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A journey framed by Semenyih Dam's gate: a reflective note on memory, and the quiet weight of time in research growth

Abstract

This reflective note revisits the emotional landscape of returning to Semenyih Dam's gate in 2025, nearly three decades after my final-year bachelor project in 1997. The physical site, unchanged in some ways and transformed in others, became a mirror that allowed me to see the long arc of my academic life; from a young undergraduate to a full professor and World's Top 2% Scientists. The narrative explores how memory, place, and personal history intersect, and how years of endurance, struggles, and unspoken hurts have shaped my identity as a researcher, professor, and educator. The original student project at Semenyih River later produced two peer-reviewed papers on macrobenthic invertebrates and their environmental correlates, marking the first tangible scientific legacy of that early work. Through this recollection, I confront both the burdens and the blessings that have accompanied my journey. While acknowledging the pains, disrespects, and dismissive attitudes I have endured, I reflect on why such experiences no longer possess the power they once did. This paper serves as a meditation on acceptance, resilience, and the quiet wisdom that comes from standing at a familiar place after many years. It concludes with an open-hearted perspective on moving forward with clarity, humility, and a strengthened sense of self.

Keywords: Semenyih dam nostalgia, academic journey, personal growth, resilience, reflective memory

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Introduction

Revisiting a place from one's youth is more than an act of looking. It is an encounter with time. On 7 September 2025 (Figure 1), as I passed the entrance of Semenyih Dam's gate on the way to visit my mother's resting place, I felt a convergence of past and present that was unexpected and heavy with meaning. The road beside the lake, the gate of the dam, and the morning air carried the weight of 1997 (Figure 2), when I first stood here as a final-year undergraduate doing macrobenthos sampling in the Semenyih River. Between those two moments, the access road has been widened, the signboards renewed, and the vegetation along the lakeshore periodically cleared and replanted, quiet indicators that the Semenyih Dam landscape has been repeatedly managed and adjusted even as its basic profile remains recognizable. That project, which began with simple curiosity, later matured into two scientific publications on species diversity,[1] and on the relationships between macrobenthic invertebrates and physico-chemical parameters in the Semenyih River.[2] These papers became early evidence that a small student project could grow into work with lasting scientific value. Figures 1 and 2 therefore do more than document a gate; they act as visual anchors that hold together changes in infrastructure, subtle ecological shifts, and the parallel evolution of my academic identity.

Figure 1 A view at the entrance of Semenyih Dam's gate on 7 September 2025. Note: The present-day entrance, with clearer signposts and bright morning light, represents the stage of my life where clarity finally replaces confusion. The Malaysian flag stands firmly above the gate, echoing a rise that feels personal. Compared with the scene in 1997, the upgraded signage, smoother road surface, and trimmed verge also signal how the dam and its surroundings have been

progressively formalised and managed over the decades, mirroring a more structured phase in my academic journey.

Figure 2 A view of the Semenyih Dam's gate entrance taken in June 1997 during macrobenthos sampling for my final-year project. Note: The old brick signboard, weathered and unstylish, reminds me of a younger self who had no certainty about the future and who faced the world with unpolished hope. The more modest structure, older typography, and less manicured roadside vegetation capture an earlier phase in the dam's history, when both the landscape and my academic self were still clearly under construction.

Seen from 2025, it is a long psychological and emotional negotiation with doubt, isolation, and expectation. Studies of academic life show that the formative years in graduate school and the academic promotion processes are often filled with negative emotions, social isolation, and impostor feelings that quietly shape academic identity and resilience.[3] My own path from Semenyih River to professorship unfolded inside this same emotional landscape, even if most of it remained invisible to others.

The journey has also been cognitive. A research career is built on the ability to hold and organize an expanding body of knowledge across many years. Empirical work among university students shows that working memory and intentional memory are strong predictors of academic achievement, highlighting how the capacity to retain and strategically manipulate information underpins long-term success.[4] At the same time, studies of science retention show that knowledge decays over time if it is not repeatedly reinforced and meaningfully connected to practice.[5] Teaching, supervising, and returning to basic concepts again and again have therefore not only been professional duties in my academic life but also mechanisms for keeping my own scientific memory alive and stay passionate within myself.[6,7]

Time itself is another quiet actor in this story. Research on meta-cognitive knowledge of time passing indicates that how individuals perceive and monitor the flow of time is closely linked to their sense of self, life meaning, and decision making.[8] For an academic, this means that the years between 1997 and 2025 are not only a chronology of academic promotions and publications; they trace a gradual deepening of awareness about when to work, when to rest, when to say yes, and when to say no. Meanwhile, the digital era has changed how memory functions in research. My evolution from a student reading photocopied articles to a professor navigating vast online databases mirrors this broader shift.

