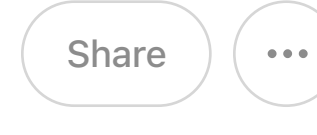
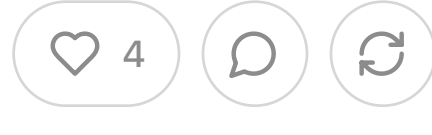


Winter Adventures

Thailand, Japan, and grad school results!

JAN 18, 2024



It has been a busy but fun winter! December started with a trip to Bangkok, Thailand to visit my friend Gordon, another Olmsted Scholar currently studying there. He was a fantastic host and showed me all around Bangkok. I got to experience the traditional temples, street food markets, and even took a Thai cooking class! The food in Thailand was just incredible, and I can't wait to practice what I learned in the cooking class at home.



Wat Arun (I think)



Thai food is 10/10!



This cooking academy was so fun and tasty 😊

After Thailand, I returned to Seoul to pick up my girlfriend Yoomin and head to Japan. First, we first visited the northern island of Hokkaido to experience Sapporo and the natural hot springs at Noboribetsu. It was my first time driving on the left-hand side of the road, and the Hokkaido road conditions were quite icy and snowy in December, but it didn't take too long to get used to it. I absolutely loved the food in Hokkaido, the onsen bathhouses, and this cute traditional Japanese village where we watched a fun ninja show!



