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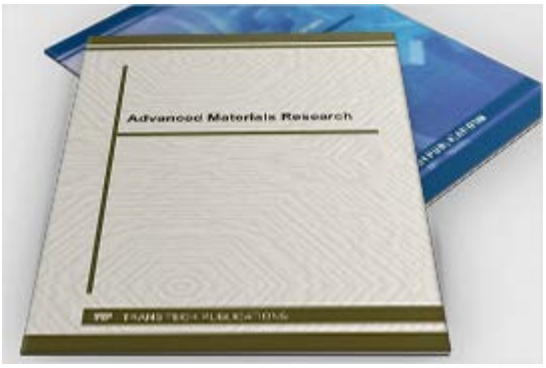

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Table of Contents

Preface and Conference Organization

Chapter 1: Micro/Nano Materials and Films

Preparation of Coralloid α-FeOOH and Discussion on its Crystal Growth Mechanism
Y.Y. Guo, H.B. Wu, M.Y. Li and S. Sun 3

Facile Preparation of the Single Crystalline In_2S_3 Nanosheets with Highly Efficient Photocatalytic Activity
H.Y. Yin, J.H. Tang, C.J. Yan, Q.L. Nie, D. Wu and Q.Y. Wang 8

Study on Cerium Doped Flower-Like ZnO Microcrystaline Preparation and its Microwave Absorbing Properties
Z.F. Wang, Y.H. Zhang, J. Mao and J.Z. Wang 12

The Research of Nano-Mechanical Properties of Mono-Crystalline Silicon
X.J. Yang and W.X. Zhang 18

Friction and Wear Property of Ti(C,N)/ZrO_2/WC Nano-Composite Cermet Die Material
J. Ma, C.H. Xu, M.D. Yi, G.C. Xiao and X.H. Wang 23

Fabrication and Characterization of Superhydrophobic Film on Titanium Substrate
D.P. Long, J.R. Xue and Z.X. Yan 29

Toward the High-Quality Graphene for Optoelectronic Applications by Optimization of the Growth and Transfer Parameters
L. Wang, J.H. Zhang and L.Q. Yang 33

Synthesis of β-Phase GeO_2 Nanoparticles and their High Pressure Studies
X. Zou, W. Wu, R. Liu, Z.P. Li, Q.J. Li and B.B. Liu 37

Preparation of Superhydrophobic Surface on Copper Foils by a Facile Method
Z.Q. Yuan, X. Wang, J.P. Bing, M.L. Wang and J. Huang 42

Self-Assembled Alcohol Sensor of In_2O_3 Nanorods
Z.Q. Zheng, H.Y. Wu and B. Wang 46

Preparation and Magnetic Properties of FeSi/SiO_2 Nanocomposites with Core-Shell Structure
Z.R. Geng, Y. Li, R.J. Yan, C.B. Wang and X.M. Ling 50

Synthesis and Photocatalytic Activities of Bi_2WO_6 Three-Dimensional Hierarchical Microstructures
X.C. Song and R. Ma 56

Interaction of the Femtosecond Laser Pulses with the New Silica Nanocomposites Containing Au and CdS
D. Proschenko, A. Mayor, O. Bukin, S. Golik, A. Chekhlenok, I. Postnova, Y. Shchipunov and Y. Kulchin 60

Effect of Substrate Temperature on Structural and Optical Properties of ZnO:Co Thin Films Fabricated by Laser Molecular Beam Epitaxy
X.G. Wang 64

Effect of Deposition Pressure on the Properties of Silicon Thin Films
J.W. Chen, L. Zhao, H.W. Diao, S. Zhou, G. Wang and W.J. Wang 70

Effect of Nano Fibre Arrays on the Peel Strength between Low-Density Polyethylene Film and Aluminium Foil
J. Wang, H. Chen and Z.Q. Yuan 74

A Study of ITO Thin Films Fabricated by DC Magnetron Sputtering Method
X.M. Yang, L. Liu and J.X. Lin 79

Synthesis and Characterization of P (AAEA-Co-Aa)-PVP-PEG/Gold Nanoparticle Composite Hydrogel with Pore and Semi-Interpenetration Structure
K.L. Li, S.B. Lin, R.P. Chen, Y.L. Li and D.G. Li 90

Synthesis, Characterization and Antibacterial Activity of ε-Polylysine/PVA Biodegradable Film
Z.L. Tan, M.M. Xia, S.R. Jia and F.L. Yao 96

Crystal Structure and Optical Characterizations of Titanium-Doped Zinc Oxide Thin Films for Organic Photovoltaic Applications
Z.Y. Zhong, H. Wang, T. Zhang, C. Lan and S.B. Chen 100

Preparation of PI Microporous Membrane for Lithium Ion Batteries
X.Y. Hu, Y.W. Wang, T. Cui, Y.M. Shang, Y. Zhou and X.M. He 104

Synthesis and Capacitance of Multi-Walled Carbon Nanotube/Polyaniline Nanocomposites
Q.G. Wang, W. Zhou, S.M. Wang, W.Z. Zhang, J.P. Li, X.M. Wang and Z.Y. Lu 108

Properties of SiO_2CuO_x Films for Nitrogen Dioxide Detection
T. Myasoedova, G.E. Yalovega, V.V. Petrov, O.V. Zabluda, V.A. Shmatko and A.O. Funik 112

Chapter 2: Polymer Materials

Synthesis, Characterization and Application of 2, 2'- Methylene-Bis (4,6-Di-Tert-Butyl-Phenyl) Phosphate Sodium
W.J. Huang, W.T. He, J. Yu, K. Zhang, S.H. Qin and J. Gao 119

Pyrolysis Characteristics Research of Waste Plastics of Electronic Waste
W. Lv, X.T. Shao and D.X. Li 124

Crystallization Regimes and Spherulitic Morphology of Poly(trimethylene terephthalate/isophthalate) Random Copolyesters
C.H. Tung and T.W. Shyr 129

Study on Application of Insulating Materials in Electrical (Electronic) Equipment
J.H. Zhang and D.W. An 133

