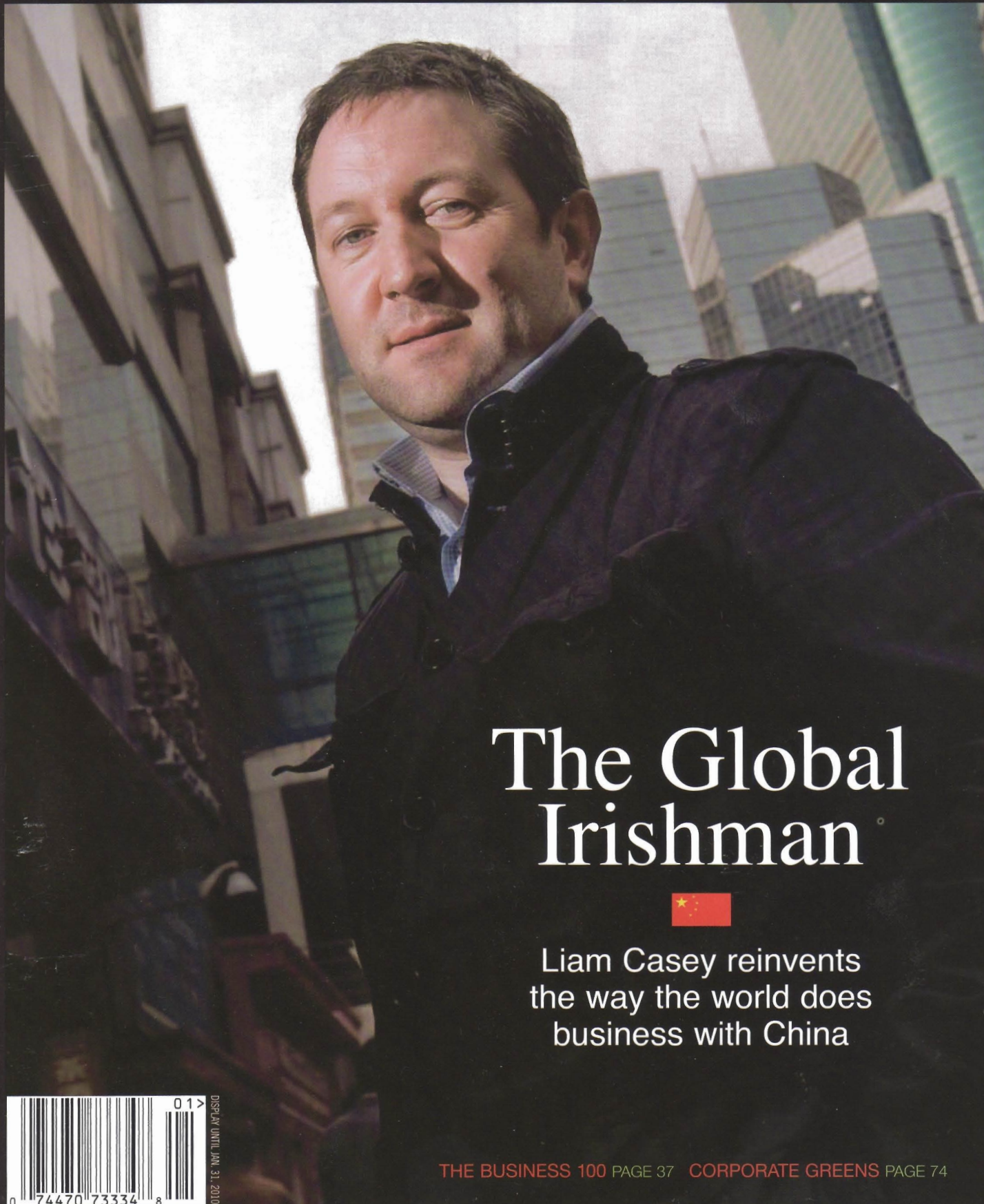


IRISH AMERICA



The Global Irishman



Liam Casey reinvents
the way the world does
business with China



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LIAM CASEY'S BORDERLESS WORLD

Dubbed “Mr. China” by James Fallows of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and the subject of a BBC 4 program, **Liam Casey**, a native of Cork, is changing the way the world does business with China.

By Chris Ryan.

You’ve studied the goods and compared the prices, and your latest electronic desire hovers in your online shopping cart, awaiting that final command. You click “Purchase” and you’ve tipped the domino, sparking a chain reaction that will play out on a global scale. Already, your order has appeared on a screen before nightshift workers on the other side of the world. A highly choreographed dance involving ever-changing flows of data, people, money, goods, and ideas brings the product to your doorstep, just two days later.

