him that he had a child.

Ed would meet Liu An-Ping in February.

The week before Ed left for China, his three-bedroom ranch home was in disarray. Dirty dishes were stacked high on his kitchen counter. Two televisions sat in the living room and an old air conditioner in the kitchen waited to be installed. Ed has many things he has rarely -- if ever -- used, such as a silver pitcher and candlesticks from a garage sale. Videos of the 1996 NCAA basketball finals and the 1980 World Series sit on a basement shelf near art films.

Ed never cooked much. He didn't even have an oven in his previous home, just a hot plate. To a friend's dinner party more than a year ago, Ed brought carrots and celery, uncut and unwashed, in the bags they were sold in.

Once he knew he was going to adopt, he slowly tried to alter his life. He has become more outgoing, friends said. He started attending the Metro Detroit Chinese Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Madison Heights, where services and Sunday school classes are in Chinese. He took Chinese classes at Schoolcraft College. He recruited women who could be maternal figures to the child, including a lawyer friend, women from his movie-watching group and a Chinese-American woman from church. He bought a satellite dish that can get a Chinese channel. He found a Chinese-American doctor who speaks Mandarin.

He taught himself to cook. He took a Middle Eastern cooking class because he couldn't find a Chinese one. He watched and recorded cooking shows. He can make pierogies and apple pie. He writes recipes on index cards and puts them in a small wooden box: Pizza margarita. Pumpkin pudding. Cold soups.

"I need to teach you about hot dogs and mac and cheese," his friend Barbara Johannessen teased one January afternoon.

"I buy soy hot dogs," he offered hopefully. "They're good."

"And she'll be immediately turned off," she said, smiling.

Ed has big dreams for his daughter. He wants to pass on his love for art and classical music. He wants her to speak fluent Chinese, English and other languages. An-Ping will travel with him on vacations. He will keep her Chinese name, which will be easy for people to learn and means "heavenly peace," but her middle name will be Dorothea, which is Greek for gift of God.

"I want her to be a student of the world," he said.

An-Ping looked boyish in the first picture Ed received in November.

Short cropped hair. About 4 years old. A typical first-glimpse foreign-adoption picture: a small, outdated photo of a child, looking slightly tentative. The photo came with a document that said that An-Ping has a good personality and is healthy.

Ed had no way of knowing whether this was true. Part of the risk of a foreign adoption is that parents often do not know their child's history, quirks or medical problems. They don't know whom she left behind or who left her. They may never know.

A second set of pictures the adoption agency sent via e-mail in December was lively. An-Ping wears a pink, yellow and green warm-up suit. Her head is pressed to a plastic phone receiver and thrusts her fingers out in a "V" for victory. She has rosy cheeks and wears a smile so big her eyes look like quarter moons.

Ed was relieved. An-Ping looked happy.

But he also felt anxious.

If she is happy there, could she be happy with him? Adoptive parents imagine all kinds of terrible conditions that abandoned children must live in. Thanks to news reports and adoption agency propaganda, many parents believe they may be saving the children from a cruel, parentless life of poverty.

But if An-Ping was happy with other children, Ed feared she would be miserable with him: an old man with three cats.

He decided, after much thought, that he would introduce himself formally.

Ni hao An-Ping. Wo xing Mao. Hello, An-Ping. My name is Mr. **Mahl**.

"If I tell her I'm her father, she may break into tears," he said.

"I don't want her saying, 'No, You're not.' "

A week before he left, An-Ping's room was almost ready.

The shelves at the foot of the bed were filled with Bugs Bunny and sing-along videos and Chinese cartoons that he bought in a Chinese grocery store in Madison Heights. Stacked on the bed were presents and a deflated balloon from the shower that the women in his movie club threw him in January. They gave him toys and clothes. They cooed and he blushed.

The home's previous owner had decorated one of the rooms for a little girl -- that's why Ed bought the house last year. Painted white picket fences line the wall, and a white dove is perched in a tree. The ceiling is specked with glow-in-the-dark stars.

Ed bought extra stars and planets. He bought dozens of stuffed animals -- bears, camels, raccoons. He bought a pinball machine and a bouncing horse at garage sales. On the edge of a shelf sits a pink tutu.

"What does she wear under that?" he asked Barbara.

"The leotard in the closet," she said.