Effect of Accelerator Type on Dynamic Properties of Natural Rubber Vulcanizates
T.M. Gao, M.F. Huang, P.W. Li and R.H. Xie 138

Study of Voids in the Flexible RFID Tag Inlays Packaged by Anisotropic Conductive Adhesive
S.Y. Fan, J.K. Chen, Z.P. Yin and Y.H. Wang 142

Analysis of Stinky Components in Natural Rubber Latex
H.C. Liu, F.Y. Wei, Q.F. Wang, Z.Q. Zeng and H.P. Yu 148

Microwave-Assisted Preparation of PS Phase Change Microcapsules
G.X. Wang, S.W. Guo and W.B. Xu 152

Thermal Degradation of Pa 6 Film Prepared from a Phenol/Dichloroethane Mixed Solution
T.M. Wu, C.J. Chen, Y.L. Lai and T.W. Shyr 156

Shape Recovery Characteristics of Shape Memory Polymers Subjected to Bending
T. Zhou, H.F. Tan and Y.Y. Liu 160

On Elastic-Plastic Explosives for Explosive Hardening
X.Y. Hu, Z.W. Shen, Y.B. liu and T.S. liu 165

Synthesis and Characterization of Alcohol Soluble Acrylate-Polyurethane Adhesive for Low Surface Energy Substrate
J.J. Yang, Z.L. Jin, J.A. Zhang, Q.Y. Wu and M.Y. Wu 169

Study on Natural Rubber Quality of Micro-Cut Tapping with Gas-Stimulation
K.D. Wang, M.F. Huang, C.L. Yang, Z.Q. Zeng, Z.X. Liang and X.Z. Xiao 175

Research on Insulator Detection by Nuclear Magnetic Resonance
L.F. Zhang, X.N. Li and G.Q. Liu 180

Chapter 3: Composites

Preparation and Electromagnetic Properties of CIP/SiO_2/PANI Composites
M.M. Wang, Z.L. Zhang, W.J. Hao, G.Y. Hou, Z.J. Xin, F. Wu and Y.Y. Yi 187

Research of the Stability of Stiffened Composite Panel
H. Zhu 191

Damping Properties of Novel Organic Hybrids of Textile Reclaimed Rubber and Hindered Phenol
X.O. Zhou, S. Jiang, X. Yan, X.T. Liu and L. Li 195

The Property of Waterborne UV-Curable Polyurethane Based on Alkali Lignin of Wheat Straw
J.L. Chao, F.Q. Chu, C.L. Xu, H. Wang and Y.X. Liu 199

Co-Extrusion of Wood Flour/PP Composites with PP-Based Cap Layer Reinforced with Macro-and Micro-Sized Cellulosic Fibres
I. Turku, K. Hämäläinen and T. Kärki 203

Preparation of Porous Titanium with High Porous Titanium and Surface Modification with High Concentration Alkaline Treatment
X.P. Fan 211

Effect of 1-(9-Ethyl-9*H*-carbazol-3-yl)-4,4,4-trifluorobutane-1,3-dione on Properties of Luminescent Europium (III) Complexes
H.J. Tang, L.Y. Wei, Q. Luo, X.W. Shen and C.L. Liu 215

The Impact of V/III Ratio on GaN Growth by HVPE
H.Q. Yu 221

Research Status of Carbon Fibre-Reinforced PEEK Composites
Q.Q. Liang and X.Q. Wu 225

Preparation of a Multi Media Ceramsite Containing Magnetic Powder
Z.F. Zhu, J.Z. Zhu, J.B. Chen and C.Y. Yang 229

Defect Types and Ultrasonic Nondestructive Testing for Fiber-Reinforced Composites
L.D. Liu and X.Q. Wu 233

Study the Effect of the Addition of HAp from Crocodile Bones on the Mechanical Properties of PLA/HAp Composites
K. Pawarangkool and W. Keawwattana 237

Impact Resistance of Shear Thickening Fluid (STF)/Kevlar Composites for Body Armor Application
S. Zhao, M.Y. Zhang, Y.N. Ren, W. Yang and S.Z. Wu 241

Wearing Research of Modified PTFE Materials in Water Pump Bearing
H. Ji, X.L. Li, L. Wang, J. Liu and C.X. Peng 246

Analysis of Low Temperature and High Temperature Performance of Different Aggregate SMA
P. Ren, B. Zhang, Y.Q. Wang, L. Zhang and L. Zhao 252

Synthesis and Characterization of Binuclear Ruthenium Vinyl Complexes with Dithienylethene Unit
Y. Lin, H.F. Cui and H. Fan 259

Theoretical Predication Method of High Order Elastic Constants of Cubic and Tetragonal Crystal Material
H. Yang and W.Q. Huang 263

First-Principles Study of Structural, Electronic and Optical Properties in $BaTi_{0.5}Ni_{0.5}O_3$
H.L. Pan, S.L. Yang and T. Li 268

Crystallization Behavior of Polyamide 6 Prepared from a Phenol/Dichloroethane Mixed Solvent
Y.L. Lai, H.P. Feng, C.Y. Tung, T.M. Wu and T.W. Shyr 272

Effects of Calcium Carbonate on the Thermal Properties of Acrylonitrile-Butadiene-Styrene/Calcium Carbonate Composites
X.J. Bai and L. Wang 276

Preparation and Study on Si/Ag/C Composite as Anode Material for Lithium Ion Batteries
T. Cui, Y.W. Wang, X.Y. Hu, Y.M. Shang, X.M. He and J.J. Li 281

Mechanical and Tribological Properties of Polytetrafluoroethylene Filled Polyoxymethylene/Aluminum Foam Interpenetrating Phase Composites
C.G. Long, Y. Su and C. Shen 285

Thermodynamics Analysis of SnO_2/C Composite Materials Fabricated by Biotemplating
X.H. He, X.B. Zhang, M. Wang, F.Y. Jiang, J.B. Wang, S.T. Liu, M.G. Yang and X.L. Su 290

