

# SHENAO ZHANG

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## EDUCATION

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### Northwestern University

Ph.D. student in IEMS (Industrial Engineering & Management Sciences)  
Advisor: Prof. Zhaoran Wang

Sep. 2023 - Present  
Evanston, IL

### Georgia Institute of Technology

M.S. in ECE (Electrical and Computer Engineering), GPA: 3.81/4.00  
Advisors: Prof. Tuo Zhao and Prof. Bo Dai

May 2020 - May 2022  
Atlanta, GA

### South China University of Technology

B.Eng. in EE (Electronic and Information Engineering, Innovation Class)

Aug. 2016 - May 2020  
Guangzhou, China

### University of California, Berkeley

Visiting student at the Department of EECS, GPA: 3.90/4.00

Jan. 2019 - May 2019  
Berkeley, CA

## RESEARCH INTERESTS

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My research centers on **LLM** and **RL**, with a focus on **reasoning**, **agents**, and **alignment**. I develop techniques for LLMs to learn strong foundations from offline data and self-improve via online interactions:

- **Learning strong foundations from offline data:** RL algorithms that learn the action hierarchies from 1B mid-training Python coding data [14], extract easier-to-learn hidden rationales [12], and achieve better credit assignment for reasoning and agents [11]; techniques that enhance RLHF by augmenting the offline data [10] and mitigating reward hacking [8].
- **Self-improvement via online exploration and adaptation:** A formal study of how to efficiently (or even correctly) scale test-time compute with exploration [13]; self-exploring language models [9]; LLM agents that quickly adapt by orchestrating reasoning and acting [7]; and RL algorithms that address two core challenges: **data-efficient exploration** [4, 2, 1], and **long-horizon credit assignment** [6, 5, 3].

## PREPRINTS

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- [14] **Learning to Reason as Action Abstractions with Scalable Mid-Training RL.**  
Shenao Zhang, Donghan Yu, Yihao Feng, Bowen Jin, Zhaoran Wang, John Peebles<sup>†</sup>, Zirui Wang<sup>†</sup>.  
[We analyze how mid-training shapes RLVR, propose a scalable way to learn action hierarchies from Python code.](#)  
*Preprint*, 2025.
- [13] **Beyond Markovian: Reflective Exploration via Bayes-Adaptive RL for LLM Reasoning.**  
Shenao Zhang, Yaqing Wang, Yinxiao Liu, Tianqi Liu, Peter Grabowski, Eugene Ie, Zhaoran Wang<sup>†</sup>, Yunxuan Li<sup>†</sup>.  
[We formally derive why, how, and when LLMs should self-reflect and explore at test time.](#)  
*Preprint*, 2025.

## PUBLICATIONS

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- [12] **BRiTE: Bootstrapping Reinforced Thinking Process to Enhance LLM Reasoning.**  
Han Zhong\*, Yutong Yin\*, **Shenao Zhang\***, Xiaojun Xu\*, Yuanxin Liu\*, Yifei Zuo\*, Zhihan Liu\*, Boyi Liu, Sirui Zheng, Hongyi Guo, Liwei Wang, Mingyi Hong, Zhaoran Wang.  
[A probabilistic framework that unifies previous LLM reasoning methods and unlocks new ones.](#)  
*International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2025.
- [11] **Offline Reinforcement Learning for LLM Multi-Step Reasoning.**  
Huajie Wang\*, Shibo Hao\*, Hanze Dong, **Shenao Zhang**, Yilin Bao, Ziran Yang, Yi Wu.  
[An offline RL algorithm for LLM reasoning and language agents, adopted by Kimi k1.5.](#)  
*Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL)*, 2025.  
*ICLR Workshop on Reasoning and Planning for LLMs (Oral)*, 2025.
- [10] **Reward-Augmented Data Enhances Direct Preference Alignment of LLMs.**  
**Shenao Zhang\***, Zhihan Liu\*, Boyi Liu, Yufeng Zhang, Yingxiang Yang, Liyu Chen, Tao Sun, Zhaoran Wang.  
[A simple data augmentation method to enhance direct preference alignment algorithms.](#)  
*International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2025.