One of two sons in a working-class family from Clawson, Ed knows little about

wearing tutus or brushing a little girl's hair or ordering Happy Meals at McDonald's. He has not read parenting books and dropped a parenting class. He knows little about how children can be stubborn, how they can test you and how they develop their own ideas about their needs and their lives. He knows little about how hard it can be to be a parent.

But he will learn.

Quickly.

Ed slept only five hours the night before he left for China. He knew little about fatherhood. He might live only 20 more years. What would An-Ping do then? Ed still wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing.

But he had made his decision. And his brother, Jim, came to pick him early Sunday morning, Feb. 20.

Ed crammed An-Ping's new clothes and toys into a leather bag and a beat-up suitcase. He fastened to his belt a purple backpack filled with wind-up cars, play make-up and candy. He locked up his mustard-colored home and the brothers drove to Metro Airport.

"Well, all right," Jim said. "Have fun."

Ed nodded at his brother as he left the van and entered Northwest's international terminal.

After a 20-hour string of plane rides and a bus journey across rural China to the Chinese city of Jinan, Ed would stand before An-Ping Dorothea Liu. They would regard each other and consider how their lives would change.

And Ed **Mahl** would become a father.

#### SOURCES FOR INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

\* Chinese Children Adoption International in Englewood, Colo. One of the largest China-only adoption agencies in the country. Call 303-850-9998, 8:30-5 Central Standard Time weekdays. [www.chinesechildren.org](http://www.chinesechildren.org) .

\* Holt International Children's Services in Eugene, Ore. Arranges adoptions from China and several other countries. Call 541-687-2202, 8-4:30 Pacific Standard time weekdays. [www.holtus.com](http://www.holtus.com) .

\* Regional offices of Great Wall China Adoption in Austin, Texas. Will hold a free workshop on adopting from China, 1:30-3:30 p.m. April 30 at the Beaumont Rehabilitation and Health Center, 746 Purdy St. in Birmingham. Call 248-442-0857 anytime. [www.eden.com/\(tilde\)gwcadopt/index.html](http://www.eden.com/(tilde)gwcadopt/index.html)

\* Morning Star Adoption Agency in Huntington Woods. Arranges domestic and some international adoptions, but does not arrange adoptions from China. The agency also conducts family evaluations. Call 248-248-399-2740, 9-5 weekdays.

\* Americans for International Aid and Adoption in Troy. Adoptions from Korea,

Vietnam, India and Guatemala, Bulgaria and Russia. Call 248-362-1207, 8:30-4:30 Monday-Thursday and 8:30-12:30 Friday.

\* Information on international adoption from all over the world is available at [www.adopting.com](http://www.adopting.com) .

Contact MEI-LING **HOPGOOD** at 248-586-2621 or at [hopgood@freepress.com](mailto:hopgood@freepress.com) .

**NOTES:** FIRST OF TWO PARTS; SEE CHART IN MICROFILM PAGE 2J

**GRAPHIC:** Photo PATRICIA BECK, Detroit Free Press; CHART Detroit Free Press;

Above: Ed **Mahl** passes a new tutu for An-Ping to friend Jeannette Saquet of Birmingham during a surprise shower thrown for him by the Metro Film Lovers. Left: Ed **Mahl** holds the first picture of An-Ping sent to him by Chinese Children Adoption International. **Mahl** prepares An-Ping's room. He bought sing-along videos and Chinese cartoons for her from a Chinese grocery store. Ed **Mahl**, left, and his brother, Jim, prepare to leave for Metro Airport. After a 20-hour string of plane rides and a bus journey across rural China, Ed will finally meet An-Ping. Left: Jeannette Saquet uses a laptop to show off a photo of An-Ping at the surprise shower for Ed **Mahl**. Above: The photo shown at the shower was E-mailed to **Mahl** by Chinese Children Adoption International.

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**HEADLINE:** Ed **Mahl** brings adopted daughter An-Ping home and learns that fatherhood is far from easy

**BYLINE:** By Mei-Ling **Hopgood**

**BODY:**  
stories)

DETROIT \_ Ed **Mahl** met his new daughter in the lobby of a hotel in an eastern province of  
China.

For a year and a half, Ed had waited for this moment, when he would meet Liu An-Ping, the child he was adopting. He spent long nights wondering whether this 6-year-old, who knew only Chinese, would accept a 52-year-old bachelor as her father.