Natural hot springs

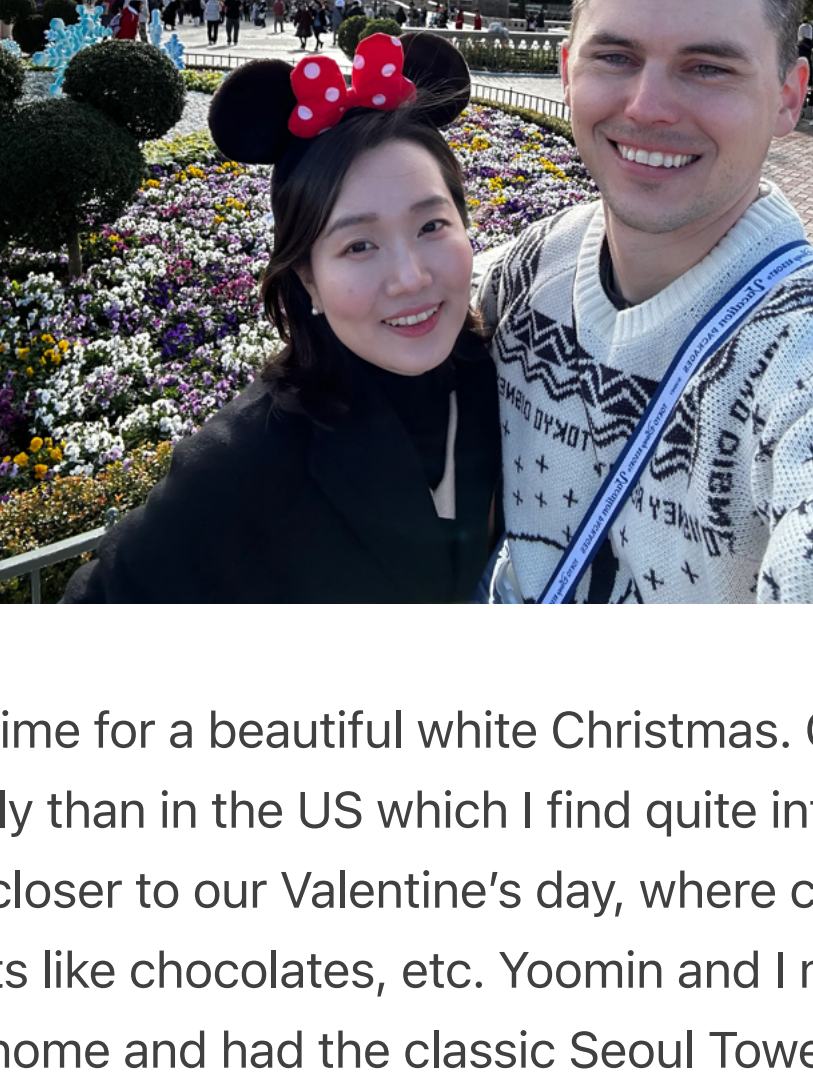


Noboribetsu Date Jidai Village



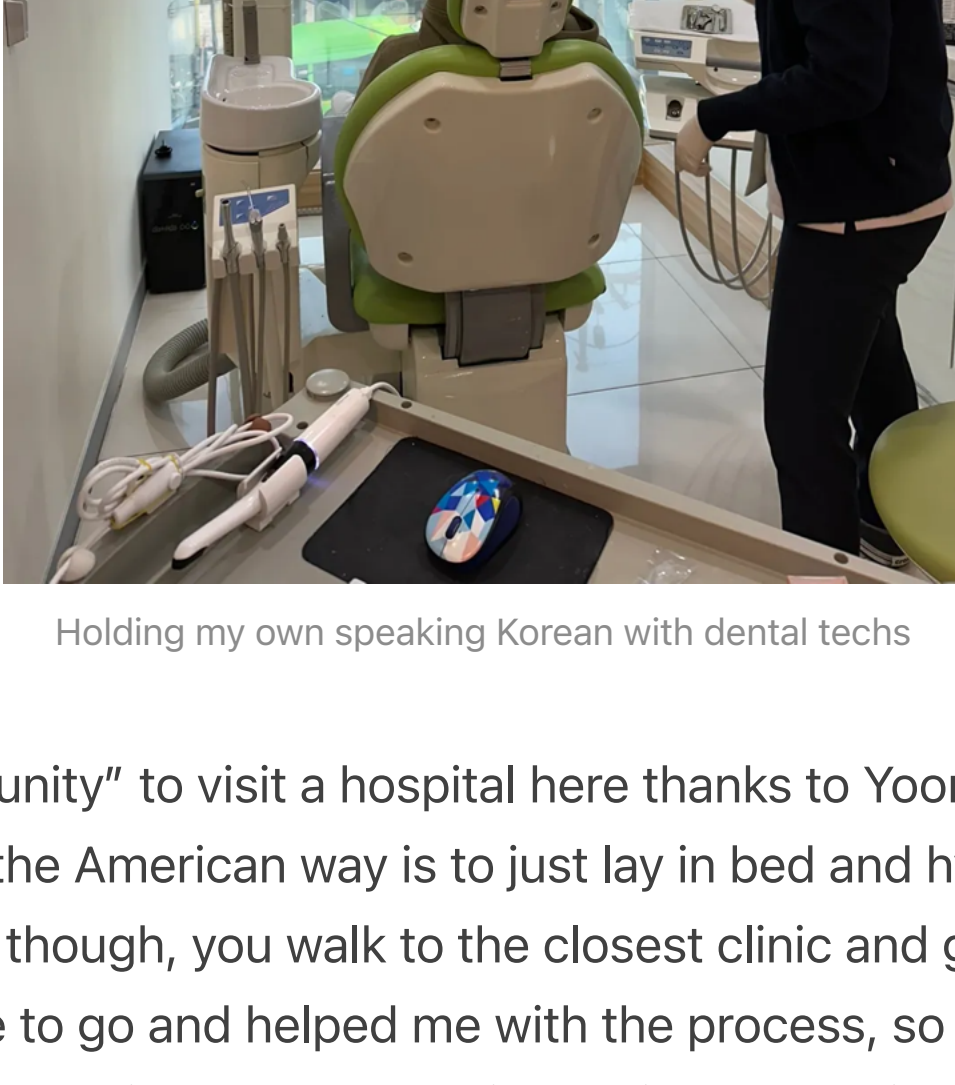
Noboribetsu Yakitori

After finishing up in Hokkaido with a trip to Otaru and a night in Sapporo, we flew to Tokyo to visit my friend Marie and her family (an Olmsted Scholar studying in Tokyo). They showed us around their cute neighborhood before Yoomin and I spent a few days at DisneySea and Disneyland Tokyo! We had a wonderful time and thankfully had special passes to avoid nearly every line, which was handy in the cold temperatures.