Chapter 4: Ceramic

Preparation and Characterization of Coprecipitation-Derived Ferromagnetic Glass-Ceramic for Hyperthermia Application
J.A. Liu, M.M. Zhang and X.N. Yang 297

Preparation and Characterization of Bioactive and Magnetic Biphasic Thermo-Seeds Material
J.A. Liu, X.N. Yang and M.M. Zhang 301

Influence of Boron on Glass-Ceramic Magnetic Performance for Hyperthermia Application
J.A. Liu, M.M. Zhang and X.N. Yang 305

Structure Characterization of Sintered CaO-Al_2O_3-SiO_2 Glass-Ceramic Reinforced with Spodumene
Z.F. Xiao, J.S. Cheng and J. Xie 309

Mechanical Connection between 8YSZ Ceramic and 7075 Aluminum Alloy
Z.M. Du, J. Qin, Y.G. Sun, J.H. Niu and W.Q. Zhao 315

Chapter 5: Metal, Alloys and Mining Engineering

Recent Research on Ternary Phase Diagram of Gold Alloy
D.X. Zhuang, M. Xie, L.J. Liu, M.M. Liu, Y.T. Chen, J.M. Zhang, Y.C. Yang, J.Q. Hu, S.B. Wang and S. Wang 323

Cause and Remedies of Bulge Particle Defect on Surface of Hot-Dip Galvanized Steel Sheets
T.X. Guo, X.Q. Dong, Y.L. Zhou and Y.Q. Jin 330

Wetting Behavior and Interfacial Characteristic of the Sn-3.5Ag Alloy on Ni Substrates
L.K. Zang, H.L. Yan, Z.F. Yuan and L.Y. Lu 335

Application of Rare Earth Elements in the Study of Oil-Source Correlation in the Tarim Basin, China
X.J. Xiang, W.W. Jiao, L.J. Cheng and Y. Zhao 340

Crack Failure Analysis on Kitchen Knife of 5Cr15MoV Steel
J.X. Chen 345

Preparation and Characterization of Quaternary TiZrMnFe Gettering Compound
S.Q. Wang, F.H. Zeng, J.F. Song, X.F. Tan and L.W. Li 350

SEM *In Situ* Study on Fatigue Crack Growth of LC9 Aluminum Alloy Subjected to Elevated Temperature
Z.J. Cai, X.D. Li and M.M. Jia 356

Effect of Minor Silver Addition on Microstructure and Properties of Al-8Zn-1.Cu-1.3Mg-0.1Zr Alloys
X.Z. Wu, D.H. Xiao, Z.M. Zhu, X.X. Li and K.H. Chen 360

The Characteristic of Ores and Concentrates of the Open Society "EVRAZ KGOK"
A.N. Dmitriev, G.Y. Vitkina, R.V. Petukhov, S.V. Kornilkov, A.E. Pelevin, A.Y. Fishman, T.V. Sapozhnikova and K.Y. Shunyaev 364

Pitting Resistance of Domestic Super Martensitic Stainless Steel 00Cr13Ni5Mo2
S.D. Zhu, J.L. Li, H.X. Ma and L. Liu 370

Experimental Study on Magnetic Separation of Oolitic Hematite Ore
Q. Liu, L.L. Zhong, W.Q. Gong, E.W. Wang, Y. Lu and D.H. Xia 374

Comparative Analysis of Steel Slag Characteristics and Treatment Process
J.L. Liao, Z.H. Zhang, J.T. Ju and F.C. Zhao 378

Characteristic Analysis on Suppressing VFTO in GIS by Ferrite
X.G. Gan, S.P. Zhong, S. Wei and D.B. Yang 385

Investigation of Cr34Ni45 Ethylene Cracking Furnace Tube in Service
R.K. Song, M.C. Zhang, J.X. Dong and C.Y. Du 390

Domestic and Overseas Research Status on Molybdenum Resources and its Use
H.K. Feng, Z.Y. Cai, Y.G. Li and Y.F. Qi 401

A Modified Yoshida-Uemori Constitutive Model and its Application to Cold-Bending in Weldox960
L. Fu, C.H. Deng, H.L. Ren, Y. Zhong and H. Zhou 407

Texture Development in a Special Rolled AA6016 Aluminum Alloy
T. He, N. Zhang and W. Sun 416

Study of the Impact Factors on Heavy Metals Migration of Stainless Steel Choppers
Y. Chen 420

Investigation of 2024 Aluminum Alloy Flange Semi-Solid Thixoforging by Changing Cavity
Z.M. Du, J. Liu, J.H. Niu, W.Q. Zhao and S. Cong 425

Hot Deformation Behavior and Processing Map of a Nickel-Base Superalloy GH4169
F.W. Kang, X.M. Zhang, J.F. Sun and J.L. Zhao 432

Study of the Effect of Oxygen Annealing on YBCO Platelet Aggregates Synthesized by a Biomimetic Method
Z.L. Zhang, H.L. Suo, A. Kursumovic, M. Liu, Y. Wang, J. Macmanus-Driscoll and S.C. Wimbush 437

Chapter 6: Chemical Materials

The Mechanism Study of Sewage Scaling in Gas Filed Containing H_2S
X.Y. Long and C.F. Ding 445

Amino Acid Catalyzed Conjugate Addition of Thiol to Dienone
H.F. Cui, Y. Lin, H. Fan, L.D. Yu and P.N. Wan 450

Study of Viscosity and Stability of SiO_2 Sol Prepared by Sol-Gel Method
K. Peng, M.Y. Yuanyin, J.J. Zhu, D.Y. Li and L.P. Zhou 454

The Study of Catalytic Oxidation of NOx Using Mn_3O_4/GO/PMS
X.Z. Sun and D.X. Li 458

Effects of Catalyst on the Transmittance and Stability of SiO_2 Antireflective Film Prepared by Sol-Gel Method
K. Peng, E. Chen, L.P. Zhou, J.J. Zhu and D.Y. Li 462

Morphology and Electrochemical Performance of Amorphous Nickel Hydroxide Added Anion
W. Shang, C.J. Liu and Y.Q. Wen 466

