Multispectral hybrid Cerenkov luminescence tomography based on the finite element SPn method

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Abstract. Cerenkov luminescence tomography (CLT) is a promising tool that enables three-dimensional non-invasive in vivo detection of radiopharmaceuticals. Conventionally, multispectral information and diffusion theory were introduced to achieve whole-body tomographic reconstruction. However, the diffusion theory inevitably causes systematic error in blue bands of the electromagnetic spectrum due to high-tissue absorption, and CL has a blue-weighted broad spectrum. Therefore, it is challenging to improve the accuracy of CLT. The performance of the n-order simplified spherical harmonics approximation (SPn) in different spectra is evaluated, and a multispectral hybrid CLT based on the combination of different SPn models is proposed to handle the Cerenkov photon transport problem in complex media. The in vivo xenograft experiment shows that this approach can effectively improve the quality and accuracy of the reconstructed light source. We believe that the new reconstruction method will advance the development of CLT for more in vivo imaging applications.

Keywords: Cerenkov luminescence tomography; spherical harmonics approximation; multispectral; diffusion theory.

1 Introduction

Cerenkov luminescence (CL) is generated when a charged particle travels with a velocity faster than the speed of light in a medium. It was first used in small animal optical imaging in 2009,1 and then was proven to have a strong correlation with positron emission computed tomography (PET) and single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT).2,3 CL imaging (CLI) can detect the distribution of both positron and electron emitting radioisotopes such as 18F, 32P, and 131I.4,5 It combines the superiorities of optical imaging and nuclear imaging, so that many clinically approved radiotherapeutics can be imaged by optical approaches such as planar imaging and endoscopic imaging.1,6 Applications in oncology, metabolic pathways, inflammation, and infectious diseases have been studied.7–10 Human CLI studies, which showed great promise of CLI for clinical translation, have been reported.11,12

To overcome the drawback of conventional two-dimensional CLI for lack of depth information, three-dimensional (3-D) CL tomography (CLT) was introduced,13 which employed the radiation transport equation (RTE) to describe the light propagation in turbid media. As the computational cost of RTE is too high, diffusion theory (DE) was usually applied to solve the approximate problem.14,15 CL has a blue-weighted broad spectrum (about 300 to 900 nm, peak at 400 nm), and recent studies showed that the third-order spherical harmonics (SP3) method provided a better performance than the DE model did in the case of strong tissue absorption.16,17 However, all these previous studies did not fully utilize the unique feature of CL to improve the performance of CLT. We hypothesize that by investigating various higher-order spherical harmonic approximations with multispectral data collection, the optimal approximation between scattering and absorption for such a wide spectrum CL can be achieved so that the overall reconstruction accuracy can be further improved with limited sacrifice of computational cost. In this work, we tested the performance of the higher-order spherical harmonics approximation method up to SP7 over seven spectra under the finite element framework and compared the results with the Monte Carlo (MC) method. Based on this comparison, the novel multispectral hybrid CLT (mCLT) reconstruction method was established. This new approach not only utilizes multispectral information, but also combines SP3 and DE models at different wavelength bands to achieve a more accurate description of in vivo CL photon propagation. In vivo xenograft experiments were conducted to evaluate this technique, and its feasibility for tumor detection was verified with a PET scan.

2 Methods

2.1 SPn Model

The SPn model approximates the RTE by a set of coupled diffusion-like equations with a Laplacian operator. The DE model only retains the first term of the spherical harmonics series, which is essentially the same as the SP1 model. Therefore, it is conceivable that the SP3 model can have a better
performance compared with DE. However, it is still questionable whether the higher order of the SPn model, such as SP5 or SP7, will achieve better approximation of RTE, because the SPn solutions do not converge to exact transport solutions as $N \to \infty$. For each problem, there is an optimal order of SPn that yields the best solution. In addition to that, the higher-order SPn model will also come with a significant increase in computational cost, which is not practical for in vivo imaging. Therefore, we investigated the performance of the higher-order spherical harmonics approximation method up to SP7 under the finite element framework to determine which one was the most suitable approach for CLT. Equation (1) includes the steady-state SP3 equations associated with partly reflecting boundary conditions, which are demonstrated as an example for the SPn model. The higher-order SPn equations can be found in the work of Klose and Larsen:

$$- \nabla \cdot \left( \frac{1}{3 \mu_t} \nabla \varphi_i + \mu_s \varphi_i \right) = Q + \left( \frac{2}{3} \mu_a \right) \varphi_2$$

$$- \nabla \cdot \left( \frac{1}{7 \mu_t} \nabla \varphi_i + \left( \frac{4}{9} \mu_t + \frac{5}{9} \mu_a \right) \varphi_2 \right)$$

$$= - \frac{2}{3} Q + \left( \frac{2}{3} \mu_a \right) \varphi_1,$$  

(1)

where $\mu_t = \mu_a + \mu_s(1 - g)$, $i = 1, 2, 3$, $\mu_a$ is the absorption coefficient, $\mu_s$ is the scattering coefficient, and $g$ is the anisotropy coefficient. $Q$ is the CL source and $\varphi_i$ is the $i$th order Legendre moments of the radiance.

The boundary conditions are

$$\left( \frac{1}{2} + A_1 \right) \varphi_1 + \left( \frac{1 + B_1}{3 \mu_t} \right) n \cdot \nabla \varphi_1$$

$$= \left( \frac{1}{8} + C_1 \right) \varphi_2 + \left( \frac{D_1}{\mu_t} \right) n \cdot \nabla \varphi_2$$

$$\left( \frac{7}{24} + A_2 \right) \varphi_2 + \left( \frac{1 + B_2}{7 \mu_t} \right) n \cdot \nabla \varphi_2$$

$$= \left( \frac{1}{8} + C_2 \right) \varphi_1 + \left( \frac{D_2}{\mu_t} \right) n \cdot \nabla \varphi_1,$$  

(2)

where $A_1$, $B_1$, $C_1$, $D_1$, $A_2$, $B_2$, $C_2$, and $D_2$ are the constant coefficients related to the refractive index of the biological tissue. $n$ is the normal vector of the boundary.

The domain of the object is discretized by a tetrahedral grid. The photon flux density and the CL source are approximated with the piecewise linear bases:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} q_i(r) = \sum_{k=1}^{N} q_{i,k} v_k(r) \quad i = 1, 2 \\ Q(r) = \sum_{k=1}^{N} s_k v_k(r) \end{array} \right.$$  

(3)

where $q_{i,k}$ and $s_k$ are the discretized luminescent flux and CL source, respectively, at node $k$. The bases function $v_k(r)$ is a piecewise linear function. $N$ is the total number of nodes on the entire tetrahedral grid $\zeta$. If we multiply the bases function $v_k(r)$ on both sides of the SP3 equations, integrate on domain $\Omega$, use the Green equation to eliminate the second derivative item, and introduce the boundary conditions, the formulation of Eq. (1) is transferred as follows:

$$J^+ = A_{SPn} s,$$  

(4)

where $A_{SPn}$ is the system matrix obtained by the SPn method, $s$ is the CL source, and $J^+$ is the exiting partial luminescent flux.

### 2.2 Multispectral Method

As shown in Sec. 2.1, both the SPn model and the DE model can obtain a system matrix to reveal the relationship between the unknown CL source $s$ and the measurable exiting partial luminescent flux $J^+$. For a multispectral situation, by taking different spectra exiting $J^+$ and the CL source spectrum into account, we obtain the mhCLT method from Eq. (4):

$$\begin{bmatrix} \eta(\lambda_1) A_{SPn}(\lambda_1) \\ \vdots \\ \eta(\lambda_k) A_{SPn}(\lambda_k) \end{bmatrix} s = \begin{bmatrix} J^+(\lambda_1) \\ \vdots \\ J^+(\lambda_k) \end{bmatrix},$$  