We returned to Seoul in time for a beautiful white Christmas. Christmas in Korea is celebrated a bit differently than in the US which I find quite interesting. Instead of a family-focused day, it is closer to our Valentine's day, where couples go on cute dates and exchange simple gifts like chocolates, etc. Yoomin and I made our own Korean style Christmas feast at home and had the classic Seoul Tower date that I wanted.

After the holidays, Yoomin continued to show me so many new experiences in Korea including new delicious foods that I was unaware of, coin 노래방, my first Korean dental visit, my first Korean hospital visit, and getting custom clothing made by a Korean tailor. A quick note on the medical care in Korea is in order now that I've experienced it. First, I've had a frustrating time trying to get a dental cleaning by my military dental clinics since COVID-19, so while Yoomin was here to help me, she took me to my neighborhood dental clinic. Without an appointment and without any insurance, I was able to walk right in, get X-rays done immediately, receive a full inspection and cleaning/scaling, and pay my bill within maybe 30 minutes total. Also, the bill (remember, with no insurance!) was only around \$50!



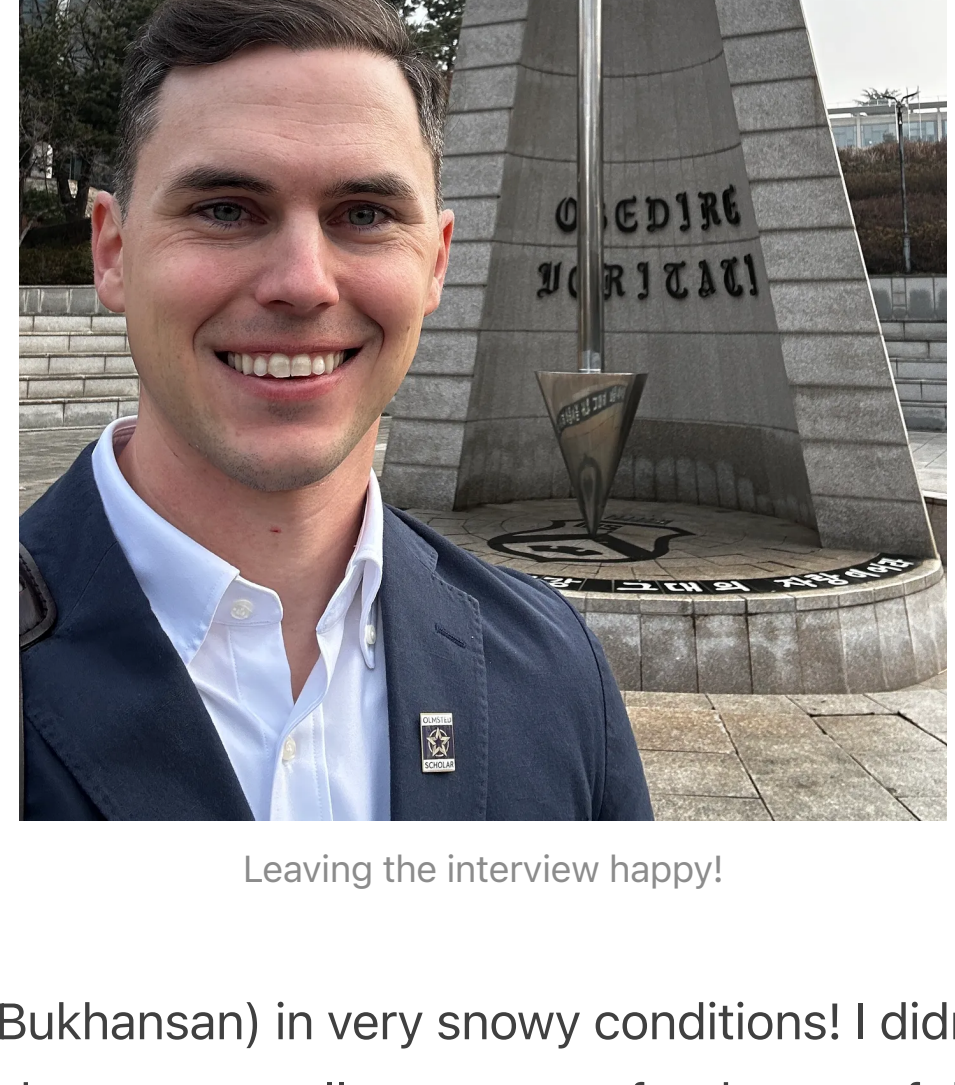
Holding my own speaking Korean with dental techs