Finally, this path is embedded in questions of performance, recognition, and self-worth.[9] Yet grades and metrics alone do not produce a scientist. Work among Malaysian university students shows that time management, attendance, sleep, self-esteem, and a clear sense of purpose are important predictors of academic performance.[10] Looking back at Semenyih, I can see how small habits of discipline, an emerging sense of purpose, and a refusal to give up slowly accumulated over decades into the profile of a senior academic.[11,12] In this sense, the reflective narrative that follows does not serve as a stand-alone memoir; it aims to contribute to the scholarly conversation on academic identity, environmental memory, and the long-term trajectories of research practice by using a specific dam, river, and set of early publications as a concrete case.

The objective of this reflection is to use the Semenyih Dam' gate and Semenyih River project as an anchor to examine my personal and academic journey from 1997 to 2025, to acknowledge both the scientific outputs and the emotional scars accumulated along the way, and to articulate how I wish to move forward with a more open heart, deeper understanding of myself, and less dependence on external recognition for my sense of worth.

Reflections

The weight of memory

When I saw the gate again in 2025, I realized that I was not only looking at a place but at the beginning of my academic identity. In 1997, I was just a bachelor student without any clear idea of what I could become. Yet that year marked the first time I felt the rhythm of field research: mud on my shoes, the sharp smell of river sediment, and the curiosity that kept me kneeling by the riverbank for hours. The subsequent publications from that work[1,2] became proof that an uncertain student project could grow into research with

lasting scientific value. [At that time, the access path to the dam was narrower, the guardrails more rudimentary, and the fringing forest denser; erosion marks on the riverbank and small patches of exposed laterite along the reservoir edge hinted that the Semenyih catchment was already carrying the signs of human use even as it supported drinking-water supply and ecological study. As of 18 November 2025, the paper by Yap et al.[1] has received 66 citations, while Yap and Rahim Ismail[2] has been cited 12 times in Google Scholar, small but important indicators that the questions once asked by a young student continue to speak to others.

From a cognitive perspective, this weight of memory is not only sentimental. The same working and intentional memory that help students learn and retain knowledge[4] are the capacities that allowed me to remember field protocols, macrobenthic species names, analytical methods, and statistical principles over many years. Research on science retention reminds us that knowledge fades when it is not regularly revisited.[5] My continuing engagement with river ecology through teaching and supervision has acted as a form of "retention defence," keeping the Semenyih knowledge alive in my mind.[13] At the same time, my relationship with memory has evolved with technology. As the literature expanded, I found myself relying more on remembering where to find information than on storing every detail internally, echoing the "Google effect" observed in doctoral work.[14] Standing at the dam's gate in 2025, I was not only recalling past events; I was also feeling the accumulation of years of cognitive labour, shaped by changing tools and changing expectations.

Seen in this way, the dam itself functions as more than an engineering structure. Its concrete gate, regulating fluctuating water levels through wet and dry seasons, resembles the way working and intentional memory hold core concepts steady while allowing daily details to rise and fall. The sediment settling quietly in the reservoir mirrors the gradual build-up of methodological skills, statistical habits, and teaching narratives that have accumulated in my own mind. Returning to this physical structure makes visible what is often only abstract in the literature: that cognition, affect, and identity are always located somewhere, in actual landscapes that silently host the labour of learning and research.

The return to Semenyih also revealed something about my relationship with time. The distance between 1997 and 2025 is not only numerical. It represents a deepening awareness of how quickly time passes and how easily years can be filled with tasks that do not nourish the soul. Studies on meta-cognitive knowledge of time passing show that people's understanding of time's flow is linked to their broader sense of meaning and self-direction.[8] Seeing the Semenyih Dam's gate again forced me to ask whether I had used the intervening decades in ways that honoured the curiosity of that young student by the river, or whether I had allowed external pressures and institutional demands to dictate my pace and priorities. In that moment, memory, time, and identity sat together at the same roadside.

Pain, dismissal, and the small humiliations no one sees

If memory provides the outline of this journey, pain fills in many of its details. Growth is always painful and rarely in a clean pathway. The years have contained more pain than I usually admit. There were countless moments of disrespect, dismissive attitudes, and quiet belittlement both inside and outside my lab where I grew up. Many of these moments left deep marks. People may see the achievements today, but they never witnessed the discouragements, the unseen struggles, or the subtle ways that dignity can be eroded in academic life. What the literature describes as negative emotions, social isolation, and impostor experiences in the pursuit of professional mastery[3] were not abstract constructs for me; they were daily realities. They appeared in meetings where my contributions were ignored, in emails that questioned my worth, and in institutional cultures (highly different if you are from oversea institutions) that were slow to recognize labour that did not fit neatly into simple metrics.

The transition periods described in studies of academic careers are important here. The experiences I carry from Semenyih forward resonate strongly with these broader patterns. Research has shown that moving from graduate student to lectureship, senior lectureship, associate professorship, full professorship, is often accompanied by confusion, overload, and inadequate preparation for the multiple roles being demanded.[15] I recognize these patterns in my own story. While I was expected to teach, publish, secure grants, and supervise, there was little guidance on how to protect my dignity in the face of subtle or overt disrespect. Over time, this produced an internal tension between the steady accumulation of achievements and the persistent feeling of being underestimated or sidelined. In this sense, my emotional scars are not separated from my professional growth; they are part of the same ecosystem.