At 7:45 a.m. Feb. 24, An-Ping stood before him, clinging to the hands of a teacher and the assistant director at her orphanage.

The child looked like a marshmallow, padded in three layers of clothing \_ everything she owned. Her short hair was pulled tight into a sprout on her head. She stared at the ground.

The two adults nudged An-Ping forward. They told her this was her baba, her daddy. She mumbled an indecipherable greeting.

Ed kneeled and said, twice, the Chinese words he had rehearsed so carefully: "Ni hao An-Ping. Wo xing Mao." Hello, An-Ping. I'm Mr. **Mahl**.

He picked her up and tried to hug her. But An-Ping held her arms tight to her side. She would not look at him.

He put her down.

Ed had come face to face with his choice, a choice that is unusual for single men.

Despite a growing number of single women adopting internationally, adoption agencies say only one or two men each year inquire. About 26 percent of the 424 children adopted in 1999 through Chinese Children Adoption International went to single women. Ed was one of only two men who were approved to get a child.

The men who do adopt face questions about their intentions and doubts about whether they can pull it off \_ and whether they should try.

Ed adopted because he wanted a new focus in his life. He wanted a family before he got too old to be an active parent.

He thought he had prepared as well as he could in the long months since October 1998, when he applied to Chinese Children Adoption International in Englewood, Colo. The debt-collection lawyer bought a home across from Beacon Elementary School in Harper Woods and recruited friends to be fill-in moms. He found a Chinese church in Madison Heights and a Chinese-speaking doctor in Sterling Heights.

But he was not quite prepared, he admits, for the real thing.

"I thought I would be able to give the kid a coloring book and that would keep her interested. Or let her watch TV. But she's hardly interested in TV," he said later, almost incredulous.

"She seems to need me to play with her."

When An-Ping giggles, everyone giggles back. She has an apple-cheeked joy when she sings, chases Ed's three cats or plays on a jungle gym. She is bright and mischievous.

But her fury can be swift.

When foreign sounds and faces overwhelm her, she becomes sullen. She will not respond even if someone speaks to her in Mandarin, her native dialect. When she is angry or frustrated, her high wail swallows everyone in the room.

Ed sometimes tries to reassure or hug her. But often he stands to the side, looking almost helpless.

During the nine days that An-Ping and Ed spent in China before they returned to Detroit, An-Ping tested and teased. She poured pop on the floor and threw a carrying case with two of Ed's books into a bubble bath. She crumbled crackers on Ed when he tried to rest. She kicked the seats in front of her on the 20-hour string of plane rides home to Detroit. And she cried when he tried to stop her.

The rudimentary Chinese that Ed had tried to learn at Schoolcraft College didn't help much. An-Ping sometimes couldn't understand when he said her name. An is pronounced high and flat. Ping is pronounced with a rising tone, as if the voice is climbing a hill. Ed's tones fluctuated awkwardly.

He thought: "What have I done?"

Members of Ed's hand-picked support team were waiting for Ed and An-Ping

March 4 at Detroit Metro Airport.

Like many other single parents, Ed has created his own network of family. He has recruited friends \_ mostly women who are colleagues or members of his movie-watching group \_ to be part of his new daughter's life. His father is dead and his mother, June **Mahl**, lives in Arizona. Though she is thrilled to have a grandchild, she will wait to visit until summer because she wants Ed and An-Ping to have time to bond. Ed does not expect much involvement from his brother, who lives in Ferndale, because they are not close.

Barbara Johannessen, 40, a lawyer from Rochester Hills, slept over on An-Ping's first night.

"Ed has done a very brave thing," she says.

Hillary Henning, 29, a research assistant from St. Clair Shores, baby-sits and visits with An-Ping. Wendy Chang, an assistant pastor at Metro Detroit Chinese Christian and Missionary Alliance in Madison Heights, offered to translate and invites An-Ping over to play with her children.

Ed believes that parenting classes and counseling would be pointless. So his friends and mother are his sources for advice on An-Ping's hair and clothes. They sometimes bite their tongues when they think Ed should be firmer with his daughter. They gently suggest parenting books. His friends try to figure out how they can

encourage him to clean his small ranch home more thoroughly.

