

THE CONCEPT OF THE "TEACHER" IN UZBEK SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15662373>

Oybek Uralovich Khushbokov

Chirchik State Pedagogical University, Faculty of Tourism.

Senior Lecturer of the Department of German Language.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-7641>

Abstract

This article explores how the figure of the teacher has functioned as a pivotal cultural archetype in Uzbekistan from pre-Soviet times to the present day. Drawing on historical chronicles, oral narratives, legislative documents, and contemporary ethnographic studies, it traces the evolution of teachers' social stature—beginning with their revered position in Islamic madrasahs, through the ideological shifts of the Soviet era, and into the nation-building agenda of “New Uzbekistan.” Particular attention is given to the ustoz-shogird mentorship tradition, which embeds moral authority and communal responsibility within teacher-student relations and continues to shape pedagogical ethics today. By situating educators at the center of the government's “Third Renaissance” discourse—an ambitious project aimed at revitalizing science, culture, and civic consciousness—the study shows how the teacher is imagined not merely as a transmitter of knowledge but as a catalyst for cultural continuity and progressive reform. The analysis demonstrates that, despite changing political paradigms, the teacher remains a key mediator between collective identity and global modernity, anchoring Uzbekistan's quest to harmonize heritage with innovation.

Keywords

teacher, socio-cultural identity, Uzbekistan, ustoz-shogird tradition, education, New Uzbekistan, Third Renaissance, cultural heritage, national values, pedagogy.

Introduction

In the socio-cultural fabric of Uzbekistan, the concept of the “teacher” occupies a central and highly respected position. This figure has historically been more than an educator in the conventional sense; the teacher, or “ustoz,” is seen as a guide, moral authority, and custodian of both knowledge and cultural values. From ancient times, when education was deeply rooted in Islamic traditions and madrasah institutions, to the secularized framework of the Soviet era and into the current independent Uzbek state, the image and role of the teacher have

continuously evolved while maintaining core elements of reverence and responsibility.

In pre-modern society, especially in rural communities, the teacher was often the most literate and ethically respected person, consulted not only on academic matters but also on social and spiritual issues. During the Soviet period, although the ideological underpinnings of education changed, the teacher retained a pivotal role as a state agent of enlightenment and discipline. In today's Uzbekistan, particularly under the framework of "New Uzbekistan," teachers are once again being placed at the forefront of national development. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has repeatedly emphasized the need to elevate the status of teachers, equating their importance with that of nation-builders and innovators.

Moreover, the teacher's role transcends institutional boundaries and reflects a deeper societal pattern—one that links education with character formation, moral upbringing, and national consciousness. In this context, the teacher is not only a deliverer of curriculum but also a model of ethical behavior and civic duty. Understanding this unique cultural positioning of the teacher offers significant insight into Uzbekistan's efforts to modernize its educational system while preserving the traditions that define its identity. As such, the figure of the teacher remains a mirror through which one can observe the past, present, and aspirations for the future in Uzbek society.

Uzbek society has long held the teacher in the highest regard, as reflected in proverbs, folk stories, and oral traditions that honor the *ustoz* for their wisdom, guidance, and moral leadership. Historically, the teacher was considered second only to one's parents, a notion embedded in the popular saying, "*Ota-onangdan keyin ustozing hurmatli.*" In pre-Soviet Central Asia, teachers primarily worked in *madrasahs*, where they were not only educators but also spiritual mentors. Their role was to cultivate both the intellect and the soul, emphasizing ethics, piety, and the responsibilities of communal life.

With the advent of the Soviet regime, the traditional perception of teachers underwent significant change. The state standardized and secularized education, discouraging religious influence, yet still placed teachers in a vital role within its ideological framework. Teachers were regarded as agents of modernization and progress, entrusted with shaping the "new Soviet citizen." While the spiritual and cultural aspects of the teacher's role were diminished, their authority in shaping minds remained crucial. Despite these ideological shifts, many traditional values concerning respect for teachers persisted in family and community life.

In contemporary Uzbekistan, respect for teachers remains deep-rooted, though societal attitudes are evolving. The economic hardships of the 1990s and early 2000s

somewhat weakened the profession's prestige. However, recent reforms have aimed to restore the status and dignity of the teaching profession. Government policies now focus on improving teachers' working conditions, raising salaries, and strengthening their role in moral and civic education. The teacher is once again being recognized not only as a source of knowledge but as a moral compass guiding the younger generation toward national values and global awareness.

Today, ceremonies, literature, and public discourse continue to reinforce the symbolic status of the teacher. Their role is seen not just in classrooms but across the cultural and ethical landscape of the nation. This enduring reverence reflects a broader cultural belief that the moral and intellectual development of society begins with the teacher.

