

Shangtong Zhang

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RESEARCH INTEREST

The goal of my research is to solve sequential decision making problems in a scalable and reliable way. Currently, I focus on Reinforcement Learning (RL) as a solution method. In particular, I work on stochastic approximations for RL, theories and algorithms of RL, and applications by RL.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENTS

| | |
|--|---|
| Assistant Professor Department of Computer Science University of Virginia, VA, United States | Aug 2022 - Present |
| Research Scientist Interns Microsoft Research Montreal DeepMind London Microsoft Research Montreal | Jun 2021 - Sep 2021 Feb 2021 - Jun 2021 Jun 2020 - Aug 2020 |

EDUCATION

| | |
|---|---------------------|
| Doctor of Philosophy , Computer Science University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom Advisor: Prof. Shimon Whiteson Thesis: Breaking the Deadly Triad in Reinforcement Learning | Oct 2018 - Jul 2022 |
| Master of Science , Computer Science University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada Advisor: Prof. Richard S. Sutton Thesis: Learning with Artificial Neural Networks | Sep 2016 - Jul 2018 |
| Bachelor of Science , Computing Science Fudan University, Shanghai, China | Sep 2012 - Jul 2016 |

HONORS

NSF CAREER Award, 2025
QuantCo Spotlight Award at the ICML In-Context Learning Workshop, 2024
Rising Stars in AI by KAUST AI Initiative, 2024
AAAI New Faculty Highlights, 2023
IFAAMAS Victor Lesser Dissertation Award (Runner-Up), 2022
Alf Weaver Junior Faculty Fellowship, UVA, 2022 - 2025

ICLR Outstanding Reviewer, 2021
NeurIPS Reviewer Award, 2020
ICML Reviewer Award, 2020
AAMAS Best Paper Award, 2020
Light Senior Scholarship, St Catherine’s College, University of Oxford, 2020
EPSRC Studentship, University of Oxford, 2018 - 2022
EMC Scholarship, Fudan University, 2014

PUBLICATIONS

Advisees of SZ are underlined; * indicates equal contribution; † indicates equal supervision.

Preprints

- (P1) *Reward Is Enough: LLMs Are In-Context Reinforcement Learners.*
Kefan Song, Amir Moeini, Peng Wang, Lei Gong, Rohan Chandra, Yanjun Qi, **Shangdong Zhang**.
ArXiv Preprint 2025.
- (P2) *Experience Replay Addresses Loss of Plasticity in Continual Learning.*
Jiuqi Wang, Rohan Chandra, **Shangdong Zhang**.
ArXiv Preprint, 2025.
- (P3) *GameChat: Multi-LLM Dialogue for Safe, Agile, and Socially Optimal Multi-Agent Navigation in Constrained Environments.*
Vagul Mahadevan, **Shangdong Zhang**, Rohan Chandra.
ArXiv Preprint, 2025.
- (P4) *A Survey of In-Context Reinforcement Learning.*
Amir Moeini, Jiuqi Wang, Jakob Beck, Ethan Blaser, Shimon Whiteson, Rohan Chandra, **Shangdong Zhang**.
ArXiv Preprint, 2025.
- (P5) *Almost Sure Convergence Rates and Concentration of Stochastic Approximation and Reinforcement Learning with Markovian Noise.*
Xiaochi Qian*, Xinyu Liu*, Zixuan Xie*, **Shangdong Zhang**.
ArXiv Preprint, 2024.
- (P6) *Asymptotic and Finite Sample Analysis of Nonexpansive Stochastic Approximations with Markovian Noise.*
Ethan Blaser, **Shangdong Zhang**.
ArXiv Preprint, 2024.
- (P7) *Almost Sure Convergence of Linear Temporal Difference Learning with Arbitrary Features.*
Jiuqi Wang, **Shangdong Zhang**.
ArXiv Preprint, 2024.
- (P8) *AlphaStar Unplugged: Large Scale Offline Reinforcement Learning.*
Michael Mathieu*, Sherjil Ozair*, Srivatsan Srinivasan*, Caglar Gulcehre*, **Shangdong Zhang***, Ray Jiang*, Tom Le Paine*, Richard Powell, Konrad Zolna, Julian Schrittwieser, David Choi, Petko Georgiev, Daniel Kenji Toyama, Aja Huang, Roman Ring, Igor Babuschkin, Timo Ewalds, Mahyar Bordbar, Sarah Henderson, Sergio Gomez Colmenarejo, Aaron van den Oord, Wojciech M. Czarnecki, Nando de Freitas, Oriol Vinyals.
ArXiv Preprint, 2023

Invited Articles

- (I1) *A New Challenge in Policy Evaluation*.
Shangtong Zhang.
 AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**AAAI**), 2023
 New Faculty Highlights Program.

