

SHENAO ZHANG

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EDUCATION

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

Advisor: 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

My research centers around Large Language Models (LLMs) and Reinforcement Learning (RL). I'm currently interested in LLM/agent reasoning and alignment. The ultimate goal of my research is to build systems that actively explore and self-improve to achieve super-human intelligence. Previously, I developed data-efficient decision-making algorithms with applications to robotic and multi-agent systems.

PREPRINTS

[13] **Shenao Zhang**, Yaqing Wang, Yinxiao Liu, Tianqi Liu, Peter Grabowski, Eugene Ie, Zhaoran Wang[†], Yunxuan Li[†], “Beyond Markovian: Reflective Exploration via Bayes-Adaptive RL for LLM Reasoning”, *ICML Workshop on Test-Time Adaptation*, 2025. [\[PDF\]](#)

PROCEEDINGS

[12] 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, “BRiTE: Bootstrapping Reinforced Thinking Process to Enhance Language Model Reasoning”, *International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2025. [\[PDF\]](#)

[11] Huaijie Wang*, Shibo Hao*, Hanze Dong, **Shenao Zhang**, Yilin Bao, Ziran Yang, Yi Wu, “Offline Reinforcement Learning for LLM Multi-Step Reasoning”, *Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL), ICLR Workshop on Reasoning and Planning for LLMs (Oral)*, 2025. [\[PDF\]](#)

[10] **Shenao Zhang***, Zhihan Liu*, Boyi Liu, Yufeng Zhang, Yingxiang Yang, Liyu Chen, Tao Sun, Zhaoran Wang, “Reward-Augmented Data Enhances Direct Preference Alignment of LLMs”, *International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2025. [\[PDF\]](#)

[9] **Shenao Zhang**, Donghan Yu, Hiteshi Sharma, Ziyi Yang, Shuohang Wang, Hany Hassan, Zhaoran Wang, “Self-Exploring Language Models: Active Preference Elicitation for Online Alignment”, *Transactions on Machine Learning Research (TMLR), ICML AutoRL Workshop (Best Paper Award)*, 2024. [\[PDF\]](#)

[8] Zhihan Liu*, Miao Lu*, **Shenao Zhang**, Boyi Liu, Hongyi Guo, Yingxiang Yang, Jose Blanchet, Zhaoran Wang, “Provably Mitigating Overoptimization in RLHF: Your SFT Loss is Implicitly an Adversarial Regularizer”, *Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, 2024. [\[PDF\]](#)

[7] Zhihan Liu*, Hao Hu*, **Shenao Zhang***, Hongyi Guo, Shuqi Ke, Boyi Liu, Zhaoran Wang, “Reason for Future, Act for Now: A Principled Framework for Autonomous LLM Agents with Provable Sample Efficiency”, *International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2024. [\[PDF\]](#)

- [6] Feng Gao*, Liangzhi Shi*, **Shenao Zhang**, Zhaoran Wang, Yi Wu, “Adaptive-Gradient Policy Optimization: Enhancing Policy Learning in Non-Smooth Differentiable Simulations”, *International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2024. [PDF]
- [5] **Shenao Zhang**, Boyi Liu, Zhaoran Wang[†], Tuo Zhao[†], “Model-Based Reparameterization Policy Gradient: Theory and Practical Algorithms”, *Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, 2023. [PDF].
- [4] Zhihan Liu*, Miao Lu*, Wei Xiong*, Han Zhong, Hao Hu, **Shenao Zhang**, Sirui Zheng, Zhuoran Yang, Zhaoran Wang, “Maximize to Explore: One Objective Function Fusing Estimation, Planning, and Exploration”, *Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)* (Spotlight), 2023. [PDF]
- [3] **Shenao Zhang**, Wanxin Jin, Zhaoran Wang, “Adaptive Barrier Smoothing for First-Order Policy Gradient with Contact Dynamics”, *International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML)*, 2023. [PDF]
- [2] **Shenao Zhang**, “Conservative Dual Policy Optimization for Efficient Model-Based Reinforcement Learning”, *Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS)*, 2022. [PDF]
- [1] **Shenao Zhang**, Li Shen, Lei Han, Li Shen, “Learning Meta Representation for Agents in Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning”, *Conference on Lifelong Learning Agents (CoLLAs)* (Oral), 2023. [PDF]

INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

- Apple** June 2025 - Present
Research Intern Advisors: John Peebles and Zirui Wang
 • Working on a novel RL paradigm that is suitable for reasoning mid-training.
- Google** Dec. 2024 - May 2025
Student Researcher Advisors: Eric Li, Yaqing Wang, Canoe 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
 • Worked on 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 (MSR), Asia** 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