Photostability of Monoazo Disperse Dyes in Different Solvents
N. Ittarat, P. Suwanruji, T. Karpkird and J. Setthayanond 472

Methanol Conversion to Propylene over Mo-HZSM-5 Zeolite
H.R. Zhang, H.Y. Liu, Y. Jiang, X.H. Chang, K. Yuan, B. Wang, Y. Guo and S.M. Meng 476

Application of Dividing Wall Column in High Purity Cyclohexene Oxide Distillation
E.Q. Wang 481

Crystal Structure of Biammonium Hexamolybdonickelate (II) Hydrate, $(NH_4)_2(NiMo_6O_{24})(H_3O)_6$
H.X. Liu, Q. Liu, Q.H. Fan, X.P. Zhang, L.T. Wang, K.Q. Ye and G. Zeng 485

Study on a Structure of 2,6-Pyridine-Dicarboxylic Acid Europium Quarthydrate
H.X. Liu, Q. Liu, Y. Xu, T.T. Huang, L.T. Wang, K.Q. Ye and G. Zeng 490

Study on a Novel Structure of $C_{21}H_9Ba_2SrN_3O_{12}$
H.X. Liu, Q. Liu, X.P. Zhang, Q.H. Fan, L.T. Wang, H.J. Yue and K.Q. Ye 494

Simulation and Optimization of Chlorobenzene Distillation Process
E.Q. Wang 500

Electrochemical Synthesis and Electrochromic Properties of Poly(3-bromothiophene) Films
X.C. Song and R. Ma 504

The Extraction of Polyphenols from Tea Leaves Based on Mechanochemical Methodology and Aqueous Two-Phase System
D.G. Li, F.F. Yuan, R.P. Chen, Y.L. Li, K.L. Li and S.B. Lin 508

Study on Novel Structure of Praseodymium Complex, $C_5H_{13}O_{11}Pr$
H.X. Liu, Q. Liu, T.T. Huang, Y. Xu, L.T. Wang, H.J. Yue and K.Q. Ye 515

The Ternary System Phase Equilibrium of KCl-NH_4Cl-H_2O at 80°C
B. Zhao, G.Y. Geng, J.X. Chen, S.F. Zhang, Y.H. Li and A.D. Lu 519

Progress of Purification and Applications of Coal Gangue
T. Huang, S.M. Lei, Q.L. Ma and E.W. Wang 523

Study on the Chemical Stability of Mechanochemically Modified Polyvinylchloride (PVC) Membrane
Z. Hao, X.Y. Hu and Y.B. Chen 527

Study on Adsorption of Crosslinked Starch Microspheres towards Heavy Metal Ions
L.Y. Yang, Y.H. Guo, L.L. Yu and J. You 531

Chapter 7: Biomaterials and Technology

Preparation of Guiqi Polysaccharide and Antioxidant Activity *In Vitro*
X.Y. Pu, H.R. Wang, W.B. Fan and S. Yu 539

Solvothermal Synthesis, Structure, Fluorescence and Magnetism Properties of a Novel 3D Metal-Organic Framework Based on Tetranuclear Copper Secondary Building Units
L. Wu, M. Xue, G. Chaplais, G.S. Zhu, S.L. Qiu, A. Simon-Masseron and J. Patarin 543

Calcium Methoxide Synthesis from Quick Lime Using as Solid Catalyst in Refined Palm Oil Biodiesel Production
W. Suwanthai, V. Punsuvon and P. Vaithanomsat 550

Preparation and Characterization of Cellulose Films with Curcumin
J. Suksulap, P. Suwanruji and J. Setthayanond 555

Study the Effect of HAp Content in PLA/HAp Microsphere on the Efficiency of Drug (Clindamycin) Loading Process
J. Pradid, W. Keawwattana and S. Tangbunsuk 559

Synthesis and Antiproliferative Activities of Novel 2-Phenylaminopyrimidine (PAP) Derivatives
S. Chang 563

The Effect and Mechanism of Apoptosis on Hela Cells Induced by Bufotalin
X. Chao, X.J. Zhou, C.H. Dong and G. Zheng 568

Ganoderic Acid Restores the Sensitivity of Multidrug Resistance Cancer Cells to Doxorubicin
J.J. Ouyang, Y.Q. Wang and W. Tang 573

Antioxidant Activities of Flavonoids from *Canavalia maritime*
J.C. Deng, G.G. Niu, L.H. Li, X.Q. Yang, Y.C. Deng, Y.Y. Wu, S.X. Hao, B. Qi and W.L. Lin 577

Development of Selective Blue-Laser Lithography for Biomedical Applications: A Pilot Study
T. Apatthananon, S. Channasanon, P. Uppanan, S. Chantaweroad, T. Siriporn, C. Nattapon, P. Surasith and S. Kriskrai 582

Chapter 8: Surface Engineering/Coatings

The Structure and Corrosion Process Characterization of Galvannealed and Galvanized Steel Sheets
S.M. Jiang, D.W. Guo and Q.F. Zhang 589

Modeling and Experimental Study of the Supporting Force of Water Striders Legs
Q.C. Wang and X.D. Yang 597

Coating Structure and Corrosion Resistance Behavior of Hot Dip Zn-Al-Mg-Si Alloy Coating Steel Sheet
S.M. Jiang, C.F. Yue and Q.F. Zhang 601

Influence of Powder Structure on Decarburization and Microstructure of HVOF Sprayed WC-12wt.%Co Coatings
N. Ma, Z.X. Cheng, H.T. Wu and F.X. Ye 609

Study on the ALN Thin Film for Improving the Performance of Heat Dissipation on High Power LED Substrate
Y. Li, K. Chen, H.R. Peng, M.J. Zhu, Y.W. Pan and J.S. Liang 613

Comparison of Microstructure and Mechanical Properties of Co-Based and Fe-Based Alloy Coatings Deposited by PTA
M. Lou, Y.X. Xu, H.W. Ouyang and Y. Du 617

Fracture Analysis on Cracking of 16Mn Flange
F. Wang, C. Shi, Y.R. Fan and A.Q. Ma 623

