While the original function of this thin, delicately designed bowl is not clear, its conical shape, steep sides, small base-ring, and wide mouth may indicate that it was used to serve wine. It possibly belonged to a wealthy Chinese man, although two bowls with similar proportions and decoration are known to exist in Turkey and Iran, which suggests that it was made in China to be sold as part of the trade of luxury goods between the countries. In the early fifteenth century, such porcelain pieces were highly prized as some of the most rare and valuable trade goods. This particular bowl was once part of a collection owned by President Herbert Hoover (1874–1964), who admired the intense blue color, so striking against the brilliant white.

The main design is a bouquet of intertwined pine, plum, and bamboo branches, which are carefully arranged to accentuate the shape of the bowl. At the base, there is a small tuft of bamboo leaves. Plum blossoms wrap around pine branches, whose round bundles of needles just touch the object’s upper lip. These three plants are known as the Three Friends of Winter, a favorite theme of Chinese wealthy and educated classes. Since pine and bamboo are evergreens and the plum tree blooms in deep, cold winter, surviving when all other plants do not, they are admired for their resilience and endurance. Poets and scholars used the Three Friends as ideals for their ability to face hardship with moral integrity. This decorative motif was also enjoyed at social gatherings—such as ones to welcome the New Year—where a bowl like this would have been a centerpiece.

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