Refereed Journals

- (J1) *The ODE Method for Stochastic Approximation and Reinforcement Learning with Markovian Noise*.
Shuze Liu, Shuhang Chen, **Shangtong Zhang**.
 Journal of Machine Learning Research (**JMLR**), 2025.
- (J2) *Global Optimality and Finite Sample Analysis of Softmax Off-Policy Actor Critic under State Distribution Mismatch*.
Shangtong Zhang, Remi Tachet des Combes[†], Romain Laroche[‡].
 Journal of Machine Learning Research (**JMLR**), 2022.
- (J3) *Truncated Emphatic Temporal Difference Methods for Prediction and Control*.
Shangtong Zhang, Shimon Whiteson.
 Journal of Machine Learning Research (**JMLR**), 2022.
- (J4) *MLPack 3: A Fast, Flexible Machine Learning Library*.
 Ryan Curtin, Marcus Edel, Mikhail Lozhnikov, Yannis Mentekidis, Sumedh Ghaisas, **Shangtong Zhang**
 Journal of Open Source Software (**JOSS**), 2018.

Refereed Conference Papers

- (C1) *Towards Provable Emergence of In-Context Reinforcement Learning*.
 Jiuqi Wang, Rohan Chandra, **Shangtong Zhang**.
 Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (**NeurIPS**), 2025
 Acceptance rate: 24.52%
- (C2) *Finite Sample Analysis of Linear Temporal Difference Learning with Arbitrary Features*.
Zixuan Xie^{*}, Xinyu Liu^{*}, Rohan Chandra, **Shangtong Zhang**.
 Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (**NeurIPS**), 2025
 Acceptance rate: 24.52%
- (C3) *Counterfactual Explanations for Continuous Action Reinforcement Learning*.
 Shuyang Dong, **Shangtong Zhang**, Lu Feng.
 International Joint Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**IJCAI**), 2025
 Acceptance rate: 19.3%
- (C4) *Towards Large Language Models that Benefit for All: Benchmarking Group Fairness in Reward Models*.
 Kefan Song, Jin Yao, Runnan Jiang, Rohan Chandra, **Shangtong Zhang**.
 Reinforcement Learning Conference (**RLC**), 2025
 Acceptance rate: 39%
- (C5) *Linear Q-Learning Does Not Diverge in L^2 : Convergence Rates to a Bounded Set*.
Xinyu Liu^{*}, Zixuan Xie^{*}, **Shangtong Zhang**.
 International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2025.
 Acceptance rate: 26.9%
- (C6) *Transformers Can Learn Temporal Difference Methods for In-Context Reinforcement Learning*.
Jiuqi Wang^{*}, Ethan Blaser^{*}, Hadi Daneshmand, **Shangtong Zhang**.
 International Conference on Learning Representations (**ICLR**), 2025.
 Acceptance rate: 32.08%.
QuantCo Spotlight Award at the ICML Workshop on In-Context Learning, 2024.
- (C7) *Revisiting a Design Choice in Gradient Temporal Difference Learning*.
Xiaochi Qian, **Shangtong Zhang**.