Structure and Properties of TiAlLaN Coatings Deposited at Various Ar/N_2 Flow Ratio Using a Mid-Frequency Magnetron Sputtering System
H. Du, H.B. Zhao, J. Xiong, L.L. Wang and G. Xian 629

Optimal Design of the Thickness of the Multi-Layer Absorption Plates Based on the Max Absorption Coefficient
D.Y. Huang 634

Investigation on Dynamics of Ultrasonic Surface Rolling Process
X.H. Zhao and Y. Liu 640

Effects of Tribo-Couple and Environmental Medium on the Tribological Properties of the Graphite/CaF_2/TiC/Ni-Base Alloy Composite Coating
B. Cai, H.B. Li, Y.F. Tan, H.W. Li, Q.F. Jing and Z.W. Zhang 644

Mechanisms and Characteristics of Ultrasonic Impact Treatment on Steel Surface
T.T. He, Z.M. Ding, C.B. Shen and Z. Li 649

The Study on the Process and Mechanism of Explosive Hardening of Hadfield Steel by a New Flexible Explosive
F.Y. Wang, X.H. Gao and T.S. Liu 654

The Study of Stability of Tungsten Plug CMP Slurry for IC Multilevel Interconnect
Y.Q. Jia, X.H. Niu, L. Li and N. Li 658

Fabrication of Superhydrophobic Surfaces on Copper Substrates via Brush Plating Technique
K. Hu, Q.X. Xu and X.L. Yang 662

Research on the Rate-Dependent Fracture Energy of Al/HTPB Adhesive Interface
Z. Wei, Y.T. Ju and Q.C. Zhou 670

Chapter 9: Building Materials, Construction and Architecture

Study on Displacement Prediction Model of Foundation Pit
Q. Song, J.J. Zhang and Y.S. Liu 679

Learn from Tradition: Utilizing Traditional Building Materials in the Post-Earthquake Reconstruction
C.P. Hou and H.R. Wu 683

Chapter 9: Building Materials, Construction and Architecture

Research Progress and Existent Problem of Nano Cement
Y.G. Xue, S.C. Li and N. Zhang 689

Summary of Performance and the Application of the Concrete Filled Steel Tubular Structures
J. Gong, J. Li, Y. Tang and Y. Miao 693

Seismic Reinforcement of a r.c. Building with External Steel Frameworks: The Case of the Primary School XXV April of Arcola (Italy)
L. Giresini, A. Gioeli and M. Sassu 697

Research on Construction Control of Irregular Steel-Arch Cable-Stayed Combination Bridges
X.L. Zeng, Y.F. Zhao, Y. Yuan and Y.F. Gao 701

Experimental Study on the Effects of Pumice Powder to Cement Soil
Y.Q. Wen, X.D. Shen, L. Niu and Y.P. Cui 706

Extra-Lightweight No-Fines Cellular Concrete – Use for Non-Structural Material
C.J. Chang and Y.C. Chang 713

Experimental Research and Finite Element Analysis of BFRP Flexural Strengthening Efficiencies of Pre-Damaged Concrete Beams
H.L. Wang, W. Chang and X.L. Yang 720

Experimental Study on Impermeability Performance of Chopped Basalt Fiber Reinforced Concrete
H.L. Wang and L. Yuan 726

Research Status and Proposals of Basalt Fiber Reinforced Concrete
H.L. Wang and Y.H. Zhong 730

The Analysis of the Adhesion between Limestone, Basalt and Asphalt
P. Ren, X.J. Zhao, Y.Q. Ren, B. Zhang and Q. Du 738

Study on Properties of Plate Performance of Black Substratum Cement Concrete Pavement
W. Yu, X.C. Wang, J.J. Zhou and Z.A. Feng 745

Protection Effectiveness of Concrete Surface Treating Materials
L.W. Teng, R. Huang, S.Y. Zou and H.M. Hsu 749

Experimental Research on Influences on Mechanical Property of C50 Waterproof Concrete by Basalt Fiber
H.L. Wang, H.Y. Guo, X.L. Yang, Q.C. Ren and P. Dong 755

Research on Flexural Behavior of Damaged RC Beams Strengthened with Basalt Fiber Reinforced Polymer
H.L. Wang and X.L. Yuan 762

Experimental Research on Basalt Fiber Reinforced High-Strength Concrete Filled Steel Tubular Short Columns Subjected to Axial Compression Load
H.L. Wang and H. Li 768

Global Analysis of Polymer Pads in a Bearing Element for a Large-Span Movable Sluice
P. Gou, X. Peng and L. Ren 772

Microscopic Mechanism Study on the Strength Effects of Pumice Powder to Cement Soil
Y.Q. Wen, X.Y. Feng, X.D. Shen and Y.P. Cui 776

Chapter 10: Material Processing Technology

Experimental Study on the Effect of Jet Penetrating into Disconnected Targets with Water Medium
H.C. Gao and X.B. Luo 787

Prediction of Welding Residual Stress by Using Thermo-Metallurgical-Mechanical Constitute Model
Y.J. Sun, Y. Lu, J. Xu and C.M. Shi 791

Experimental Study on Low-Temperature Cold Cutting Technology
J.L. Li and L. Zhu 795

Summary of Fatigue Life Research Method on Rubber Components
M.Q. Wang, X.H. Du, Y.J. Song and B.Z. Wang 799

Research Development of AuSn20 Solder Preparation Technology
J.Q. Hu, M. Xie, J.M. Zhang, M.M. Liu, Y.T. Chen and Y.C. Yang 803

Impact of Sample Preparation on Determination of Hydrogen Content in TC4 Titanium Alloys
Z.H. Cao and Y.Q. Feng 808

Diffusion Bonding of Mg-AZ31B/Al-6061 and Characteristics with Pressure and with no Pressure
M. Zhao and D.Y. Ju 812

Investigation of Heat Treatment on Mechanical Properties of SAE4320 and SAE8620 Alloys
L.J. Tan, J.Q. Wang, Q.Q. Wang, X.L. Chen and S.Z. Zhou 816