Ed has called the adoption agency staff twice to update them. A social worker will visit four and 12 months after the adoption to see how the two are adjusting and to make suggestions.

"Ed is going to be a fine father," says June **Mahl**. "He's going to be frustrated. But I hope and expect that this all is going to turn out beautifully."

So far each day is a series of blind negotiations.

An-Ping won't eat Spaghetti-Os or toast, but Ed has discovered she loves meat, hard-boiled eggs and bananas. When she refuses to sleep in her room, he carries her to her bed after she has fallen asleep in the living room.

He hates to force her to do anything.

When Ed wants her to blow her nose, he'll hand her a tissue. He tells his friends that An-Ping doesn't like her barrette because she won't put it in her hair. He buys her the cucumbers she asks for in the grocery store, but says she won't eat them.

You'll have to put the tissue to her nose and get her to blow, his friends tell him.

You'll have to put the hair barrette in for her.

"Oh, Ed!" his friends say, with sighs. And they try to help.

An-Ping's past might as well have been lost when she left China.

So far, only she knows. Though she will talk about food or Ed's cats, she will not discuss China. Even if someone, such as Wendy or An-Ping's doctor, asks in Chinese about her past, she says little.

Parents who take on foreign adoptions often do not know much about a child's family or medical history. They do not know what traumas the child might have lived through. They adopt with faith that somehow everything will work out if they work hard enough.

Chinese officials did not even give Ed immunization records so she'll have to get her shots over again. He has only a short booklet that says An-Ping was found Aug. 31, 1994, in the city of Ping Du and her birthday is Dec. 18. But even this is a guess, Ed suspects. If she was abandoned, how would they know the date?

Glimpses into An-Ping's past are revealed only in her taste for eggs and fish and in her ability to write numbers and wash dishes. It echoes eerily in the rhythms of the Chinese songs she sings.

"You changgele. You tiaowule. Youji youji you chang ge."

Everyone is singing. Everyone is dancing. Everyone is singing, singing, singing.

Ed sat next to An-Ping and listened to her sing when Barbara drove them to church on An-Ping's second day in the United States. He murmured to himself a few of the Chinese words.

He feels frustrated, trapped by the language barrier, unable to make rules or ask questions or read to her. Things will be better, he hopes, when she speaks more English.

"Sometimes I just don't know what she wants," he says.

"An-Pingy. An-Pingy," Ed called out his nickname for his daughter the morning of March 7, An-Ping's fourth day home. He planned to register her for kindergarten at Beacon Elementary School. When Ed returned to work full-time at Nitzkin and Associates in Southfield two weeks after her arrival, An-Ping was to attend kindergarten, then K-Care, a paid class for morning kindergarteners from 11:30-3:05. He also has her in the school's latch-key program until he gets home in the evening.

On An-Ping's first day, teacher Janet Gottsleben tells her class that a little girl from China who does not speak English is joining them. They should welcome her and

show her how responsible they are, she says.

When An-Ping and Ed enter room 101, children surround her. William Wagner, 6, throws his arms around her.

"I'll be your playmate for the year," he promises. But An-Ping is rigid. At recess, she stays by herself, refusing invitations to play. She does help the teacher turn the pages of a book and pass out papers to other children.

Later, when Ed and An-Ping have left the school and are on the way to visit a friend, he looks at her face as he straps her into her car seat.

She is grinning.

Ed is learning about kindergarten and pushing tricycles. He is learning about Tigger movies and Happy Meals. He attends support groups for parents with adopted children, and his friends visit and call the pair each week. The two go weekly to Chinese church and Chinese school.

Most of the time, An-Ping seems to accept her new life. Her tantrums are fewer.

She jabbars to Ed in Chinese.

"Baba! Baba!" she calls to him when she wants to be lifted into the car, or to take a bath or to go outside. She answers the phone and tells him he has a phone call.

She giggles at him.

"Ha-ha. Ha-ha," Ed laughs back, unsure what she is saying. One month after the adoption, her English is limited to "hello" and "good-bye." His Chinese is a little less shaky, but he has no time now for lessons.

He has already thought about adopting a second child. He thinks An-Ping might be happier and "more entertained" with a sister. During the last two weeks, during good moments, he has called Chinese Children Adoption International and another adoption agency, Holt International Children's Services in Oregon. He figures

another adoption might take almost two years, as An-Ping's did. With a sister, An-Ping will not be alone when he dies. He thinks his role in the life of An-Ping \_ and possibly a sister \_ might be short, but hopefully important.