- [9] **Self-Exploring Language Models: Active Preference Elicitation for Online Alignment.**  
**Shenao Zhang**, Donghan Yu, Hiteshi Sharma, Ziyi Yang, Shuohang Wang, Hany Hassan, Zhaoran Wang.  
[The first algorithm for LLMs to self-explore and self-improve during online RLHF.](#)  
*Transactions on Machine Learning Research (TMLR)*.  
*ICML Workshop on AutoRL (Best Paper Award)*, 2024.
- [8] **Provably Mitigating Overoptimization in RLHF: Your SFT Loss is Implicitly an Adversarial Regularizer.**  
 Zhihan Liu\*, Miao Lu\*, **Shenao Zhang**, Boyi Liu, Hongyi Guo, Yingxiang Yang, Jose Blanchet, Zhaoran Wang.  
[We show that adding SFT loss mitigates RLHF reward hacking, adopted by Llama 3 and Nemotron 4.](#)  
*Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, 2024.
- [7] **Reason for Future, Act for Now: A Principled Framework for Autonomous LLM Agents with Provable Sample Efficiency.**  
 Zhihan Liu\*, Hao Hu\*, **Shenao Zhang\***, Hongyi Guo, Shuqi Ke, Boyi Liu, Zhaoran Wang.  
[The first provably efficient framework to orchestrate reasoning and acting for LLM agents.](#)  
*International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2024.
- [6] **Adaptive-Gradient Policy Optimization: Enhancing Policy Learning in Non-Smooth Differentiable Simulations.**  
 Feng Gao\*, Liangzhi Shi\*, **Shenao Zhang**, Zhaoran Wang, Yi Wu.  
[An adaptive policy gradient method for variance reduction in long-horizon tasks.](#)  
*International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2024.
- [5] **Model-Based Reparameterization Policy Gradient: Theory and Practical Algorithms.**  
**Shenao Zhang**, Boyi Liu, Zhaoran Wang<sup>†</sup>, Tuo Zhao<sup>†</sup>.  
[We analyze first-order policy gradients, obtained by differentiating through policy, dynamics, and reward.](#)  
*Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, 2023.
- [4] **Maximize to Explore: One Objective Function Fusing Estimation, Planning, and Exploration.**  
 Zhihan Liu\*, Miao Lu\*, Wei Xiong\*, Han Zhong, Hao Hu, **Shenao Zhang**, Sirui Zheng, Zhuoran Yang, Zhaoran Wang.  
[A simple RL objective that integrates estimation and planning for sample-efficient exploration.](#)  
*Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS) (Spotlight)*, 2023.
- [3] **Adaptive Barrier Smoothing for First-Order Policy Gradient with Contact Dynamics.**  
**Shenao Zhang**, Wanxin Jin, Zhaoran Wang.  
[A smoothing technique for RL policy gradients that balances the bias-variance tradeoff.](#)  
*International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2023.
- [2] **Conservative Dual Policy Optimization for Efficient Model-Based Reinforcement Learning.**  
**Shenao Zhang**.  
[A theoretically and practically sample-efficient exploration algorithm for model-based RL.](#)  
*Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, 2022.
- [1] **Learning Meta Representation for Agents in Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning.**  
**Shenao Zhang**, Li Shen, Lei Han, Li Shen.  
[A meta-RL algorithm that enables agents to quickly adapt to new multi-agent environments.](#)  
*Conference on Lifelong Learning Agents (CoLLAs) (Oral)*, 2023.

## INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

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### Apple Foundation Models

Research Intern

June 2025 - Sep. 2025

Advisors: John Peebles and Zirui Wang

- Studied how mid-training shapes RLVR, proposed a scalable RL method for code mid-training [14].

### Google

Student Researcher

Dec. 2024 - May 2025

Advisors: Yunxuan Li, Yaqing Wang, Canoe Liu, and Tianqi Liu

- Worked on test-time exploration and Bayes-adaptive RL for reflective reasoning [13].

### Microsoft GenAI

Student Researcher

Jan. 2024 - June 2024

Advisor: Donghan Yu

- Proposed active preference elicitation for online alignment [9].

### ByteDance Seed

Research Intern

June 2024 - Sep. 2024

June 2023 - Aug. 2023

- Worked on RL with LLM policy prior [\*] and reward-augmented alignment [10].

**Microsoft Research***Research Intern**Feb. 2023 - May 2023**Advisor: Li Zhao*

- Worked on autonomous LLM agents that actively gather information [\*].

**Tencent AI Lab***Research Intern**Aug. 2019 - Sep. 2020**Advisors: Li Shen, Lei Han and Li Shen*

- Worked on visual attention representation [\*] and multi-agent RL [1].

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

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Head TA of the graduate course [CS 7648: Interactive Robot Learning](#) (Fall 2021) at Georgia Tech.

**PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

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**Conference Review:** NeurIPS 20-25, ICLR 22-25, ICML 22-25, AISTATS 22-25, COLM 24-25.

**Journal Review:** Neurocomputing, TPAMI, TMLR.

**HONORS AND AWARDS**

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Meshy Fellowship Finalist	2025
NeurIPS Top Reviewer	2024
NeurIPS Scholar Award	2022-2023
ICML Travel Award	2023
Georgia Tech Level A Premier Merit-Based Scholarship	2020-2021
Outstanding Freshman Scholarship (Awarded to 30 among 6,500 students)	2016