- International Conference on Learning Representations (**ICLR**), 2025.
Acceptance rate: 32.08%.
- (C8) *Efficient Policy Evaluation with Safety Constraint for Reinforcement Learning*.
Claire Chen^{*}, Shuze Liu^{*}, **Shangdong Zhang**.
International Conference on Learning Representations (**ICLR**), 2025.
Acceptance rate: 32.08%.
- (C9) *Doubly Optimal Policy Evaluation for Reinforcement Learning*.
Shuze Liu, Claire Chen, **Shangdong Zhang**.
International Conference on Learning Representations (**ICLR**), 2025.
Acceptance rate: 32.08%.
- (C10) *Efficient Multi-Policy Evaluation for Reinforcement Learning*.
Shuze Liu, Claire Chen, **Shangdong Zhang**.
AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**AAAI**), 2025.
Acceptance rate: 23.4%. **Oral presentation (4.6%)**.
- (C11) *Efficient Policy Evaluation with Offline Data Informed Behavior Policy Design*.
Shuze Liu, **Shangdong Zhang**.
International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2024.
Acceptance rate: 27.5%
- (C12) *On the Convergence of SARSA with Linear Function Approximation*.
Shangdong Zhang, Remi Tachet des Combes, Romain Laroche.
International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2023.
Acceptance rate: 28%
- (C13) *A Deeper Look at Discounting Mismatch in Actor-Critic Algorithms*.
Shangdong Zhang, Romain Laroche, Harm van Seijen, Shimon Whiteson, Remi Tachet des Combes.
International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems (**AAMAS**), 2022.
Acceptance rate: 26%. **Oral presentation**.
- (C14) *Learning Expected Emphatic Traces for Deep RL*.
Ray Jiang, **Shangdong Zhang**, Veronica Chelu, Adam White, Hado van Hasselt.
AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**AAAI**), 2022.
Acceptance rate: 15%.
- (C15) *Breaking the Deadly Triad with a Target Network*.
Shangdong Zhang, Hengshuai Yao, Shimon Whiteson.
International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2021.
Acceptance rate: 21.5%.
- (C16) *Average-Reward Off-Policy Policy Evaluation with Function Approximation*.
Shangdong Zhang^{*}, Yi Wan^{*}, Richard S. Sutton, Shimon Whiteson.
International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2021.
Acceptance rate: 21.5%.
- (C17) *Mean-Variance Policy Iteration for Risk-Averse Reinforcement Learning*.
Shangdong Zhang, Bo Liu, Shimon Whiteson.
AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**AAAI**), 2021.
Acceptance rate: 21.4%.
- (C18) *Learning Retrospective Knowledge with Reverse Reinforcement Learning*.
Shangdong Zhang, Vivek Veeriah, Shimon Whiteson.
Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (**NeurIPS**), 2020.
Acceptance rate: 20.1%.
- (C19) *GradientDICE: Rethinking Generalized Offline Estimation of Stationary Values*.
Shangdong Zhang, Bo Liu, Shimon Whiteson.
International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2020.
Acceptance rate: 21.8%.

- (C20) *Provably Convergent Two-Timescale Off-Policy Actor-Critic with Function Approximation.*
Shangdong Zhang, Bo Liu, Hengshuai Yao, Shimon Whiteson.
 International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2020.
 Acceptance rate: 21.8%.
- (C21) *Deep Residual Reinforcement Learning.*
Shangdong Zhang, Wendelin Boehmer, Shimon Whiteson.
 International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems (**AAMAS**), 2020.
 Acceptance rate: 23%. **Best Paper Award**.
- (C22) *Mega-Reward: Achieving Human-Level Play without Extrinsic Rewards.*
 Yuhang Song, Jianyi Wang, Thomas Lukasiewicz, Zhenghua Xu, **Shangdong Zhang**, Andrzej Wojcicki, Mai Xu.
 AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**AAAI**), 2020.
 Acceptance rate: 20.6%.
- (C23) *DAC: The Double Actor-Critic Architecture for Learning Options.*
Shangdong Zhang, Shimon Whiteson.
 Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (**NeurIPS**), 2019.
 Acceptance rate: 21.2%.
- (C24) *Generalized Off-Policy Actor-Critic.*
Shangdong Zhang, Wendelin Boehmer, Shimon Whiteson.
 Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (**NeurIPS**), 2019.
 Acceptance rate: 21.2%.
- (C25) *Distributional Reinforcement Learning for Efficient Exploration.*
 Borislav Mavrin, **Shangdong Zhang**, Hengshuai Yao, Linglong Kong, Kaiwen Wu, Yaoliang Yu
 International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML**), 2019.
 Acceptance rate: 22.6%.
- (C26) *ACE: An Actor Ensemble Algorithm for Continuous Control with Tree Search.*
Shangdong Zhang, Hao Chen, Hengshuai Yao.
 AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**AAAI**), 2019.
 Acceptance rate: 16.2%. **Spotlight presentation**.
- (C27) *QUOTA: The Quantile Option Architecture for Reinforcement Learning.*
Shangdong Zhang, Borislav Mavrin, Linglong Kong, Bo Liu, Hengshuai Yao.
 AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence (**AAAI**), 2019.
 Acceptance rate: 16.2%. **Oral presentation**.
- (C28) *Crossprop: Learning Representations by Stochastic Meta-Gradient Descent in Neural Networks.*
 Vivek Veeriah*, **Shangdong Zhang***, Richard S. Sutton.
 European Conference on Machine Learning and Principles and Practice of Knowledge Discovery in
 Databases (**ECML-PKDD**), 2017.
 Acceptance rate: 27.1%.
- (C29) *A Deep Neural Network for Modeling Music.*
 Pengjing Zhang, Xiaoqing Zheng, Wenqiang Zhang, Siyan Li, Sheng Qian,
 Wenqi He, **Shangdong Zhang**, Ziyuan Wang
 International Conference on Multimedia Retrieval (**ICMR**), 2015.
 Acceptance rate: 31%.