"I'm functioning something like a catalyst by bringing her to America and sending her on the way for the rest of her life," he says. "If she lives to be 80, I've only been with her a short time in her life. But I'm more a facilitator for her. I'm hoping that I'm giving a child a chance for a better life and I'll be creating two good citizens for the United States."

Ed feels the ambivalence and has the doubts of many other new parents who realize their lives will never be the same. He has problems disciplining An-Ping. He is perpetually exhausted. Recently, An-Ping was throwing fits when she moved from kindergarten to Kindercare. School officials asked the Chinese-American mother of another child to spend a class with the little newcomer and explain what was going on. Since then, she has been calmer. But he is searching for other day-care options, just in case.

Ed's days of bachelorhood \_ of quiet reading, art films at the Main Theater in Royal Oak and pure independence \_ are over.

But there are times when the challenges that lie before him seem less daunting and scary. The times when An-Ping climbs on his back for a horsey ride. Times when she is giggling or singing.

One day, about a week after An-Ping came home, he was drawing her bath. She looked at him, then reached up. He lifted her and she put her arms around his neck. It was her first attempt at giving her baba a hug.

In these moments Ed feels like a father.

And he is hopeful.

PHOTO will be available from KRT Photo Service, 202-383-6099.

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**HEADLINE:** GROWING TOGETHER AFTER 7 MONTHS, ED **MAHL** AND HIS  
ADOPTED CHINESE DAUGHTER, AN-PING, ARE FAMILY

**BYLINE:** MEI-LING **HOPGOOD** FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

**BODY:**

Ed **Mahl** was worried when he brought his new daughter home from China in March.

He was 52, single and spoke hardly any Chinese. He knew little about girls and things such as getting a child to brush her teeth or helping her put on a dance tutu. An-Ping, age 6, threw herself on the floor in anguish when she didn't understand or get what she wanted. They both got frustrated and tired, unable to communicate.

In the beginning, he and some of his closest friends sometimes wondered whether he had made the right decision.

But today, this father and daughter are in a whole new place.

A man who had lived alone for all of his adult life, he is trying to be a good father. An-Ping, a bright girl who spent most of her life in an orphanage in China, is adjusting to her new role as an American child and as Ed **Mahl's** daughter.

Two people who were strangers eight months ago are becoming a family.

Ed leans over her one recent evening as she watches "Tom and Jerry" and gets ready to eat corn in a Chinese bowl and warmed frozen pizza, one of her new favorite dinners.

"Milk or water or juice?" he asks her.

She holds up three fingers, with a radiant smile.

He brings her all three.

Ed became An-Ping's father despite doubts from strangers and friends alike about whether a single, older man could or should raise a little girl. He is a smart man but often seems awkward and serious, barely smiling when he is smiling. He believed he was getting too old to marry, and he wanted a family -- at least a child to care for.

So he became one of two single men who applied to adopt one of 424 children through Holt Children International last year. He bought a new home in Harper Woods, joined a Chinese-American church, took cooking and Chinese language classes and recruited female and Chinese-American friends to help him.

He met An-Ping (pronounced "on-ping") in the southern province of Qingdao, China, and brought her home.

Ed had not envisioned that he would lose all his free time. He hoped she would be interested in books and the violin. He had imagined that he'd raise her as a tomboy, loving baseball and soccer.

Violin lessons earlier this year failed to gain her interest. She didn't like to play soccer. This girl likes Barbie, nail polish and playing dress up, stuff Ed knew nothing about. He is awkward brushing her hair and helping her match her clothing.

The art film buff is watching movies such as "Stuart Little." He is eating his daughter's leftover meat even though he was a vegetarian before he adopted her. He gained 15 pounds and, unable to work as many hours each week at his job at Nitzkin & Associates in Southfield, he is struggling financially.

But Ed laughs more than ever before.

During the last seven months a tender relationship has emerged. An-Ping, now about 3 inches taller, sulks when he leaves her with baby-sitters. She runs out to his car when he arrives home from work or when he picks her up from latchkey, chanting the Chinese word for daddy: "Baba!" She adores him.