The choreographer of this global production is a former farmer from Cork whom you’ve probably never heard of. But he works behind the scenes to deliver the goods – quite literally – for some of the top makers of high-tech devices around today. To do this he spans time zones, disregards borders, jets between continents, thinks spatially, works incessantly, and lives out of a Sheraton in Shenzhen, China. He’s an Irish-born man with the world as his stage.

Hyper Connections

I caught up to Liam Casey on a recent autumn afternoon in the heart of California’s Silicon Valley. To get there, I rode part of the Pacific Coast Highway, a long stretch of seaside road that holds special significance for Casey.

He was in his late 20s, he explained, and had just spent ten years in the retail business, which he likened to a rat race. For the first time, he “had a chance to stand back and take a breather.” It was in Southern California just off the Pacific Coast Highway. “There was something about driving on it that just captured me.”

Casey also found the culture suited his personality well. “There’s a huge can-do attitude here in the U.S.,” he beams. “That’s one of the things I really liked – it’s very creative, very innovative.”

It was soon after, while working for a Southern California trading company, that Casey got the idea for his next move. He asked a Taiwanese colleague who imported hardware from Asia whether he had ever sold his products to Ireland. His answer: “I’ve never heard of that company.” It lit a fire under Casey. He realized there had to be great opportunity in Ireland to bring goods into Europe.

Two years later he was thinking beyond merely importing products; he was learning what Western companies wanted to build and creating the connections to make it happen. By age 30, Casey had founded a company in Cork and named it PCH, after that Pacific Coast road.

Fast forward 14 years to the present. Casey meets with Silicon Valley clients – some of the top names in consumer electronics and personal computers – hops a plane back to Hong Kong, and makes the short jump to his base in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen. In this Special Economic Zone, Casey can choose from hundreds of factories within a few miles to piece together all the aspects of engineering, manufacturing,



MICHAEL CHRISTOPHER BROWN

Opening page: Liam Casey on a recent visit to Silicon Valley, CA. Above: Casey stands beside workers assembling laptop computers.

retail packaging, order management – even product design – that Western companies can't do as fast or efficiently. PCH handles well over a billion dollars worth of product in a year.

Crucial to this harried assembly line of high-volume high technology are the millions of rural migrants who flow to Shenzhen to work in its factories. While often arduous and repetitive, the work can earn them a much better living than they can squeeze from the countryside. In just 20 years, Shenzhen has grown from a small fishing village to a metropolis with twice the population of New York City.

Thanks to the recent flourishing of more interactive, Web-based applications, the process isn't over when the products leave China on the early-morning Fed-Ex flight. From Shenzhen, Casey's people can monitor the blogs where consumers are raving about – or ripping on – his clients' products. The real-time feedback allows them to tweak the supply chain quickly, fixing any problems at a speed impossible before the advent of "Web 2.0" sites like blogs and wikis.

Globalization is not just hype or business-speak but reality in full swing.

Now, bringing a new product to stores – which often took companies years to do

on their own – commonly takes just six months. Casey calls this "disruptive commerce." This is the notion that these growing, interacting flows of information, people, concepts, and capital add up to more than just lower costs and faster trade. New ideas and products which, in the past, may have looked too risky to back can now leave the drawing boards and come to life.

Meanwhile, Casey's clients can focus on conceptualizing the next hot handheld device.

Casey is modest about the success he has enjoyed in his business, but I sensed a tiny blink of pride at his notion that he's helping to shake up the order.

While southern China and the U.S. are central to his enterprise, Casey sniffs out local strength wherever it lies, which is why the company's headquarters are still in Cork. Ireland has well-known education and tax advantages, but Casey also likes it for its time zone. A California client can talk to customer service in Cork, where the sun is still up, instead of a bleary-eyed nightshift worker on the other side of the globe.

The ties between countries may be multiplying, but most places still have their own strengths and character. Casey smiled while recalling a story from one of his Irish engineers who went to China

several years ago.

"One of the last billboards he saw on the way to Dublin airport was a beautiful lady in a Wonderbra. And he arrived in Shenzhen 24 hours later and the first billboard he saw was an industrial molding press, so he knew he was in the right place," Casey chuckled.

Ironically, one of the local strengths Casey sees in China is its ability to think globally. In the U.S., he said, they talk about the American dream. In China, "it's the global dream."