(5)

where $A_{SPn}(\lambda_i)$ stands for the system matrix obtained with the optical properties in spectrum $\lambda_i$ by the SPn model ($n = 1, 3, 5, 7$). $\eta(\lambda_i)$ is a weighing coefficient determined by the theoretical Cerenkov emission spectrum $\omega(\lambda)$ as follows:

$$\eta(\lambda_i) = \frac{\int_{1/\lambda_{min}}^{1/\lambda_{high}} \omega(\lambda) d\lambda}{\int_{1/\lambda_{low}}^{1/\lambda_{high}} \omega(\lambda) d\lambda},$$  

(6)

where $\lambda_{high}^{i}$ and $\lambda_{low}^{i}$ represent the higher and lower bounds of the $i$th filter. When substituting the Cerenkov emission spectrum $\omega(\lambda)$ with $1/\lambda^2$ for approximation, Eq. (6) can be written as follows:

$$\eta(\lambda_i) = \frac{1/\lambda_{low}^{i} - 1/\lambda_{high}^{i}}{1/\lambda_{min}}.$$  

(7)

### 2.3 Solving the Inverse Problem

Orthogonal matching pursuit (OMP) is an optimization scheme used for compressed sensing. It can solve the equations of optical tomography through iterations. Here, we employed the OMP method to solve Eq. (5).

Equation (5) can be presented as

$$A s = J^+ A = \begin{bmatrix} \eta(\lambda_1) A_{SPn}(\lambda_1) \\ \vdots \\ \eta(\lambda_k) A_{SPn}(\lambda_k) \end{bmatrix}, \quad J^+ = \begin{bmatrix} J^+(\lambda_1) \\ \vdots \\ J^+(\lambda_k) \end{bmatrix}.$$  

(8)

The inverse model of mhCLT can be approximately regarded as a basis pursuit problem:

$$\begin{bmatrix} \text{min} \| s \|_1 \\ \text{s.t. } A s = J^+ \end{bmatrix}.$$  

(9)

We set the supporting index set $I$ to represent the vertex index whose light source is not zero, and the OMP starts with an empty supporting index set. Then

$$I_k = I_{k-1} \cup \{ p \mid c_k(p) > t_k \},$$  

(10)

where $c_k = A^T r_{k-1}$ and $t_k = \alpha \| c_k \|_\infty \alpha \in (0, 1)$. For the $k$th iteration, the residual vector $r_{k-1}$ is as follows:

$$J^+ = A_{SPn} s,$$  

(11)
By introducing the supporting index set $I_k$, Eq. (8) can be simplified as
\[ A_{I_k}s_{I_k} = J. \] (12)

Finally, the reconstructed source $s$ can be expressed as the least-squares solution of the problem:
\[ A_{I_k}^TA_{I_k}s_{I_k} = A_{I_k}^TJ. \] (13)

The stop condition of the iteration is defined as the number of $I_k$ that exceeds the estimated threshold.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Forward Simulation

A digital mouse was used to assess the performance of all the SPn models. The light source was set to be 1.8 mm beneath the skin surface. We discretized the phantom with 8254 nodes and 41,922 tetrahedrons, as shown in Fig. 1(a). All the forward models, including DE(SP1), SP3, SP5, and SP7, were applied on the finite element grid, and the MC method was considered to be the gold standard to evaluate which model was better in each spectrum (550, 600, 650, 700, 736, 800, and 855 nm). The MC method was conducted by MOSE v2.1. The results of the MC method are shown in Fig. 1(b). Two examples of the simulation for 600 and 800 nm are shown in Fig. 1(c). Compared with MC, DE showed a relatively poorer skin surface photon flux in 600 nm, whereas in 800 nm, the flux of DE appears to be much better. To achieve a quantitative assessment, the cosine similarity was adopted to measure the similarity of the surface photoflux between MC and other forward models:

\[ \rho = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{M} J_{1,k} J_{2,k}}{\sqrt{\sum_{k=1}^{M} j_{1,k}^2} \sqrt{\sum_{k=1}^{M} j_{2,k}^2}}, \] (14)

where $M$ is the number of nodes on the surface, and $j_{i,k}$ is the $k$'th element of vector $J_i$.