"Before he got her, everyone wondered how it was going to work out, can he handle her?" says Hillary Henning, a friend who visits the **Mahls** about once a week. "It's hard to imagine any other way now -- Ed without her."

One recent evening, An-Ping jumped onto his lap to hear "Bubbles," a book that her first-grade teacher requested he read to her that night.

"Say 'bubbles,' " he says.

"Ba-bles."

He tries to get her to say "Bubbles on the stairs."

"Bubbles fa-to-nay," she says, mocking the rhythm, but not understanding the words.

"Bubbles on the stairs," Baba says.

"Bubbles fa-to-nay," she says, over and over, throwing her head back and giggling hysterically.

"Say 'on,' " he says.

"On ...Ping!" she says, giggling more.

He laughs, too. A joyous laugh, with lots of teeth.

So far, Ed, teachers and friends have not noticed any serious behavior problems related to attachment issues, which adoption experts warn parents about. No prolonged grief. No nightmares. An-Ping's swift, strong tantrums in the beginning quickly subsided to less frequent, shorter crying spells. She is self-sufficient: knowing how to wash, brush her hair, pick out her clothes and do chores.

There is no question that An-Ping is attached to Ed. "I love-ah you," she says gleefully.

Now, some friends and family try to persuade Ed to be more assertive. An-Ping controls the pace and agenda of most of the day, he admits. She is well-behaved, though stubborn. She listens to directions and follows rules, though she sometimes seems to obey other adults better than her father.

Ed gives An-Ping almost anything she wants. If she wants hard-boiled eggs each morning for breakfast, she will get them. If the pair go to the local CVS store and she demands a toy, he will buy it for her. If she resists going to bed, brushing her teeth or doing her homework, he will not force her. She sometimes goes a few days without brushing her teeth.

Friends and his mother offer lots of advice. Set times for homework and dinner and bed. Take a parenting class. Get her to choose one drink or one toy in a store, even if she wants three. Be more a father than a friend. Say no more often.

"I think Edward is a little overwhelmed at times, but he's trying very hard," says his mother, June **Mahl**. "But some of these things, he's just going to have to work out himself."

Ed listens to advice, which he doesn't necessarily use, and doesn't get angry, though he hates when people imply he can't do a good job. He doesn't like the idea of being strict and he doesn't believe parenting classes or books would help.

He says: "I don't like to hurt An-Ping's feelings. I want to try to avoid making her cry. Ideally she should go to bed early. And she should do her homework. Maybe some parents would just hit her.

"I did have a policy of making her go to bed at 9. I turned off the TV. She turned on the TV. I unplugged it. She plugged it back in. Then she threw a real tantrum and started

throwing videos. Then I started throwing videos to show her it wouldn't work. And she sat next to the door and cried. Finally, she gave up and went to bed.

"I don't want to press her again. I don't want to go through that much trouble."

He says when she speaks more English, he'll be able to set rules or reason with her. For example, he says he would explain she needs to do her homework because she needs to go to college and get a good job.

An-Ping understands a lot.

When she arrived, her English was limited to "hello." But months later, she holds conversations, says her alphabet, reads some words, such as "me" and "what," and counts to 20, though she sometimes skips 16 and 17. She is good at first-grade survival language: "Don't touch me!"

The best students in her first-grade class can read short books. An-Ping will probably catch up to her classmates in a couple of years, but she is still ahead of a few struggling students, her teacher said. In mid-September, An-Ping took more interest in reading, even suggesting on her own that she do her homework.

Ed and her teachers had started with no idea about her education, family or experiences in China. He has no records beyond the date and place she was found, her estimated birthdate, her orphanage and her general health there.

She has only a child's spotty recollection of her past. She sings songs she learned in the orphanage. She mentioned a man she called didi, "little brother," to Wendy Chang, a friend from their Chinese church -- Chinese give such titles to acquaintances, as well as family. She said she had to share two boiled eggs with 10 kids in the orphanage.

She says she misses China, though she doesn't understand who is Chinese and who isn't.

"You Chinese?" she asks people.

An-Ping thinks Ed is Chinese. He speaks in pigeon Mandarin Chinese to her: haobuhao (Ok? Is that good?) and chi fan (eat). She often talks to him in Mandarin. When she plays with other children and wants to invite them to her home, she whispers in his ear: "Chu An-Pingdejia." Let's everyone go to my house.