Refereed Workshop Papers (Non-Archival)

- (W1) *CRASH: Challenging Reinforcement-Learning Based Adversarial Scenarios For Safety Hardening.*
 Amar Kulkarni, **Shangdong Zhang**, Madhur Behl.
 ML for Autonomous Driving Workshop at AAAI, 2025.

- (W2) [A Deeper Look at Experience Replay.](#)
Shangtong Zhang, Richard S. Sutton.
Deep RL Symposium at NIPS, 2017.
- (W3) [Comparing Deep Reinforcement Learning and Evolutionary Methods in Continuous Control.](#)
Shangtong Zhang, Osmar R. Zaiane
Deep RL Symposium at NIPS, 2017
- (W4) [A Demon Control Architecture with Off-Policy Learning and Flexible Behavior Policy.](#)
Shangtong Zhang, Richard S. Sutton.
Hierarchical RL Workshop at NIPS, 2017.

Technical Reports

- (T1) [Group Fairness in Multi-Task Reinforcement Learning.](#)
Kefan Song, Runnan Jiang, Rohan Chandra, **Shangtong Zhang**.
ArXiv Preprint, 2025.

GRANTS

- (G1) [Reinforced Sensory Intelligence for Safe Autonomous Driving.](#)
CCI Central Virginia Node, **PI**, Total \$100,000, My Share \$60,000 2025 - 2026
- (G2) [CAREER: Revolutionizing the Evaluation of AI Agents with Online and Offline Data.](#)
NSF 2442098, **PI**, Total \$600,000, My Share \$600,000 2025 - 2030
- (G3) [Revolutionizing Domain Generalization with In-Context Reinforcement Learning.](#)
Nvidia Academic Grant, **PI**, 16,000 A100 Hours 2025
- (G4) [Enhancing the Security of Large Language Models Against Persuasion-Based Jailbreak Attacks in Multi-Turn Dialogues.](#)
CCI Coastal Virginia Node, **Co-PI**, Total \$60,000, My Share \$20,000 2025 - 2026
- (G5) [RAMPART: Reinforcement Against Malicious Penetration by Adversaries in Realistic Topologies.](#)
DARPA HR001123S0002, **Co-PI** of UVA subaward, Total \$2,150,000, My Share \$77,000 2023 - 2027
- (G6) [SLES: CRASH: Challenging Reinforcement-Learning Based Adversarial Scenarios for Safety Hardening.](#)
NSF 2331904, **Co-PI**, Total \$800,000, My Share \$400,000 2023 - 2026
- (G7) [III: Small: Moving Offline Learning to Rank Online, from Theory to Practice.](#)
NSF 2128019, **PI**, Total \$500,000, My Share \$500,000 2021 - 2026

SERVICES

Organizers

CPS Rising Star Workshop 2024, Co-Chair

Panelists

National Science Foundation (NSF), 2024

Virginia's Commonwealth Cyber Initiative (CCI), 2024

Meta Meta Reviewer

RL Conference 2025 (Senior Area Chair)

Meta Reviewer

NeurIPS 2025 (Area Chair)

ICML 2025 (Area Chair)

ICLR 2024, 2025, 2026 (Area Chair)
 AISTATS 2024, 2025, 2026 (Area Chair)
 L4DC 2025 (Program Committee)
 AAMAS 2025 (Senior Program Committee)
 RL Conference 2024 (Area Chair)
 ACML 2022, 2023, 2024 (Area Chair)

Reviewer

Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence (1)
 Transaction of Machine Learning Research (2)
 Journal of Machine Learning Research (3)
 Artificial Intelligence Journal (2)
 Transactions on Intelligent Systems and Technology (2)
 IJCAI 2023
 AISTATS 2022
 NeurIPS 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
 ICML 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
 AAAI 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
 ICLR 2021, 2022, 2023
 SIGCOMM 2022
 Offline Reinforcement Learning Workshop at NeurIPS 2020, 2021, 2022
 Deep Reinforcement Learning Workshop at NeurIPS 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
 Adaptive and Learning Agents Workshop at AAMAS 2019, 2020
 Optimization Foundations for Reinforcement Learning Workshop at NeurIPS 2019
 Reinforcement Learning for Real Life Workshop at ICML 2019, 2021
 Reinforcement Learning for Real Life Workshop at NeurIPS 2022

Conference Session Chair

AAAI 2023, “Reinforcement Learning Theory & Algorithms”