The optical properties $\mu_a$ and $\mu_s$ were calculated based on the work of Alexandrakis et al. As the anisotropy coefficient $g$ varies slightly over the spectra, we assumed it was a constant. As an illustration, the optical properties used for 650 nm are listed in Table 1. The results for different models are shown in Fig. 2. The cosine similarity results are shown in Table 2. The results showed that none of the models reached 50% cosine similarity at 550 nm. This was probably because of the high-absorption effect of the soft tissue. However, when the wavelength reached 600 nm and above, the cosine similarity improved dramatically (Table 2). The SP3 model was more accurate than the DE model over all spectra. The accuracies of the SP5 model and SP7 model were almost the same as

### Table 1 The optical properties for 650 nm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organ</th>
<th>$\mu_a$ (mm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>$\mu_s$ (mm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>$g$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muscle</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>15.58</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lungs</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>31.56</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>37.27</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liver</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidneys</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>23.59</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Fig. 1 The results of the forward simulation: (a) the digital mouse used to simulate the forward model. Heart (red), lungs (blue), liver (yellow), kidneys (green), and bone (black) were segmented. The rest was set to be muscle. The red point was the light source. There were 8254 nodes and 41,922 tetrahedrons in total; (b) the simulation result of different spectra (550 to 855 nm) using the MC method; and (c) two examples of the simulated optical flux in 600 and 800 nm using different forward models.](https://www.spiedigitallibrary.org/journals/Journal-of-Biomedical-Optics/086007-3-August-2015-Vol.20(8)/Liu-et-al.-Multispectral-hybrid-Cerenkov-luminescence-tomography-based-on-the-finite...)
that of the SP3 model. The major difference was between the DE
and SP3 models [Fig. 2(a)], which varied from 8.13% to 0.05%.
This proved that for a shorter wavelength and higher absorption
situation, SP3 was more accurate, but for a longer wavelength and lower absorption
situation, the difference was almost negligible. When solving
the inverse problem, which is the calculation of a light source
from the surface CL flux [Eqs. (8)–(13)], the employed math-
ematical model should be as accurate as possible, because the
inaccuracy of a forward model may lead to a significant
reconstruction error due to the ill-posed problem of Eq. (8). In
other words, a small change of J would introduce a signifi-
cant variation of s in Eq. (8). Meanwhile, the mathematical
model should also consider the computational cost, because if the reconstruction time is too long, it would be very unprac-
tical for real biomedical applications. Therefore, there is a
balance between reconstruction accuracy and computational
time.

In this study, a 2% difference between these two models was
set as the threshold. The dividing line between the SP3 model
and the DE model was 683.5 nm [Fig. 2(b)]. Thus, if the wave-
length was below 683.5 nm, the SP3 model was used to describe
the photon transmission, whereas for a wavelength above
683.5 nm, the DE model was employed. Mathematically speak-
ing, it will have a threefold increase of the computational cost for adopting SP3 instead of DE, but the difference of the com-
putational time is not obvious due to the fast development of the
computing power in computers, and we only employed SP3 for
a partial CL spectrum to further save the time. SP5 and SP7
models were discarded because of the high computational
cost with no significant benefit in accuracy.

### 3.2 Simulated Comparison Between mhCLT and SP3

The mhCLT was compared with the conventional single wave-
length SP3 method in accuracy using a simulation study. Two CL sources were set inside the liver of a digital mouse [Fig. 3(a)], and the mouse was discretized with 4309 nodes and 21,979 tetrahedrons. Three spectra (650, 700, and 736 nm) were employed to obtain system matrix \( A \) [Eq. (8)] of the mhCLT method. Based on our previous findings, for 650 nm (wavelength below 683.5 nm), the SP3 model was applied. For 700 and 736 nm (wavelength above 683.5 nm), the DE model was used. After that, the OMP iterative algorithm was used to solve Eq. (8) and calculate the distribution of the two CL sources. As a comparison, the conventional SP3 reconstruction was conducted on the 700-nm spectrum. The reconstructed results of both methods are shown in Fig. 3 and Table 3, which revealed that the mhCLT achieved accurate reconstruction of both sources, whereas SP3 could only reconstruct one CL source accurately (Source 1), but lost the accuracy of the other (Source 2).

