Color by Aging

"Old" and recent carvings on olives (recent= center, CHS071, 072 from Suzhou)

The shade of seed carvings, whether they are olives (Canarium pimela), peaches, apricots, walnuts or what so ever darken by time. This process seems to become faster when the seeds are oiled (to prevent from getting cracks) and / or when they are exposed to light. The same effect one can get by moving a rosary or single beds in one's hand, when thin layers of fat will be transferred from the skin to the seeds. As it looks like the change in color / darkening is faster at the beginning and slows down. So one can say: the darker the older, but unfortunately one can't say how old. Dyeing the seeds with modern dyestuffs is critical, because one not necessarily gets this unique shade. Instead one can get dots or stripes of different darkness, which can't be repaired. And the dyestuff will stay at the surface of the seed, not penetrating through the total shell.

Smoothening the surface artificially is not so difficult, so worn looking is not necessarily a sign of long usage / movement in ones hand.

And what do the carvers / dealers are saying? Unfortunately this does not help so much. The answer mostly is just Qing dynasty, which does not mean anything (it would be between 1644 and 1911) and in principle is just an argument to ask for more money. So again it is not a question of quality or skill of the carvers but age which determines the price / value.

Nowadays carvers of the Suzhou area have started to sign their works. They then will tell you this is a famous artist, therefore the high (higher) price. As during Qing Dynasty (and before) carvers were only exceptionally allowed to sign their work. So this as well does not help to define a carving being from Qing Dynasty

Even with today's technical possibilities (digital camera, PC-software like ADOBE Photoshop) it is difficult to reproduce the correct shade of the above olives ("old" = not recent). There are little differences which are possibly not to be seen on the screen or when printed.