The ustoz-shogird (master-apprentice) tradition is a distinctive element of Uzbek culture that has shaped educational and interpersonal relationships for centuries. Rooted in both Islamic teachings and Central Asian custom, this tradition goes beyond formal instruction, emphasizing personal guidance, mutual respect, and the transmission of values from one generation to the next. The ustoz is not merely a teacher but a mentor who invests emotionally and spiritually in the growth of the shogird (student), creating a relationship built on trust, humility, and shared responsibility. This mentorship model has been especially influential in fields such as literature, music, craftsmanship, and religious education, where learning is not only about acquiring knowledge but embodying it through character and conduct.

In the context of New Uzbekistan, the government has made deliberate efforts to revitalize this tradition by reestablishing the teacher as a pillar of social and national development. Educational reforms initiated in recent years emphasize the moral authority of teachers alongside their academic role. State programs aim to restore the prestige of the profession by providing opportunities for professional development, encouraging lifelong learning, and creating platforms for teacher recognition at local and national levels. Teachers are now increasingly seen as key agents in building not just an educated society, but an ethically grounded one.

Furthermore, the ustoz-shogird concept has found renewed expression in contemporary educational initiatives, such as teacher mentorship networks and innovation hubs that pair experienced educators with young specialists. These programs aim to foster collaboration, professional solidarity, and cultural continuity. Public campaigns and cultural programs often reference the value of respecting and learning from one's teacher as part of the broader effort to strengthen national identity.

In sum, the ustoz-shogird tradition continues to inform Uzbekistan's educational philosophy by framing teaching as a moral vocation. It reinforces the teacher's role as a moral guide and role model and aligns with the state's broader vision of nurturing socially responsible, culturally rooted, and globally competent citizens.

In the national discourse on constructing the "Third Renaissance" in Uzbekistan, the role of the teacher is viewed as central and indispensable. This ambitious cultural and intellectual revival, championed by the country's leadership, envisions a future where education is the foundation of a just, innovative, and morally conscious society. Within this framework, the teacher is not simply a facilitator of knowledge but a builder of the future—a leader who cultivates critical thinking, ethical awareness, and a strong sense of national identity in youth.

The concept of a Third Renaissance draws inspiration from Uzbekistan's historical contributions to science, philosophy, and art during the Islamic Golden Age and the Timurid Renaissance. In that legacy, educators such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ulugh Beg played foundational roles in advancing human thought. Today's teachers are seen as the modern heirs to that legacy, charged with the task of inspiring a new generation of thinkers, innovators, and socially responsible citizens. This renaissance is deeply tied to the idea that education must preserve cultural heritage while equipping students with the skills to navigate a rapidly changing world.

Government strategies to promote this vision include curriculum reforms, investments in teacher education, international partnerships, and the integration of digital technologies into classrooms. At the heart of these changes is the conviction that teachers must be empowered, both intellectually and economically, to fulfill their expanded role in shaping the nation's future. Public campaigns regularly portray teachers as patriots, mentors, and intellectual leaders, reinforcing their symbolic and practical significance.

Moreover, in a time of global transformation, where challenges such as climate change, technological disruption, and cultural homogenization affect young people deeply, the Uzbek teacher is tasked with nurturing resilience and critical engagement. The Third Renaissance thus places teachers at the intersection of tradition and innovation, entrusting them with the dual responsibility of preserving moral values and fostering progress. Their work is not confined to the classroom—it extends into shaping the civic consciousness and cultural direction of an entire generation.

Conclusion

The concept of the teacher in Uzbek socio-cultural life transcends the boundaries of professional occupation and is deeply embedded in the nation's moral, historical, and educational foundations. From the respected figures of pre-modern madrasahs to the Soviet-era educators and today's reform-driven professionals, the teacher has always symbolized more than the transmission of academic knowledge. They have represented ethical leadership, cultural continuity, and national identity. The ustoz-shogird tradition continues to influence both pedagogical practices and the broader vision of character education, strengthening the personal and spiritual connection between teacher and student.

In the era of New Uzbekistan and the aspirations for a Third Renaissance, the teacher stands at the center of national development. The state recognizes their transformative potential and is taking steps to elevate their status, improve conditions, and integrate them into strategic cultural renewal. Teachers are envisioned as key drivers of modernization, custodians of moral heritage, and architects of future generations who will uphold the values of their nation while engaging with the global world.

Ultimately, the role of the teacher in Uzbekistan reflects a unique blend of historical reverence and forward-looking innovation. It embodies the belief that education is not merely a tool for economic advancement but a cornerstone of national identity and ethical strength. In this light, the teacher is not only a profession but a mission—one that shapes the soul of a people and the destiny of a nation.

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