### 3.3 In Vivo mhCLT

All animals utilized in the experiment were purchased from the Department of Laboratory Animal Science, Peking University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>550 nm</th>
<th>600 nm</th>
<th>650 nm</th>
<th>700 nm</th>
<th>736 nm</th>
<th>800 nm</th>
<th>855 nm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SP1</td>
<td>48.10</td>
<td>76.23</td>
<td>95.05</td>
<td>97.26</td>
<td>97.76</td>
<td>97.77</td>
<td>97.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP3</td>
<td>49.87</td>
<td>84.36</td>
<td>97.71</td>
<td>98.94</td>
<td>98.80</td>
<td>98.06</td>
<td>97.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP5</td>
<td>49.77</td>
<td>83.07</td>
<td>97.22</td>
<td>98.72</td>
<td>98.80</td>
<td>98.05</td>
<td>97.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP7</td>
<td>49.67</td>
<td>82.96</td>
<td>97.16</td>
<td>98.71</td>
<td>98.84</td>
<td>98.24</td>
<td>97.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 3 The simulated comparison between mhCLT and SP3 for CL source reconstruction: (a) the digital mouse used in the simulation. Lungs (light blue), heart (red), liver (yellow), kidneys (blue), and bone (purple) were segmented. The two green spots inside the liver are the CL sources; (b) the surface CL fluxes of different spectra generated from the dual light source in (a); (c) the axial slice location used in (d) for comparison; and (d) the reconstruction results of different methods. Top: the result of the SP3 method, and bottom: the result of the mhCLT method. The black circles are the real light sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Reconstructed Source</th>
<th>Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Real light source</td>
<td>(6.80, 3.80, 4.80)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructed light source</td>
<td>SP3</td>
<td>(7.08, 3.73, 4.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mhCLT</td>
<td>(6.65, 3.79, 5.05)</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 The reconstructed energy center of the single spectrum SP3 and mhCLT.

In Vivo Imaging of a Xenograft Using mhCLT

4T1 breast cancer cells were injected into a BALB/c nude mouse to establish the tumor mouse model. Two weeks after the injection, the multispectral optical [Figs. 6(a)–6(c)] and CT data were acquired and processed using the same process as Fig. 4. Figure 6(d) demonstrates the difference between the filtered and no-filtering optical data. The 3-D reconstruction of mhCLT was then compared with PET images. Note that the mouse was moved from the CLT system to the PET system. Although the body posture for the two imaging devices was different, the tumor lesion reconstruction could still be reasonably compared [Figs. 6(h)–6(m)]. The PET showed that the $^{18}$F-FDG uptake in the tumor was not homogeneous, but was concentrated in the peripheral areas deeper inside the body [Figs. 6(h)–6(j)]. This phenomenon was commonly observed because tumor cell necrosis was usually found in the center area of the tumor lesion. The mhCLT successfully reconstructed the $^{18}$F-FDG uptake area that was closer to the body surface, but it failed to reconstruct the uptake area that was deeper inside the tumor lesion [Figs. 6(e), 6(k), 6(l), and 6(m)].

4 Discussion

This study demonstrated a new approach which combined the multispectral information and the multiorder SPn models to further improve the reconstruction accuracy for CLT. The performances of different SPn models on different spectra of CL were compared with the MC model through simulation. The results showed that although SP3, SP5, and SP7 indeed improved the accuracy compared with the conventional DE model, the difference between these three models was not significant.

