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Personal Statement

When I was in primary school, I became known as the “computer kid” in my neighborhood. Many older neighbors had Windows XP machines full of ads and viruses. Even popular antivirus tools would quietly install more unwanted software. I learned how to reinstall the OS from a CD, remove malware, replace hard drives and memory, and more importantly, sit beside elderly people and walk them step by step through what they want to do. When smartphones arrived, I wrote simple sequences of actions so they could send photos, join WeChat groups, or pay bills. They took careful notes. These moments were my first experience as a mediator between people and technology, taught me to listen first, translate second, and work to make technology feel less hostile to as many audiences as possible.

My family shaped this orientation. My father is a software engineer and my grandfather was a mechanical engineer, so I grew up seeing problems broken down systematically and solved with tools. My mother is a chemistry teacher who spends a surprising amount of time not teaching, but talking with students and parents about mental health. She often told stories about students exhausted by expectations at home, and how simply pushing them harder only made their grades and wellbeing worse. Watching her meet with both students and parents to reduce pressure and reframe failure taught me that supporting someone’s learning often begins with protecting their sense of self. Art was just as present at home: my grandmother is a musician, and playing with her taught me that performance is not just about technique, but about holding a space in which people can feel. These influences made me see engineering, teaching, and art as a single practice: caring about how people experience systems, not only whether they work.

At Tsinghua University Student Art Troupe, about 98% of the clavier team were passionate amateurs. The troupe existed not only to win competitions for the university, but also to give students from all majors a place to develop an artistic practice. As the president of the clavier team, I spent many evenings in practice rooms helping members with piano technique, but also designing performance opportunities that match different levels. Formal recitals were reserved for students with more training, when salon concerts were gentler spaces where new members could perform for peers. I encouraged them to play four hand pieces and chamber music with the symphony and traditional Chinese ensembles, so they can learn by playing alongside others.

Two students were amateurs who took on a challenging four hand arrangement of Tchaikovsky’s Sleeping Beauty. Our faculty coach was demanding, and they became so anxious that they considered withdrawing from the concert. I met them every week, encouraging them, working through difficult passages in detail, and reminding them the goal of this performance was experience, not perfection. At the final performance, they missed the very first chord, stopped, started again, and then finished the piece. They walked off stage smiling and told me, with my support, they did something they never thought they could do. I remember feeling proud of their playing, also deeply happy that I’m able to create a space where they can be brave.

When I later became a TA at Berkeley, I carried my mother's examples into my classroom. In my first graduate Tangible UI course, there was an undergraduate student, who founded a startup and missed many classes and assignments. When she booked my office hours, I realized she was also extremely anxious. I summarized course materials for her, but we spent more time talking about stress and time management than microcontrollers. I shared that starting is often the hardest part, and progress comes easily once you get started. We broke her remaining work into small steps, and I tried to offer the same kind of calm, nonjudgmental support I had seen my mother provide to her students. Afterwards she told me I was the most responsible TA she had met. For me, the most meaningful part was seeing her anxiety ease as she regained a sense of control, and understanding that good teaching and good systems both encourage continued engagement rather than perfection on the first try.

Outside the classroom, I bring the same values to my work as a software engineer at Anything (Create, Inc.), where our team built an AI-assisted app builder. We had one UI designer who didn't have a strong technical background, and engineers who were less familiar with design principles. Much of my role was to translate between them. I spent time with our AI researcher explaining UI design concepts in concrete terms, so we can encode them into prompts. Working from the workflows of the designer and frontend engineers, we designed a pipeline that segments screenshots into sections, identifies components, and generates clean code so that people without programming experience can realize their ideas. It was the same pattern I had practiced since childhood: sitting in between communities, turning tacit judgment into explicit structure, and reshaping tools so they serve people who might otherwise be intimidated by the learning curve.

As a queer person of color who moved between China and the United States and between art, design, and engineering communities, I became sensitive to who is quietly excluded by systems. In music, that might be students who never have access to a live orchestra, or who feel they are not talented enough to take lessons. In design, it might be learners who cannot access the right jargon, even though they have strong ideas. In engineering teams, it can be colleagues whose backgrounds do not match the dominant story of who "belongs" in computing. These experiences are part of why I'm drawn to projects like Sympathetic Orchestra and EKPHRASIS, which aim to lower barriers to expert practice, and why I care about building AI systems that make existing communities stronger rather than replacing them.

In the PhD program, I want to contribute not only through research, but also by helping to build a community where people from different backgrounds can thrive. I hope to continue teaching and mentoring, especially students who feel they are not "technical" or "creative" enough, and to create project spaces where engineers, designers, and artists can learn from one another. In lab, I want to put my experience translating between disciplines, helping bridge code and craft, implementation and reflection. In longer term, I hope to become an HCI professor who does strong research, but who is remembered even more for creating classrooms and labs where students feel seen, supported, and able to take intellectual and creative risks.