At the same time, studies of academic performance remind us that success is shaped not only by external evaluations but also by internal resources such as time management, self-esteem, and sense of purpose.[10] My ability to keep working despite hurt was supported by habits and motivations that formed early. Factors such as consistent effort and early academic success are known to be linked to later retention and achievement in demanding programmes.[9] These findings help me reinterpret my own persistence not as blind endurance but as a combination of structural pressures and personal coping strategies. I used to feel wounded by those who refused to acknowledge me. Today, I look at those memories with steadier eyes. I no longer need their recognition. If anything, they should reflect on their own behaviour, but I do not ask them to look up at me. Their approval, which once mattered, has largely lost its meaning.

Achievement without arrogance

These painful strands sit alongside another theme that is less visible from the outside: how to live with achievement without letting it harden into arrogance. When I ask myself whether these thoughts make me arrogant, I find the answer inside the same place where the memories sit. I am not claiming superiority. I am acknowledging survival. I am acknowledging work. I am acknowledging a life that did not happen by accident. In the broader literature, academic achievement is often discussed through the lenses of grades, retention, and performance indicators,[9] yet psychological studies remind us that self-esteem and a sense of purpose are fundamental for sustaining engagement and performance over time.[10] My recognition as a World's Top 2% Scientists (World's Top 2% Scientists Network, 2025)[16] is one external marker, but what matters more to me now is that I continued to show up, teach, write, and supervise despite the emotional costs.

Arrogance requires a strong need to be seen and affirmed. What I feel is almost the opposite. I have been seen enough. I have earned enough in terms of titles, positions, and metrics. I no longer seek validation in the way I once did as a young lecturer anxious about my academic promotion. Instead, I find myself aligning with the idea that time and memory are quiet partners in identity formation. As research on meta-cognitive knowledge of time passing suggests, awareness of time can gradually reshape how we prioritize and evaluate our own actions.[8] The dam's gate and its reservoir help me visualise this: an apparently stable structure quietly recording seasonal fluctuations,

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much as a career quietly records years of effort, disappointment, and small satisfactions that only become visible when one steps back. My current stance is less about claiming status and more about recognizing that my work, with all its imperfections, has already contributed something meaningful to science and to students. To acknowledge that fact is not arrogance; it is a form of honest gratitude for what has survived.

What it means to move forward

Standing at Semenyih Dam's gate reminded me that every step forward is connected to a version of myself who struggled. I owe that younger self gratitude, not regret. He kept going through hardship, and because of that I stand where I am today. The literature on working and intentional memory underlines that academic achievement is built on the continuous capacity to encode, organize, and retrieve knowledge over time.[4] When I look ahead, I see that my future work will depend less on accumulating more outputs and more on using my cognitive and emotional resources in a way that honours both my limits and my values. The still surface of the reservoir, looking almost unchanged when viewed from the roadside, offered a physical analogue of the meta-cognitive awareness of time passing described in the literature: beneath an apparently quiet surface, water, memories, and priorities are always moving, inviting periodic reflection on where the current is actually flowing.

Moving forward also means reframing my relationship with time and with university expectations. A positive and reflective view of time is linked to healthier decision making and better self-regulation.[8] I interpret this as an invitation to protect my remaining years of academic life from being swallowed by pressures that do not align with my deeper purpose. Studies on student performance highlight the importance of purpose, attendance, sleep, and self-esteem;[10] similar principles apply to academics.

In practical terms, moving forward means keeping an open heart. Not to forget the pain, but to understand it. Not to erase the past, but to walk with it. Not to seek respect from others, but to give respect to the person I have become. The long view of academic life, as suggested by longitudinal work on success and retention,[9] shows that growth is cumulative. My journey from a young, underestimated student at Semenyih to a recognized professor is the result of many small choices over almost three decades, guided by curiosity, stubbornness, and a sense of responsibility. The quiet weight of time in research growth is therefore not only a burden but also a source of meaning. To move forward is to accept that weight with less bitterness and more gentleness toward myself.

Conclusion

This revisit to Semenyih Dam's gate was not a simple memory exercise but a recognition of my own journey. The landscape reminded me that life unfolds in chapters that can only be understood when one has walked far enough to look back with calmness. I have grown not because the path was smooth, but because I kept walking even when it was (so) difficult. As I move into the next stage of my career and life, I choose to carry forward a heart that is not hardened by past hurts but softened by understanding. I choose gratitude over comparison, clarity over bitterness, and inner dignity over external validation. The future, like the lake beside the dam's gate, is still and quiet, waiting for the next step, with openness, humility, strength to continue, and a sense of 'Don't be afraid to continue'.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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