I also had the "opportunity" to visit a hospital here thanks to Yoomin's insistence. I was feeling very sick, but the American way is to just lay in bed and hydrate and wait for it to blow over. In Korea though, you walk to the closest clinic and get seen by a doctor! Yoomin convinced me to go and helped me with the process, so now I'm confident enough to do it alone next time. We walked in (again, no appointment and no insurance) and the receptionist took my temperature (high fever) and asked me some basic questions about my symptoms. A few minutes later, I was called into a doctor's office to get a medical exam and a flu test swab. A few minutes later, he told me that I did have a flu and prescribed me an IV with flu medicine and a few medications to take for the next few days. I then walked into this cozy IV room where people get vitamin IVs when they're feeling rundown or IVs with medicine in them in cases like mine. After 15 minutes of receiving the IV, I paid my bill (about \$100 for everything) and picked up my prescriptions at the pharmacy in the same building. The prescription sticle here in Korea is also quite interesting and makes a ton of sense! The pharmacist takes your prescription from the doctor and runs the medications through a machine that individually packages each morning/afternoon/evening doses so you don't have to worry about multiple big pill bottles and wondering when to take each one. A lot of things here in Korea make very little sense to me, but the way they do their medical care is truly impressive.



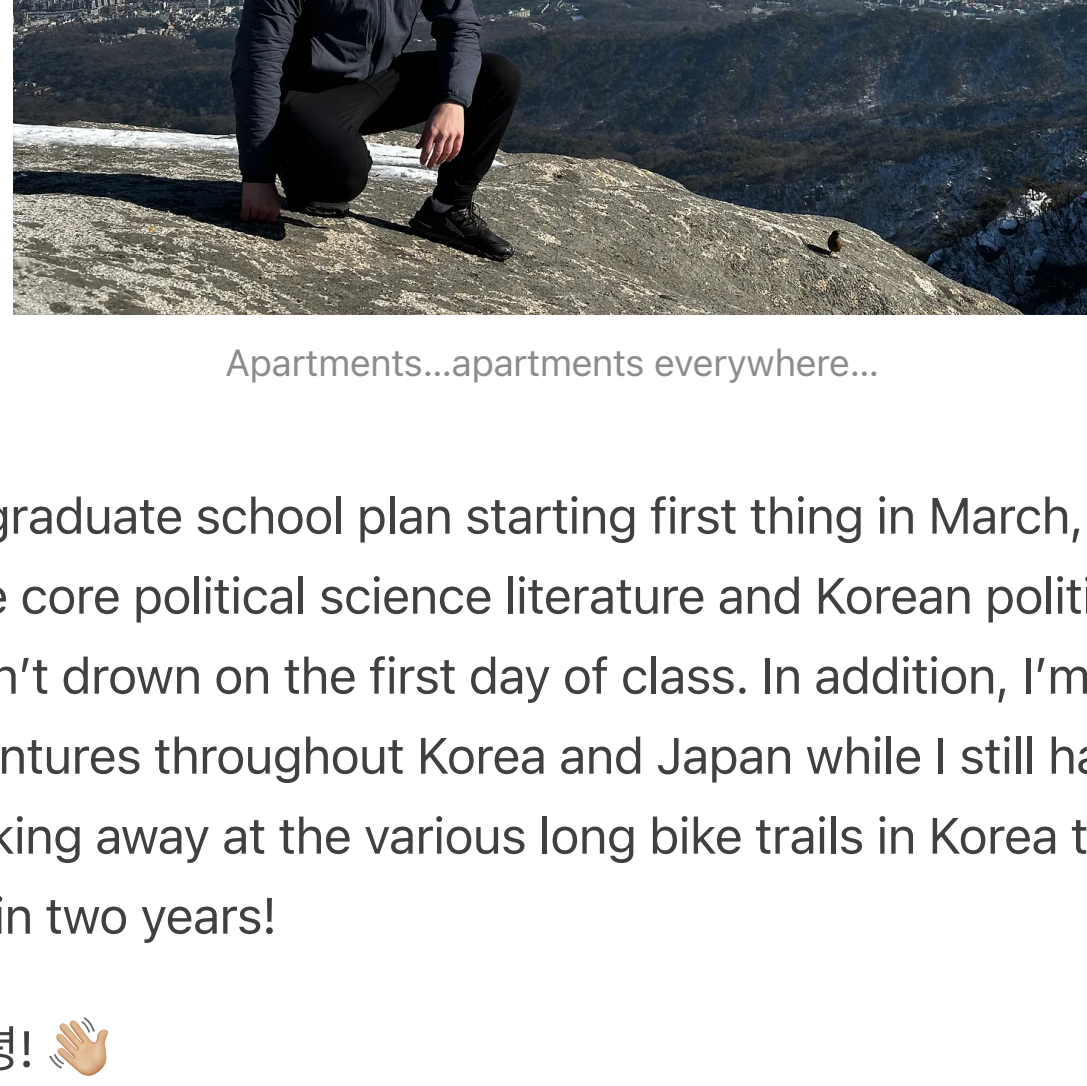
Korean prescriptions make so much more sense!

After I recovered, Yoomin helped me prepare for my graduate school interview at Sogang University's Political Science department, and I am so grateful for her help. I was quite nervous for the interview as I didn't know anything about the topic or scope besides that it was going to be in 100% Korean and with a panel of Political Science department professors. She helped me practice a good self-introduction speech that hit on the main points I wanted to convey and as a result, the