Shape Analysis of Three-Dimensional Curve Surface for Flexible Rolling Metal Plate
N.J. Qiu, M.Z. Li, R.J. Li, F. Yan and X.J. Hu 820

A Hypervelocity Impact Facilities Based on Double-Barreled Two-Stage Light Gas Gun
J. Yin, Y.W. Yang, X.Y. Hu and C.C. Yong 825

The Effect of Inclusions on Internal Cracks for 20Mn5N Steel Ingot after Forging
J.Z. Gao, P.X. Fu, H.W. Liu and X.P. Ma 829

Study on the Effect of Homemade Welding Wire Contaning Ni, Cr Elements on the Weldability of Industrial Pure Aluminum
Y.H. Zhao, L.J. Gao, Y. Sun and W.D. Song 839

Prediction of Underwater Wet Weld Seam Forming Based on ARX Model
B. Chen and J.C. Feng 843

Electrostatic Spinning Preparation and Mechanical Properties of PLGA Fibers and Fiber Membrane
L.L. Jiang, Y. Huang, J.T. Ling, Z.Q. Feng, X.F. Qiao and K.Y. Chen 847

Boundary Element Modeling of Crack Propagation Path in Brittle Matrix Composites Reinforced by Short Rectangular Particulates
C. Wang and A.B.D.S. Santos Neto 855

Effects of Cutting Parameters on Residual Stresses in High-Speed Milling of Ti-17
Y.S. Liang, J.X. Ren, Y.F. Luo and D.H. Zhang 861

Design and Researches on a Special Drillbit of Drilling Carbon Fiber Reinforced Plastics
B.J. Wu, G.H. Yan, Y.S. Li, Z.M. Huang and X.F. Yang 866

Effects of Parameters on Surface Roughness of Metal Parts by Selective Laser Melting
Q. Qin and G.X. Chen 872

Analysis of the Research Status of Tin Whisker's Influence on Lead-Free Soldering
Q.R. Lu, H. Huang and D.B. Chen 876

Research on the Effect of Mechanical Processing on Lithium Tantalate Crystal Pyroelectric Coefficient
T. Liang, S.J. Lin, Y. Li, C. Lei and C.Y. Xue 880

Effects of Asymmetrical Rotated Rectangular Basis in Two-Dimensional Gyromagnetic Photonic Crystals
H.L. Sun, Q.B. Li, H.B. Chen and B.D. Chen 885

Chapter 11: Sensors and Detecting Technology

Filtering Design and Analysis of Clamp-On Pressure Signals of High Pressure Fuel Pipe
X.M. Zhang, F. Xu, J.M. Liu and F.Z. Feng 891

A Method to Compensate Thermocouple Sensor Non-Linearity Based on Lagurre Orthogonal Polynomial Basis Functions Neural Network
A.L. Yu and J.Q. Dai 896

Test Platform for Marine Anti-Interference Satellite Navigation Receiver
K.J. Cao, Y.F. Hu, Y.B. Zhu and R. Liu 900

First Stage Detection of Node Capture Attacks in WSN Based on Cloud Model
L. Peng, G.W. Zhang, X.B. Xu, Q.B. Sun and F.C. Yang 905

Fabrication and Hydrogen Sensing Property of In_2O_3 Nanotowers
Z.Q. Zheng, H.Y. Wu and B. Wang 913

The Research of Learning Mechanism in Fault Diagnosis System of CNC Based on MAS
H. Zhang, R.F. Guo and C. Geng 917

A Research of Electromagnetic Tomography Based on Different Parameters
J. Sun and F.Q. Shao 926

Design and Implement of High-Accuracy On-Line Metal Thickness Measuring Instrument Based on NiosII Processor
S.L. Yang and B.L. Yang 930

Identification of Liquor Brands Based on near Infrared Spectroscopy
L.S. Zhang, C. Guo and B.Q. Wang 935

New Monitoring System of Firebrick Lining Deterioration of Blast Furnace Devil in Metallurgical Plants of China
A.N. Dmitriev, Y.A. Chesnokov, K. Chen, O.Y. Ivanov and M.O. Zolotykh 939

Chapter 12: Signal and Intelligent Information Processing

The Development and Application of Small Watershed Hydrological Telemetry System
L.H. Chen and F.Q. Liao 947

Central Node-A Novel Technology in Train Safety Communication System
X.D. Wang, C.H. Yang, Z.C. Chang and H.F. Hong 954

Application of Data Mining in the Forecasting of Railway Passenger Flow
D. Zheng, Y. Wang, P.Z. Tang and Y.P. Wu 958

A Concatenate Code for Error Correcting Code in Bit Pattern Media Recoding System
S. Timakul, S. Koonkarnkhai, P. Kovintavewat and S. Choomchuay 962

The Transceiver Circuit Design of Digital Ultrasonic System
X.F. Zhang, F.C. Xie, G.W. Yang and W. Zhang 968

The Application and Research of CATV Communication Technology in the Field of Electricity Consumption Information Collection in China
X.H. Song, F.T. Lin, J.F. Bai and X.J. Yang 974

New ART2/ART2A Algorithm Apply to Entire Real Number Field
Y.C. Xu, Y. Li, G.J. Shen and B. Dong 982

Signal Processing of Giant Magnetostritive Force Sensors
R.G. Yan, L.H. Zhu and Q.X. Yang 988

Image Processing Using Discrete Wavelet Transform Based on OMAP3530
Z.L. Zhong, Y.D. Ma, M.M. Nie and Y. Li 994

Design of Intelligent Teaching System Based on Data Mining Technology
W.W. Gao, J.H. Wang and X.F. Li 998

A Quick Sorting Algorithm Adaptive to Massive Data with High Repetition Rate
B.P. Chen 1002

A Noise Reduction Method of Interferogram Based on Discrete Wavelet Transform for Quantitative Calibration of near Infrared Spectra
X.M. Wu, P.Y. Lou and X.H. Yang 1006

A New Image Fusion Method Based on Improved PCNN and Multiscale Decomposition
N.Y. Wang, W.L. Wang and X.R. Guo 1011

