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## The pathfinder

Education specialist behind Belt and Road-focused study center in Singapore aims to promote a better understanding of the China-led initiative

By **LOW SHI PING** in Singapore  
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

It did not take Rathakrishnan Govind long to put his hand up and offer to open the Belt and Road Multi-Cultural Studies Centre in Singapore.

The moment he learned of the concept, the CEO of the London School of Business & Finance (LSBF) Global, the Singapore-based international arm of a private education institution headquartered in the United Kingdom, pounced on the idea.

Four months later, in July this year, the Singapore center was jointly launched by LSBF and the Overseas Education College of Xiamen University in East China's Fujian province.

The first of its kind in Singapore, it is set up under the auspices of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and funded by the China Cultural Heritage Foundation.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a trade and infrastructure network proposed by China in 2013 to boost connectivity between Asia, Africa and Europe by revitalizing the ancient Silk Road routes.

The China Cultural Heritage Foundation is administered by China's Ministry of Culture and tasked with promoting cooperation and exchange in cultural heritage between China and other countries.

"International business can only be done when you know the language and culture of the country. This collaboration between us and Xiamen University is based on this foundation," said Govind.

Now that the first phase of launching the center is out of the way, he and his team are looking at the next step: Conceptualizing the offerings, with the first to roll out in January 2018.

In the pipeline are plans to offer transnational educational programs that will help businesspeople gain a better understanding of the Belt and Road. Students are anticipated to be everyone from C-suite executives — traditional chiefs such as CEOs and chief operating officers — to middle-level managers and entrepreneurs.

They will also have the chance to gain invaluable insights and appreciation of Chinese cultural nuances, business etiquette and expectations, and even hard skills like taxation rules.

"Anyone interested in doing busi-

ness in China should attend a course at the center. The knowledge that they pick up will be practical and immediately applicable to their day-to-day work," promised Govind.

Upon completion of each course, students will be given a certificate by Xiamen University.

Govind, 52, recalled that when he first learned about the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, "the two pillars that appealed to me the most were people-to-people connections and increase in trade."

"It is my personal belief that Singapore can be a conduit to help companies understand how Chinese businesses work, particularly when it comes to how they clinch deals overseas," he said.

That the concept of the Belt and Road Multi-Cultural Studies Centre has risen out of the initiative makes perfect sense.

"If bridges and friendships can be made without arms, through people-to-people bonding, then I think we will have built a better world. It is also about increasing trade between countries. If through the center, we can build more connections, then why not?" Govind said.

That was why, when the center was first spoken about in his presence in March this year, he jumped at the opportunity to start one in his home country, Singapore.

In fact, he learned about it while working on a different deal at Xiamen University. He had gone there to sign an agreement to launch the university's bachelor of management in accounting and bachelor of economics in international economics and trade (two-year top-up program) at LSBF.

Those degree programs are being conducted in Singapore, starting this month.

During the same meeting, he learned about the Belt and Road Multi-Cultural Studies Centre. Immediately recognizing the potential, Govind volunteered LSBF Singapore as a host.

"I am truly ecstatic to know that LSBF is the first private education institution in Singapore to secure a project related to the Belt and Road Initiative. This is going to be a game changer," he said.

Govind recognizes that inking this deal is a boon for Singapore's private education sector, which has been facing challenges of late.

The number of complaints against



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private schools increased between 2014 and 2016 from 698 to 783. The main grievances were issues surrounding administrative matters and fees.

The Singapore government went so far as to set up a Committee for Private Education (CPE) in October 2016. It oversees the industry and is in charge of introducing new measures to better protect students and make information more transparent for them.

As a result, a record 25 private schools shut down last year, up from 18 in 2015, as many struggled to meet the new standards.

Moving forward, Govind hopes that the Singapore government will provide more support for the Belt and Road Multi-Cultural Studies Centre. "I would like to see them offer funding, and perhaps even send their government officers to come and attend our programs."

He is currently in talks with the LSBF team in London to explore opening a center in the city.

But he is not stopping there. Govind will try to bring them to key cities in the region. Outside of the center, working with a Chinese university is something the seasoned education specialist has desired to do for the past two years.

"All of the universities that private education institutions work with tend to be from the West. But I feel that the world has started to revolve around Asia. If businesses are coming here, the education standards and qualifications should be Asian too."

He feels that Asian universities

tend to lack the resources to go global, and therefore are less prominent and well-regarded than their Western counterparts.

"Asian education emphasizes culture too, while the West focuses on tools. When students come here to study, they get the chance to learn about the way of life and build local connections — this is where all the opportunities are."

Govind started out as an officer in the Special Operations Unit of the Ministry of Defence (Singapore). "I'm a consummate planner," he said. "Being in the army taught me to plan for every possible scenario. It's about command, control and communication."

These ideals held him in good stead wherever he went, including in running the volunteer management team of the Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee, and before that, a startup in defense equipment.

"I'm a thrill seeker. I like to look for new and exciting things to do."

He joined LSBF in 2013 as its managing director and led the school to become one of the most respected private education institutions in Singapore — attracting students from the rest of Asia while delivering internationally recognized programs.

For instance, in 2014, LSBF achieved Platinum Approved Learning Partner status from the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, the highest status awarded to ACCA qualification training providers.

He also focused on expanding the

### Bio

#### Rathakrishnan Govind

CEO, London School of Business & Finance (LSBF) Global

#### Education:

2016: Executive diploma in directorship, Singapore Institute of Directors and Singapore Management University

1997: Bachelor of Science in business administration and management, University College Dublin, Ireland

#### Career milestones:

April 2017-present: CEO, LSBF Global

2008-10: Head of volunteer management, Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee

1984-98: Officer at the Ministry of Defence (Singapore)

#### Awards:

2016: Spirit of Enterprise Award

#### Quick takes:

**The Belt and Road Initiative is mainly centered around infrastructure and connectivity. What role does education have to play in it?**

Education forms the basis around everything we do. Without skills and knowledge, we will be handicapped when it comes to learning, even about infrastructure and connectivity. Education is also a part of trade, even though it is an indirect relationship — it is the exchange of information between communities and cultures.

**Was your non-Chinese ethnicity an impediment at any point during the negotiations?**

I have a very good Chinese business department at LSBF, which supported me every step of the way. If you ask me, I do not see myself as an Indian negotiating with the Chinese. I see myself as Singaporean, and if there is business to be done that can benefit my country, I will harness the opportunity.

**Date of birth:** March 30, 1965

school's operations beyond Singapore, establishing it in Malaysia and Myanmar.

In April, Govind was promoted to global CEO, after driving double-digit growth year-on-year. It sees him leading the school's operations around the world in Singapore, the UK and Canada, and courting opportunities to expand its international activity.

Already, he has proved his mettle through the launch of the Belt and Road Multi-Cultural Studies Centre in Singapore.

His ability to recognize a stellar opportunity, combined with best practices picked up from his time in the armed forces, make it entirely likely that he will take LSBF to greater heights.