Casey seems to embody both a strong appreciation of local details and the ability to think and work comfortably across time zones, currencies, systems, and borders – in short, local expertise combined with global perspective. While most of us are grounded in one culture and place, as most of humanity has always been, Casey is one of a small number who live a globalized life on a day-to-day basis.

It dawned on me that many reporters have been looking at Casey through a narrow lens. The media often refer to him as "Mr. China," either for "unlocking China's secrets" or bringing the world's work to its factories. But Casey's stage is international and his very success as an immigrant from Ireland flows from working across all the boundaries and distances that have seemed so important

for so long.

A more fitting alias for Liam Casey is “The Global Irishman.”

Ireland's Second Act

In today's world, such cross-border fluency is in demand wherever experts converge to ponder the future. Shortly before I met with Casey, he spoke at the Web 2.0 Summit in San Francisco, and the month before that, at the Global Irish Economic Forum at Farmleigh in Dublin. The Irish government convened the Farmleigh conference in September to explore ways to renew the Irish economy.

In the lead-up to the big recession, Ireland was simply on the wrong track, Casey told me. Our concern was all about “investment properties and holiday homes and all that . . . If you look at the history of Ireland, we're not a landlord nation. I

Globalization brings huge challenges, he conceded, but “we're writing the rules for globalization now.” Any nation “has great opportunity to create what's next.”

Of course, Casey is optimistic by nature, a trait which has allowed him to spot potential and seize on it before others. But his prescriptions are well-grounded. The Irish should look beyond Europe, he reflected. “I see huge opportunity if we can take what we do in Ireland and take it globally.”

Indeed, this is what Casey has already done with PCH, a strategy which has helped the private firm grow 30% this year, over revenues of about \$115 million last year, as it employs 800 people worldwide.

In a globalized world, he predicted, the solutions to what's happening in Ireland “won't come from the island, they'll come from outside.” But they'll require the initiative of Irish people. Whether the Celtic Tiger fades into history is “up

business are too big to miss,” he insisted, “and time is often our number one currency.”

By now you might be imagining a stressed, highly caffeinated executive. But Casey struck me as comfortable and highly personable. He came from his client meeting wearing not a suit but a denim shirt and Nehru jacket. And he flatly rejects the workaholic label.

“It's a cliché, but if you love what you do, you never work a day in your life. . . . I love it, it's great fun.”

Here in the Silicon Valley, Casey works with “some of the best, most creative companies on the planet.” And on the other side of the globe in Shenzhen, which he described as the fastest changing city on the planet, Casey has had “front-row seats to the changing of the world . . . Take those and put them together, and I wouldn't say it's work.”

Work and pleasure are so synonymous to Casey that getting him to suggest any-

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think the focus was wrong and now we have an opportunity to correct that.”

Casey agreed with many of the proposals that came out of Farmleigh, particularly ones which build on Ireland's existing strengths, like culture and the arts. One panel recommended the country build a world-class center or university for the performing arts and Irish culture. Irish poets and musicians are indeed famous across the world. But considering the big downturn in more fundamental parts of the economy, I wondered how Ireland could translate things like art and culture into significant economic recovery.

I asked Casey whether countries like China and India may, in fact, be eclipsing the Celtic Tiger, moving into many of the value-added, service sector roles in which Ireland has long had an advantage.

to us,” Casey declared. It's “our decision whether we let that happen or we don't.”

Man in the Nehru Jacket

Jetting between continents, speaking at high-profile conferences, working “26-hour days” . . . I asked Liam Casey how all the hours and the travel affect his personal life.

“What personal life?” he grinned.

Weekends are rare for Casey. After meetings in California, he usually flies back to China on a Friday night, which puts him in Shenzhen late Sunday morning, with just half a day to recover.

And home, for Casey, is the Shenzhen Four Points Sheraton. Why not live in a house or a flat? “The opportunities in our

thing else he might do with more time in the day was harder than expected. Finally, after a long pause, he offered, “I think I'm . . . disruptive by nature, so I'd be looking at, what can I break next, and what can we do better?”

There's no way to know what the next disruption will bring, to Ireland, to China, or to your own front doorstep. I asked Casey to reflect on his own surprising course, from the farm in County Cork to his present-day mobile, global identity.

“It's not a clean arc, there's been a bit of meandering. To me it's a journey, and often the journey is more fun than the destination.”

I thought again of the Pacific Coast Highway.

“The longer you can keep the journey going,” Casey smiled, “the better.” **IA**