SHARED CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE TURKESTAN SPACE: HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES, CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS, AND CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS (WITH A FOCUS ON UZBEKISTAN)

Otarbaeva Guljan Kobeevna
Candidate of Historical Sciences, Associate Professor.
M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University,
TemirovaSvetlanaVladimirovna,
Tashkent StateTransportUniversity,
Headofthe Department of Public Law,
Senior teacher

Abstract. *The "Turkestan space" can be understood as a historical-cultural macro-region where oasis cities and steppe societies were connected by trade routes, scholarly mobility, sacred geographies, and shared political experiences. This article examines how common cultural heritage emerged across Turkestan over long historical periods and how it is manifested today through monumental ensembles, pilgrimage landscapes, and living traditions. Using comparative-historical and heritage-studies approaches, the study highlights: (1) Silk Roads connectivity as cultural infrastructure; (2) the role of Islamic scholarship and Sufi institutions in creating translocal ties; (3) Timurid-era urban culture as a shared architectural and intellectual reference; and (4) modern reformist movements that reshaped education and public culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. UNESCO World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage documentation is used as an empirical anchor. The analysis argues that shared heritage in Turkestan is best conceptualized as a layered system of overlapping cultural infrastructures (routes, institutions, rituals, and texts) rather than a single, unified narrative. The article concludes that inclusive interpretation and cooperative heritage management can strengthen regional dialogue, while reducing the risks of competitive memory politics.*

Keywords: *Turkestan; Central Asia; shared heritage; Silk Roads; Sufism; Timurid architecture; Jadidism; Uzbekistan; UNESCO; intangible cultural heritage.*

Introduction: Turkestan as a Heritage Space

In historical usage, "Turkistan" (or "Turkestan") refers to a broad region of Central Asia traditionally described as lying between Siberia in the north and Tibet/India/Afghanistan/Iran in the south, with the Gobi Desert to the east and the Caspian Sea to the west [1]. This macro-spatial framing matters for heritage studies because cultural exchange in Turkestan was not incidental: it was structurally supported by long-distance routes, urban marketplaces, scholarly networks, and sacred landscapes. Accordingly, "shared heritage" in Turkestan is more productively studied as a system of connections (mobility, institutions, and practices) than as a single ethnic or state-centered storyline.

"Turkistan… the regions of Central Asia lying between Siberia on the north; Tibet, India, Afghanistan, and Iran on the south; the Gobi… on the east; and the Caspian Sea on the west" Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica [1].

Methodology and Sources

The article combines (a) comparative-historical analysis, (b) heritage-studies concepts (tangible and intangible heritage), and (c) source triangulation. As empirical anchors, it relies on UNESCO World Heritage property descriptions for key urban and monumental sites in Uzbekistan (Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva) and in southern Kazakhstan (Turkestan/Yasawi), as well as UNESCO's documentation of Nowruz as a multi-country element of living heritage [2–6]. These sources provide standardized descriptions of outstanding universal value and social functions of heritage, enabling careful comparison across places and periods. Historical Layers of Shared Heritage in Turkestan

The Silk Roads were more than commercial routes; they functioned as cultural infrastructure enabling the movement of artisans, scholars, architectural techniques, and symbolic forms. UNESCO's recent work on "Silk Roads Heritage Corridors in Central Asia" emphasizes the transnational character of heritage identification and conservation along these routes [7]. In Uzbekistan, the historical urban fabrics of Samarkand and Bukhara illustrate how long-term connectivity supported cultural layering and resilience.

UNESCO describes Samarkand as a "crossroad and melting pot of the world's cultures," highlighting its deep historical foundations and major development in the Timurid period (14th–15th centuries) [2]. In a complementary way, UNESCO presents Bukhara as a city situated on the Silk Route, more than 2,000 years old, and a remarkably complete example of a medieval Central Asian city with a largely intact urban fabric [3]. Together, these UNESCO characterizations indicate that shared heritage in Turkestan was sustained not only by routes, but also by city-based institutions that preserved continuity through repeated political transformations.

"The historic town of Samarkand is a crossroad and melting pot of the world's cultures."

Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Samarkand – Crossroad of Cultures [2].

"Bukhara, which is situated on the Silk Route, is more than 2,000 years old."

Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Historic Centre of Bukhara [3].

Sacred Geographies and Sufi Networks. A major "integrative mechanism" of Turkestan's shared heritage was the circulation of Islamic learning and Sufi traditions across oasis and steppe societies. A symbolic regional node is the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in present-day Turkestan (southern Kazakhstan), built under Timur between 1389 and 1405 [5]. UNESCO notes that Persian master builders experimented with architectural and structural solutions at this site that were later adopted in the construction of Samarkand, the Timurid capital [5]. Such sacred sites worked as cross-regional memory institutions through pilgrimage, patronage, and scholarly mobility—creating cultural maps that rarely coincide neatly with modern borders.