To balance the accuracy and the computational cost based on the simulation results, our new mhCLT technique employed SP3 and DE models for short and long wavelength fluxes and utilized this hybrid information to solve the Cerenkov photon transport problems in complex media. Unlike the conventional optical tomographic methods for bioluminescence and...
To validate the superiority in accuracy for mhCLT, we compared it with the conventional SP3 method through a dual-source simulation experiment, and the results proved that the new approach could offer better accuracy for multisource reconstruction. We also compared mhCLT with conventional msCLT for in vivo mouse imaging. The quantitative analysis proved that the mhCLT provided better accuracy for $^{18}$F-FDG concentration in the bladder. Although both methods adopted multispectral information, the DE model in msCLT caused systematic errors, especially for a short wavelength flux, and led to a larger position deviation between the real source and the reconstructed source. The mhCLT improved the accuracy by combining both DE and SP3 models. To further investigate the feasibility of mhCLT, we compared it with PET for in vivo tumor mouse imaging. The results showed that the reconstructed $^{18}$F-FDG uptake region from mhCLT was not geometrical in

Table 4  The reconstructed energy center of the mhCLT and msCLT.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Position (mm)</th>
<th>Distance (mm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Real source</td>
<td>1.49, 7.92, −32.50</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructed source mhCLT</td>
<td>1.74, 6.87, −32.29</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructed source msCLT</td>
<td>1.95, 6.37, −31.34</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

fluorescence tomography, this method made full use of the wide spectrum feature of CL. Unlike the other methods for CLT, it also avoided the unnecessary computations for higher-order spherical harmonics approximation.

Fig. 4 The data preprocessing of the mhCLT.

Fig. 5 CLT reconstruction results of the mouse bladder: (a) and (b) three-dimensional (3-D) view of the reconstruction results of the mhCLT and msCLT separately. Lungs (blue), heart (pink), bone (yellow), and bladder (blue) were segmented from the CT data. The red part is the reconstructed light source; (c) illustration of the location of the two-dimensional (2-D) slice used in (d) and (e); and (d) and (e) the 2-D view (sagittal) of the light source reconstruction obtained by mhCLT and msCLT, respectively.
However, it showed great consistency with PET. Both imaging modalities indicated that the high glycometabolism area was in the tumor periphery instead of the tumor center, which was likely caused by tumor cell necrosis. We also found that compared with PET, mhCLT was not able to reconstruct the whole $^{18}$F-FDG uptake region inside the tumor. This was probably because the region was too deep inside the body, which caused an insufficient CL flux to be detected by the imaging system.

This implies that no matter how accurate the mathematical model is, the reconstruction of the CL source still relies on the sensitivity of the imaging system in the detection of the CL flux on the body surface.

Fig. 6 The comparison between mhCLT and positron emission computed tomography (PET) for in vivo tumor detection: (a)–(c) the 2-D CL images over different wavelengths acquired for the 3-D tomographic reconstruction; (d) the 2-D CL image of the same subject without filtering; (e) the contour of the tumor lesion detected by CT (black circle), the mhCLT reconstructed tumor lesion (red circle), and bladder area (blue circle); (f) the volumetric mesh of the mouse, which shows the heart (red), lungs (blue), and bone (yellow); (g) the illustration of the coronal, sagittal, and axial planes used for PET and mhCLT comparison; (h)–(j) the results of the PET scan. The green circles indicate the regions that were also seen in mhCLT; and (k)–(m) the results of mhCLT. The black circles indicate the regions that were also seen in PET.

5 Conclusion
By combining the SP3 and DE models with multispectral information, the mhCLT method can provide an accurate...
reconstruction for in vivo CLT imaging. We believe this new method will further benefit various preclinical applications of CLT and facilitate its clinical translation in the future.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by the National Basic Research Program of China (973 Program) under Grants 2011CB707700 and 2013CB735500, and the National Natural Science Foundation of China under Grant Nos. 81227901, 61231004, 61401462, and 61302024.

References


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Biographies for the other authors are not available.