Ed wants An-Ping to retain her Chinese. He bought her Chinese movies and tapes. She attends a weekly Chinese class at their church, the Metro Detroit Chinese Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Madison Heights. She is more responsive to the teacher in her class there, exclaiming when the teacher asks questions: "Wo hui!" I can do it!

She can sing all the words to "Twinkle, Twinkle," in Chinese, though she cannot sing the song in English.

However, her Mandarin has become muddled. Her sentences are a mix of Chinese and English grammar and vocabulary. She proclaims: "I want to xizao," take a bath. She has begun calling Ed "Dayah," -- Dad without the final D -- as much as she uses baba.

An-Ping is suspended between her past and present cultures, caught in that moment when the Chinese and the American parts of her are intermingling in her blood, negotiating her new identity.

Wendy Chang and her husband, Paul Chang, who is the principal of An-Ping's Chinese school, predict she will retain some understanding, but not most of her reading, writing and speaking. Even the children in her Chinese class speak Chinese to the teacher, but speak English to one another.

An-Ping is American now. Her adoption put her on the path to assimilation. On this journey, despite her father's best efforts, her new world may eventually -- or perhaps inevitably -- eclipse the old.

Ed is learning the lessons of fatherhood, of love, patience and endurance. He will put off her violin lessons and soccer a year and maybe try dance class next year, because she loves to dance.

He has considered trying to date again, but decided he has no time. He still wants to adopt another child, family for An-Ping when he dies. But friends have persuaded him to reconsider whether he can handle two kids and whether he can afford to send two kids to college.

For now, he and An-Ping will take each day, each piece of advice, each tough moment and each good time and try to mold their family.

"I think this little girl is very, very lucky, and he's a lucky man," says his friend Jeanette Saquet. "There are kids who would have been damaged by the whole experience.

"She's better off than 90 percent of American children. If discipline is the worst criticism and advice we can give, then we're doing well."

Ed is warmer now, more open to others, say friends. He used to shy away from attention.

But An-Ping demands it. She is a clown, dancing around the living room for guests in a white tank top, pink tutu, tights and bed slippers with her Teletubbies umbrella, tiptoeing in circles, a tiny dancer spinning a parasol. She giggles and makes everyone giggle with her.

"She gave me a new purpose in life," says Ed. "I have no free time now. I lived a pretty quiet life and there's no quiet to it now. But it was a good trade. I miss my quiet, but An-Ping is worth anything I've lost, many times over."

After school on a recent day, he carried her piggy-back from Beacon Elementary School, across the street from their small home.

"Look, Ping-Ping, a worm."

"I want get down."

"No, Ping-Ping."

"Yes!"

He relents: "OK," and she slides off his back. She picks up the worm despite her father's protests. "Ping-Ping, we're not taking the worm home."

She examines it and decides baba is right. Then, they marvel at the trees, the damp grass, the flowers and rain. They say the words in English and in Chinese. She asks him to stoop down so they can walk with her arm tucked into his.

Following her lead, they swing their legs, wide and forward. He starts to sing "We're off to see the wizard . . ."

And father and daughter march home, stomping in puddles, leading their own private parade.

**NOTES:** CHILDREN FIRST. ADOPTION. DADDY'S LITTLE GIRL. SERIES

**GRAPHIC:** Photos by PATRICIA BECK, Detroit Free Press;

An-Ping **Mahl**, 6, plays with her father's face at McDonald's in Madison Heights. Ed

**Mahl** adopted An-Ping and brought her home from China in March.

Ed **Mahl** helps An-Ping bowl at Thunderbird Lanes in Troy.

An-Ping sings, "Being at Beacon is great today" at Beacon Elementary in Harper Woods.

Ed **Mahl** tries to comfort his daughter, 6-year-old An-Ping, before leaving her for the evening with a baby-sitter, family friend Hillary Henning.

At home in Harper Woods, Ed and An-Ping **Mahl** laugh as he tries to teach her English from a picture book. An-Ping now speaks a mix of English and her native Chinese.

An-Ping styles Barbie's hair to match her own. Dad Ed **Mahl** wasn't expecting Barbies when he decided to adopt a child.

**LOAD-DATE:** January 30, 2002