interview went very well! The professors were nice and seemed interested in my story and in why I wanted to study there, and being the only westerner applying to the department made me stand out quite a bit. They seemed concerned about how I'll do being the only westerner (a few Japanese/Chinese students also interviewed, but they were fluent), but I successfully explained the nature of my program and that the challenge was the point. Two weeks after the interview, I found out that I made the cut and was accepted into the school! I was very proud of myself for successfully navigating this process as a new Korean speaker and for choosing the harder path. It was a risk that nearly threw off my whole Olmsted experience off track, but I think I'll come out the other end growing more as a result of the choices I made up until this point.



Leaving the interview happy!

I also climbed 북한산 (Bukhansan) in very snowy conditions! I didn't bring crampons with me to Korea, but they were totally necessary for the top of this mountain in January. It was quite sketchy at the summit, but the long climb was worth it for the views! It is the highest mountain in the Seoul area, so you could see vast stretches of the Seoul megacity in all directions. I found it funny seeing official signs on the mountain that explained that Bukhansan is the "most popular mountain in the world." 😂 I had to laugh when I saw that, thinking it couldn't possibly be true, but according to the Guinness Book of World Records, it is technically the most visited national park in the world per unit area. Who knew? 🤔



Apartments...apartments everywhere...

Now that I have a graduate school plan starting first thing in March, I can take the next month to study the core political science literature and Korean political science vocabulary so I don't drown on the first day of class. In addition, I'm taking my folding bike on a few adventures throughout Korea and Japan while I still have some free time. I need to start hacking away at the various long bike trails in Korea to complete my bike passport within two years!

Until next time, 안녕! 🙌

-Sean