The Processing of Laser Signal Based on Spatial Correlation Threshold Filtering in Foggy Media
G.Z. Yao, L.S. Ai, L.Z. Shen and G.Y. Wang 1016

Research on the Enhancement and Processing of Faint Laser Signal in Foggy Conditions
G.Z. Yao, L.S. Ai, L.Z. Shen and G.Y. Wang 1023

Design and Implementation of a Management Information System of Equipment Based on RFID
L.J. Qiu, J. Wen and H.Z. Cai 1031

Study of License Plate Recognition Technology
S. Yuan, G.Y. Zhang, J.H. Wu and L.Y. Guo 1035

Research on the High-Speed Data Acquisition System Based on Clock Distribution
G.Z. Yao, L.S. Ai, L.Z. Shen and G.Y. Wang 1039

Novel Initialization Method for Nonlinear Kalman Filters
Y.Z. Wang, H. Su, Y. Cao and H. Liu 1047

Novel Design Method for Realization of Consistency Checking for a Class of Non-Linear Filters Based on Point Selection Technique
Y.Z. Wang, R.B. Zhang, G.Q. Liu and J.W. Wu 1051

The Study on the Test Model about the Electromagnetic Inductive Communicating Signal Quality
Z.J. Li, X.L. Zhao, Q.S. Liu and J.B. Wang 1055

Time-Frequency Characteristics of Vibration Signals Analysis for Large Instantaneous Impact Mill Rolling Based on Wavelet Packet
Q.J. Xiao and Z.H. Luo 1061

Time-Frequency Features of Signal Analysis and its Application in Mechanical Fault Diagnosis
Z.H. Luo and Q.J. Xiao 1065

An Energy Metering Communication Model Based on IEC 61850
J.F. Bai, F.T. Lin, S.J. Wu, Y.H. Xu, X.H. Song and S. Zhao 1069

Closed Loop Dynamic Fuzzy Neural Network for Real-Time Lifetime Forecasting
W.W. Li, G.F. Zheng and J.Y. Zheng 1074

Research on Architecture Survivability of Wireless Networks
H.F. Sun 1081

Research and Improvement of Clustering Routing Algorithm in Ad Hoc Network
P. Zong and J. Qin 1087

An Adaptive Digital Camouflage Scheme Using Visual Perception and K-Mean Clustering
H.F. Yang and J.P. Yin 1091

Chapter 13: Electronic, Optoelectronic and Automation

Design of LED Display-Screen System Base on TMS320F2812
B.L. Yang, S.J. Bao and S.L. Yang 1097

Analysis on Bi-Frequency BUCK Circuit Current Ripple Suppressing
L. Jun, J.H. Zhang and W. Gao 1101

Higher Order Sliding Mode Control for a Class of MIMO Systems
J.D. Li and J. Zhang 1105

Analysis of the Impact Caused by Residential Users Distributed Photovoltaic Grid-Connected on Distribution Network
S.F. Chen, F.T. Lin, S. Zhao, J.F. Bai and R.M. Tong 1110

Design of Inverter Based on the Soft-Switched of High Frequency Pulse DC Loop
Z.C. Huo, G.X. Ren, J.Y. Gao and G.B. Ding 1114

Study the Coupling Characteristics of Line Defects and Point Defects in Photonic Crystals
W. Li and S.W. Zhu 1118

A Novel Octave Filter Bank Design Method Based upon Cascaded Filters
X.H. Ren and F.Q. Yu 1122

Design of Automatic Sunlight Tracking Solar Panel System Based on Single Chip Microcomputer
Z.W. Gai, S.Q. Gao and J. Long 1128

A Novel Coupled-Line Gysel Power Divider for Dual-Band and High-Power applications
W.M. Wang, Y.L. Wu and Y.A. Liu 1132

Design of Local Oscillator Based on DDS of High Performance Short-Wave Receiver
Y.T. Chen, C.J. Sun, B. Zang, L. Cheng, J. Tang, Y. Huang and D.H. Xu 1140

Study on the Characteristics of Photovoltaic Large Array Based on the Double Diode Model
J.H. Zhang, X.Y. Wei and Z.N. Hui 1145

Introduction of a Device for Automatic Collection of Potential Data and its Application in Pipeline
R.Y. Cao, Z.Y. Xue, H.Y. Chen, K. Shuang, Y.W. Jiang and M.B. Wang 1150

A New Method to Measure the Absorption Coefficient Based on the Sound Pressure Delaying
D.Y. Huang 1156

Research on NLOS Mitigation Method for TOA Positioning
Z.L. Deng, X.H. Zhao, F.P. Xie and Q. An 1161

Impact of the Phosphors on the Conformal Coating LED by Optical Simulation
Y.B. Gong and R.J. Tian 1167

The System for the Intelligent Remote Control of the Lead-Acid Battery
X.F. Tong, A.R.H. Bao and L. Yang 1172

Research of High Speed Spindle Control Method Based on Neural Network
J. Meng, Z.L. Li, Z.L. Lv and M. Liu 1177

Excess Heat Triggering by 488 nm Laser in a D/Pd Gas-Loading System
X.Y. Wang, B.J. Shen, L.H. Jin, X.L. Zhao and J. Tian 1182

A Machine Vision System for Measurement of Mechanical Parts Based on LabVIEW 2012
Y. Wang, H.Y. Lv and N. Wang 1186

Micro Network Monitoring Technology Research for Smart Grid
D.Z. Li, G.J. Xu, K. Shi, H. Wang, H. Wang and R.M. Tong 1190

Automatic Allocation Algorithm of Holographic Correlation Peaks Based on Neighborhood Variance
Q. Tian and F.W. Meng 1198

Chapter 14: Industrial Robotics and Mechatronics

Thermal Behavior Regression Analysis for Dual Linear Feed Drive Mechanism with Self-Tuning PLS
X.K. Lin and Q.Q. Wu 1205

A Tracking Controller Design for Discrete Nonlinear Singularly Perturbed Systems Based on Fuzzy Singularly Perturbed Model
C.G. Sun and L. Li 1210