SUPERVISION

Doctral Students

| | |
|--|------------|
| Ethan Blaser, NSF Graduate Research Fellowship | 2023 - Now |
| Jiuqi Wang | 2023 - Now |
| Xinyu Liu | 2024 - Now |
| Zixuan Xie, UVA Provost’s Fellowship, UVA Engineering Distinguished Fellowship | 2024 - Now |
| Amir Moeini | 2024 - Now |

Alumni with Theses or Publications

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Shuze Liu, PhD → Research Scientist at Meta | 2022 - 2025 |
| Kefan Song, Master → PhD at UVA | 2023 - 2025 |
| Licheng Luo, Master → PhD at UC Riverside | 2023 - 2024 |
| Claire Chen, Undergraduate → Undergraduate at Caltech | 2023 - 2025 |
| Vikram Ostrander, Undergraduate (DMP thesis) → Software Engineer at Palantir | 2024 - 2025 |
| Vagul Mahadevan, Undergraduate (DMP thesis) → Software Engineer at Metron | 2023 - 2025 |
| Steve Zhou, Undergraduate (DMP thesis) → Master at MIT | 2023 - 2024 |
| Xiaochi Qian, Undergraduate (Oxford) → Quantitative Researcher at Marshall Wace | 2022 - 2024 |

PhD Dissertation Examination Committees

Fengdi Che (U of Alberta, by Prof. Rupam Mahmood and Prof. Dale Schuurmans)
 Shohaib Mahmud (by Prof. Haiying Shen)
 Suraiya Tairin (by Prof. Haiying Shen)

Tao Jin (by Prof. Farzad Farnoud)
 Fan Yao (by Prof. Hongning Wang and Prof. Haifeng Xu)
 Ingy ElSayed-Aly (by Prof. Lu Feng)
 Sudhir Shenoy (by Prof. Afsaneh Doryab)
 Chuanhao Li (by Prof. Hongning Wang)

INVITED TALKS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Convergence of Value-Based Reinforcement Learning: Advances and Open Problems | |
| Workshop on Advances in ML Theory, Canada, by Prof. Csaba Szepesvari | May 2025 |
| Understanding the Training and Inference of Reinforcement Learning | |
| Tsinghua University, hosted by Prof. Hongning Wang | June 2024 |
| On the Cheating of Offline Reinforcement Learning | |
| KAUST Rising Stars in AI Symposium | Feb 2024 |
| Offline Reinforcement Learning: Current and Future | |
| AAAI New Faculty Highlight Program | Feb 2023 |
| Breaking the Deadly Triad in Off-Policy Reinforcement Learning | |
| Department of Computer Science, University of Virginia | Mar 2022 |
| School of Computing Science, Simon Fraser University | Feb 2022 |
| Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering, University of Waterloo | Feb 2022 |
| School of Informatics, University of Edinburgh | Oct 2021 |
| Breaking the Deadly Triad with a Target Network | |
| Microsoft Research Summit | Oct 2021 |
| Breaking the Deadly Triad in Reinforcement Learning | |
| RL team, DeepMind, hosted by Dr. Hado van Hasselt | Sep 2021 |
| Off-Policy Evaluation | |
| Data Fest 2020, Open Data Science | Oct 2020 |
| Off-Policy Evaluation and Control | |
| ByteDance AI Lab, Shanghai | Oct 2020 |
| Coding Deep RL Papers | |
| NIPS MLTrain Workshop, Long Beach | Dec 2019 |
| Off-Policy Actor-Critic Algorithms | |
| Latent Logic LTD, Oxford | Apr 2019 |

TEACHING & OUTREACH

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| University of Virginia | |
| CS 6771: Reinforcement Learning | Spring 2026 |
| CS 4771: Reinforcement Learning | Fall 2025 |
| CS 6316: Machine Learning | Spring 2024, Spring 2025 |
| CS 4501: Reinforcement Learning | Fall 2024 |
| CS 4501: Optimization | Fall 2023 |
| CS 6501: Topics in Reinforcement Learning | Fall 2022 |
| Tutorial: What GenAI Can and Cannot Do? | |
| UVA Innovation Hub at Charlottesville Middle School | July 2025 |
| Charlottesville High School – Link Lab Mentorship Program | |
| Gravity Battery & Wearable GPS | Fall 2024 |

OPEN SOURCE CODE

GitHub Repo: PyTorch Deep RL

A zoo of popular deep RL algorithms in PyTorch with **3k stars**.

GitHub Repo: Reinforcement Learning: An Introduction

Python implementation of the book *Reinforcement Learning: An Introduction* with **13.8k stars**.

Google Summer of Code (GSoC)

MLPack

2017

The Xapian Project

2014