The Songwangsa Sutra Covers and the Development of East-Asian Buddhist Art

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Songwangsa, in Suncheon-shi in Jeollanamdo, Korea, is famed as a Buddhist temple that has produced great Buddhist masters over the generations and has also gained attention for possessing numerous Buddhist treasures. Among these, the two sutra covers, designated Treasure No. 134, the only extant examples of ancient sutra covers in Korea, are extremely important. Due to the special consideration of the Songwangsa Museum, I had the opportunity to study these items in detail last July and thus wish to report the result of my research and the significance of the Songwangsa sutra covers in terms of the history of Buddhist art in East Asia.

Sutra covers, which functioned as wrappers for scrolls of Buddhist scripture, are a special characteristic of Chinese translations of Buddhist scripture, thus they can be understood as an example of the arts of ornamenting Buddhist scripture that developed within the East Asian Buddhist cultural sphere in the lands to the east of China. Woven sutra covers fashioned by the weaving technique called suami in Japanese, using a warp of colored silk thread and weft of fine bamboo strips, can be traced back to the 7th and 8th centuries. Tang-era examples of the technique have been confirmed from Dunhuang, and Nara-era examples are found at the Shōsō-in in Japan. The sutra covers of Songwangsa, which also use this suami technique, derive from bamboo covers of Tang and Song China, but unique characteristics of the embroidery with its three-pronged vajra pattern on the edges and serial pattern of circles whose circumferences are divided into four arcs, known as shippōmon in Japanese, suggest they were produced as ornamental art of 12th century Goryeo Dynasty.