

Personal History Statement

I am writing to share my personal history and motivations as I apply for AI PhD programs. My journey, from growing up in an extremely impoverished rural setting to pursuing a career in AI research, has been shaped by unique experiences and a deep desire to make a positive impact. In this narrative, I will elaborate on my experiences, from childhood hardships to my academic pursuits, and the events that have influenced my path.

Early Life in Poverty. I was raised in a rural area where even basic necessities were considered luxuries. Instant noodles were a rare treat for us, highlighting the challenges of our economic circumstances. Witnessing extreme poverty and the injustices it brought, such as family members unable to access healthcare or enduring humiliation from others, instilled in me a profound sense of empathy. These early experiences kindled a desire within me to bring about change for those facing adversity.

Influence of Buddhism. My early life was marked by limited access to books, but my spiritual nourishment was abundant. At the age of 7 or 8, my uncle introduced me to fundamental Buddhist teachings. The profound wisdom of the Buddha deeply affected me, particularly his compassion for all humanity, advocacy for equality, and the aspiration for universal happiness. Combining these teachings with my own observations of human suffering, I was profoundly moved by the concept of compassion and became increasingly determined to use my abilities to help those in need. Additionally, Buddhism introduced me to a causal way of thinking, encouraging a thorough examination of the root causes of phenomena—a mindset that ignited my initial curiosity for seeking new knowledge.

A Path to Academic Achievement. I am the first member of my family to attend college. During my childhood, I persevered through completing homework on freezing winter days, even when my hands were almost numb. In the rural area where I grew up, my academic performance consistently ranked at the top. However, at the age of 15, my family relocated to the city in pursuit of better educational opportunities, and this marked my first encounter with the sense of educational disparity and cultural differences. While it took me a year to catch up, the stark contrast in the quality of education between urban and rural areas left a profound impression on me.

During my time in school, I developed a strong enthusiasm for mathematics, and I frequently came up with original solutions that diverged from those suggested by my teachers. This ability to explore novel problem-solving approaches and the sense of accomplishment it brought fueled my ambition to become a mathematician or scientist in the future. As a result, I was determined to pursue a career in research from the beginning of my university journey.

The emergence of AlphaGo in 2016 left a profound impact on me. As a Chinese citizen, I had always believed that machines could never surpass human intelligence. However, AlphaGo's achievements challenged this belief and opened my eyes to the transformative potential of AI. This revelation deepened my desire to be part of the AI revolution, with the goal of using AI technology to improve human lives and address issues of inequality. Subsequently, I applied for and was accepted into HKUST's AI program for my MPhil's degree.

A Focus on Trustworthy AI and Causality. The various facets of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 triggered a reawakening of memories from my childhood. During this period, the pandemic exacerbated global issues, such as severe food shortages in Africa due to nations hoarding resources. These events, coupled with my childhood nurturing of empathy for those facing adversity, motivated me to research trustworthy AI during my MPhil studies. I aimed to promote fairness, ensure the safety of AI systems, and use AI for the betterment of humanity rather than as a threat. Subsequently, in 2020, I came across Judea Pearl's book "Causality," which deeply captivated my interest. I had never imagined that the causal thinking rooted in my exposure to Buddhism during my childhood could be rigorously described using mathematical formulas. I believe that causality holds significant potential for enhancing trustworthy artificial intelligence, as it naturally offers robust interpretability and aids in uncovering the genuine causal relationships underlying data and models. Therefore, in 2022, I reached out to Professor Kun Zhang and Professor Jiji Zhang, initiating a profound exploration of causality that continues to this day.

Diverse Experiences and Global Perspective. In addition to living in mainland China, I have also lived in the United States, Hong Kong, and Abu Dhabi for more than 8 months each. These experiences have provided me with the opportunity to immerse myself in the cultures and interact with the people of different countries. I have discovered that, despite cultural differences, the commonalities among people far outweigh these distinctions. These experiences have also deeply impressed upon me the charm of learning about different cultures. Through this process, I have formed friendships with many individuals and have learned to respect the customs of other countries.

Overcoming Personal Struggles. I would like to emphasize a specific aspect of my journey. Starting in 2016, I began setting exceptionally high standards for myself, often allowing no room for mistakes. This perfectionism led to a three-year battle with depression and was a key reason why I did not pursue formal education from 2016 to 2020. During this challenging period, I am profoundly grateful for my parents' unwavering support. In 2018, my parents joined me in running, significantly reducing my stress levels and improving my overall health. However, the turning point came when I incorporated daily meditation into my routine. Through these moments of introspection, I gradually recognized my deficiency in self-awareness, particularly in promptly addressing my own psychological issues. Meditation, coupled with regular running, enabled me to overcome depression. This personal journey illuminated the importance of self-care, mental health, and resilience, strengthening my determination to make a positive impact on the world.

Future Aspirations. If admitted to a PhD program, I aspire to create a "Meditation and Long Run Club" to share my experiences and help fellow students manage academic stress while enhancing self-awareness and physical well-being. Meditation can aid in stress release and self-awareness, while long-distance running can provide mental relaxation and boost energy levels, both essential for coping with the demands of rigorous academic life. I look forward to building friendships and supporting my peers.

In conclusion, my unique personal history has molded me into a compassionate, resilient, and empathetic individual with a deep-seated desire to use my knowledge to make a meaningful impact. I believe my background and dedication can contribute to the diverse community at my prospective PhD university, and help advance the field of trustworthy AI. Thank you for considering my application.