

# SHENAO ZHANG

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## EDUCATION

<b>Northwestern University</b>		<i>Expected 2026</i>
Ph.D. student in IEMS (Industrial Engineering & Management Sciences)		<i>Evanston, IL</i>
Major: Statistical Learning; Minor: Optimization		
Advisor: Prof. Zhaoran Wang		
<b>Georgia Institute of Technology</b>		<i>May 2022</i>
M.S. in ECE (Electrical and Computer Engineering), GPA: 3.81/4.00		<i>Atlanta, GA</i>
Advisors: Prof. Tuo Zhao and Prof. Bo Dai		
<b>South China University of Technology</b>		<i>May 2020</i>
B.Eng. in EE (Electronic and Information Engineering, Innovation Class)		<i>Guangzhou, China</i>
<b>University of California, Berkeley</b>		<i>2019</i>
Visiting student at the Department of EECS, GPA: 3.90/4.00		<i>Berkeley, CA</i>

## 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:** Mid-training frameworks that benefit RLVR (in theory and practice) by learning skills and abstractions [15], RL algorithms that extract easier-to-learn hidden rationales [12] and achieve better credit assignment [11] from offline reasoning and agentic data; 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 scaling test-time compute via self-reflective in-context exploration [14]; 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].

Currently, I'm interested in **fine-grained and scalable supervision** for LLM training, e.g., step-level RL supervision for self-reflective continual learners [14], scalable self-supervision from mid-training data [15].

My work spans multiple domains, including math reasoning [14, 12, 11], code generation [15, \*], instruction following [10, 9, 8], LLM agents [11, 7, \*], and model-based [5, 2], multi-agent [1, 13] RL.

## PREPRINTS

- [15] **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 1B code data.  
*Preprint*, 2025.
- [14] **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.
- [13] **Controlling Performance and Budget of a Centralized Multi-Agent LLM System with RL.**  
Bowen Jin, TJ Collins, Donghan Yu, Mert Cemri, Shenao Zhang, Mengyu Li, Jay Tang, Tian Qin, Zhiyang Xu, Jiarui Lu, Guoli Yin, Jiawei Han, Zirui Wang.  
A centralized system for multi-LLM coordination trained with RL.  
*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.**  
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 [15].

### Google

*Student Researcher*

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

- Worked on test-time exploration and Bayes-adaptive RL for reflective reasoning [14].

### 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 22-26, ICML 22-25, AISTATS 22-25, COLM 24-25.

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

## HONORS AND AWARDS

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Thinking Machines Tinker Research Grant	2025
NU Richard Francis Fellowship	2025
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