Timurid Urban Culture as a Shared Reference Code

The Timurid period contributed a widely legible "heritage code" across Turkestan: building technologies, ornamental vocabularies, and monumental ensembles that were reproduced and reinterpreted through artisan mobility and patronage. UNESCO identifies the Registan ensemble, Bibi-Khanum Mosque, Shakhi-Zinda, Gur-Emir, and Ulugh Beg's Observatory among Samarkand's major monuments [2]. Such ensembles became reference points beyond their immediate locality, shaping regional expectations about urban grandeur, religious authority, and political legitimacy.

Khiva's Itchan Kala offers a vivid illustration of the practical geography of exchange. UNESCO describes Itchan Kala as the inner town of the old Khiva oasis and "the last resting-place of caravans before crossing the desert to Iran" [4]. This description captures a broader historical reality: cities in Turkestan functioned simultaneously as local cultural centers and transregional service hubs for trade, diplomacy, learning, and ritual. "…the last resting-place of caravans before crossing the desert to Iran." Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Itchan Kala [4].

Institutions of Transmission and Modern Cultural Reform

Across Turkestan, the continuity of educational institutions and scholarly mobility helped maintain a shared repertoire of texts, ethical norms, and legal-religious reasoning. In heritage terms, these institutions provided the "soft infrastructure" that made cultural translation and mutual intelligibility possible across diverse communities.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reformers known as Jadids reframed heritage by linking cultural renewal to modern education and public debate. Encyclopaedia Britannica notes that Jadids opened their first school in Tashkent in 1901 and by 1914 had established more than 100 schools [9]. Adeeb Khalid's study (as summarized by the University of California Press) emphasizes that Jadid intellectuals sought to safeguard indigenous Islamic culture while adapting it to forms associated with the modern state [10]. This movement demonstrates that shared heritage is not static: it can be reinterpreted as a program for reform, new institutions, and evolving cultural norms.

Shared heritage is not limited to monuments. UNESCO's description of Nowruz (Nawrouz/Novruz/Navruz) emphasizes its social function as a shared living heritage that "encourages mutual understanding and friendship between different ethnic communities" [6]. The multi-country inscription (including Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) illustrates how rituals, seasonal calendars, and household practices form a regional cultural ecology that long predates contemporary borders.

"As a shared living heritage… the Nauryz festival encourages mutual understanding and friendship between different ethnic communities."

Source: UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, Nowruz (RL 02097) [6].

Because Turkestan's heritage is historically networked, cooperative governance frameworks are especially important. UNESCO's multi-volume "History of Civilizations of Central Asia" project aims to present a comprehensive picture of cultures that flourished

across the Eurasian heartland from early periods to the present, reflecting a commitment to regional-scale historical synthesis [8]. At the policy level, UNESCO's Silk Roads initiatives in Central Asia provide platforms for shared research and heritage protection, including corridor-based approaches that cross national boundaries [7]. Yet shared heritage also faces risks: competitive narratives, selective memory, and conservation pressures linked to tourism and urban development. Inclusive, multi-vocal interpretation—acknowledging diversity within sharedness—offers a constructive pathway for heritage to support dialogue rather than rivalry.

Conclusion: The Turkestan space produced shared cultural heritage through durable cultural infrastructures: Silk Roads connectivity, sacred geographies, city networks, and educational institutions. UNESCO descriptions of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Turkestan (Yasawi) show how monumental landscapes encode interdependence through architectural technologies, cultural patronage, and religious authority that crossed today's borders [2–5]. Meanwhile, living traditions such as Nowruz demonstrate that shared heritage persists as social practice and a resource for cohesion [6]. For Uzbekistan, recognizing shared Turkestan heritage does not weaken national specificity; instead, it situates the country's historical urban centers within a broader regional civilizational zone. Future research and policy benefit from treating shared heritage as a networked historical reality supported by cooperative conservation and inclusive interpretation.

References

[1] Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Turkistan | Map, History, & Facts." Available at: https://www.britannica.com/place/Turkistan

[2] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Samarkand – Crossroad of Cultures (Uzbekistan)," World Heritage List (Property ID: 603). Available at: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/603/

[3] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Historic Centre of Bukhara (Uzbekistan)," World Heritage List (Property ID: 602). Available at: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/602/

[4] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Itchan Kala (Uzbekistan)," World Heritage List (Property ID: 543). Available at: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/543/

[5] UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (Kazakhstan)," World Heritage List (Property ID: 1103). Available at: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1103/

[6] UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. "Nawrouz, Novruz, Nowrouz…," Representative List (Element ID: 02097). Available at: https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/nawrouz-novruz-nowrouz-nowrouz-nawrouz-nauryz-nooruz-nowruz-navruz-nevruz-nowruz-navruz-02097

[7] UNESCO. "Silk Roads Heritage Corridors in Central Asia." Available at: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/silk-roads-heritage-corridors-central-asia

[8] UNESCO Archives. “History of Civilizations of Central Asia (multi-volume project).” Available at: https://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/document-1595

[9] Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Jadidist | Muslim reform group.” Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jadidist

[10] University of California Press. “The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia,” Adeeb Khalid (book description page). Available at: https://www.ucpress.edu/books/the-politics-of-muslim-cultural-reform/paper