SHENAO ZHANG

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EDUCATION

Northwestern University *Sep. 2023 - Present*
Ph.D. student in IEMS (Industrial Engineering & Management Sciences) *Evanston, IL*
Advisor: Prof. Zhaoran Wang

Georgia Institute of Technology *May 2020 - May 2022*
M.S. in ECE (Electrical and Computer Engineering), GPA: 3.81/4.00 *Atlanta, GA*
Advisors: Prof. Tuo Zhao and Prof. Bo Dai

South China University of Technology *Aug. 2016 - May 2020*
B.Eng. in EE (Electronic and Information Engineering, Innovation Class) *Guangzhou, China*

University of California, Berkeley *Jan. 2019 - May 2019*
Visiting student at the Department of EECS, GPA: 3.90/4.00 *Berkeley, CA*

RESEARCH INTERESTS

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 for data-efficient exploration [2, 4, 5], long-horizon tasks [3, 6], and adaptive multi-agent systems [1].

PREPRINTS

[14] **Learning to Reason as Action Abstractions with Scalable Mid-Training RL.**
Shenao Zhang, Donghan Yu, Yihao Feng, Bowen Jin, Zhaoran Wang, John Peebles†, Zirui Wang†.
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†, Yunxuan Li†.
We formally derive why, how, and when LLMs should self-reflect and explore at test time.
Preprint, 2025.

PUBLICATIONS

[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.**
Huaijie 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†, Tuo Zhao†.
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

Apple Foundation Models *June 2025 - Sep. 2025*
Research Intern Advisors: John Peebles and Zirui Wang
- Studied how mid-training shapes RLVR, proposed a scalable RL method for code mid-training [14].

Google *Dec. 2024 - May 2025*
Student Researcher Advisors: Yunxuan Li, Yaqing Wang, Canoee Liu, and Tianqi Liu
- Worked on test-time exploration and Bayes-adaptive RL for reflective reasoning [13].

Microsoft GenAI *Jan. 2024 - June 2024*
Student Researcher *Advisor: Donghan Yu*
- Proposed active preference elicitation for online alignment [9].

ByteDance Seed *June 2024 - Sep. 2024*
Research Intern *June 2023 - Aug. 2023*
- Worked on RL with LLM policy prior [∗] and reward-augmented alignment [10].

Microsoft Research *Feb. 2023 - May 2023*
Research Intern *Advisor: Li Zhao*
· Worked on autonomous LLM agents that actively gather information [∗].

Tencent AI Lab *Aug. 2019 - Sep. 2020*
Research Intern *Advisors: Li Shen, Lei Han and Li Shen*
· Worked on visual attention representation [∗] and multi-agent RL [1].

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

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

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*