Application of Virtual Kinematic Chains in Cooperating Robot Systems
G. Chen and J.H. Wang 1214

The Design of 5V/100W High Frequency Switching Power Supply
H.Z. Cai and L. Bai 1221

A Remote Measurement and Control System Architecture Based on Embedded B/S Structure Using AJAX-CGI
A.B. Zhao, J. Sun and M. Bai 1225

Fuzzy Passivity Control of Flexible Joint Robot
B. Zhang 1229

Underwater Target Tracking Algorithm Based on an Improved Color Matching
L.Y. Sun, M.M. Li and Z. Wang 1234

Applications of Extended Kalman Filter for Position Sensorless Control of Permanent Magnet Linear Synchronous Motor
W.M. Yang, L.J. Pan, P.F. Zheng and Y.Q. He 1240

Preliminary Study on the Effect of Operating Conditions on the Measurement Accuracy of Electronic Type Electric Energy Meter
H.B. Yu, J. Liu, C.Y. Wang, L. Li and R.M. Tong 1246

On Fuzzy Sliding Control for a Robot Manipulator
P.H. Tang and Y.Y. Lei 1251

Self-Repairing Control System for a Hybrid Underwater Vehicle
B. Wang, C. Wu and T. Ge 1256

MCCB Instantaneous Calibration Current Error Decomposition and Control Method
J.W. Wang and T.H. Du 1263

Chapter 15: Mechanical Design and Modeling

Periodic and Chaotic Dynamic Responses of Face Gear Transmission System
Z.H. Hu, J.Y. Tang and S.Y. Chen 1273

Experimental Study on the Distribution Coefficient of Horizontal Force Acting on the Wharf Transverse Bents
Z. Yue, Z. Feng, P.R. Wang and X. Li 1281

The Power Loss and Efficiency Analysis of a 3DOFs Planetary Gear Box
H.B. Yin, S.L. Li, H. Zhang, X.Y. Zhao and J. Zhang 1285

The Mechanical Performance Evaluation of a Mechanism with Curved Edge Driving Component
X.Q. Liu 1290

Dynamic Load of Agricultural Machinery Drive Axle Housing Based on Field Measured Road Roughness
L.X. Zhang, S.R. Liu, E.R. Mao, B. Xie and X.J. Meng 1295

Tests Results and Simple Structural Analysis of the Main Lighthouse in the Harbor of Livorno (Italy)
L. Giresini and M. Sassu 1299

Force Distribution Effect on Clasp Mark of Metal Shell
H.J. Li, L. Yan, D.F. Wang, X. Tang and D.Y. Zuo 1304

Engineering Calculation and Application of Perforation Impact Dynamic Loads in Oil and Gas well
C.B. Li, Y. Liang and Z.K. Lou 1308

The Effects of Leakage on Friction Loss over a Rotating Disk
X.J. Zhang and Z.T. Fei 1313

Forces Analysis of Piston Couple in Swash-Plate Axial Piston Motor
J.Y. Shi 1319

Genetic Algorithm Optimization of a Double Four-Bar Manipulator
Q.J. Tang and T.S. Zhao 1323

Dynamic Performance Analysis and Simulation of Hybrid-Driven Seven-Bar Mechanical Press with Double Cranks
X.Z. Dang, L.S. Zhou and D. Liang 1327

Double Laplace Transform Computing Dynamic Response of the Large Thickness to Span Ratio Beam
W. Zhang 1333

Finite Element Method for Solving Bucking Load of Semi-Rigid Steel Frame
H.H. Cheng, A.M. Li, M.W. Guan, X.W. Yang and J. Luo 1337

Computation of Dynamic Stress Intensity Factor by Direct Integral Boundary Element Method
W. Zhang 1343

Analysis and Simulation on Vehicle Rollover Dynamic Driving on Curving Path
W.N. Bao 1347

Research on Vibro-Acoustic Characteristics of Underwater Finite Plate-Shell Structure under Multiple Excitations
Y.Y. Zhu 1351

Grinding Wheel Dynamic Balance Weight Type System Based on the Self-Optimal Fuzzy Control
H.T. Ma, S.F. Ma, Y. Yu and F. Chen 1360

The Design of Hydraulic Cylinder for Measuring the Contact Stress of the Bud Type Seal Ring
X. Zhang, Z.M. Zhao, M. Yu and Y.Y. Wang 1365

Mechanical Analysis on the Scour of Submarine Pipeline
Y. Han 1369

The Pressure Performance of a Slide-Style Multianvil Large Volume Press
S.J. Lv, H.L. Cui and K. Du 1373

Aircraft Navigation Model Based on Genetic Algorithms
Q.W. Yang, B. Jin and J.X. Huang 1377

Loading Analysis and Mathematical Calculation for Arc Axis of the Exponential Function
L. Xiang, Z. Feng, Z. Qiu and R.Y. Zhang 1382

ACO-Based Holes Machining Path Optimization Using Helical Milling Operation
Z.Q. Li, X. Wang and Y.F. Dong 1386

Two Analytical Models to Determine the Stress Singularities in Elastic-Viscoelastic Joints
Z.X. Gu, J. Zheng, W. Peng and X.N. Tang 1391

Chapter 15: Mechanical Design and Modeling

The Optimal Design of Thermal Insulation on the Pipeline by Using Particle Swarm Optimization
H.Y. Lv, X.D. Si and W.Z. Wu 1397

Half Region Dynamical Slip-Frequency Control of Single-Sided Linear Induction Motor
J.M. Deng, T.F. Chen and J.X. Tang 1401

Chapter 16: CAD/CAM/CAE

The Reversing Design for the Cooling Water Cavity of Engine's Cylinder Head and CFD Analysis
X.X. Liu and M. Chen 1409

Structure Design and Kinematic Analysis of Stacking Mechanical Arm of Aluminium Ingot
J.C. Cai, H.T. Wu, T.C. Yao and D.W. Xu 1414

Numerical Simulation and Optimization of Radial Heat Pipe Heat Exchanger Based on Field Synergy Principle
Q.Y. Liu, F.B. Tu and S.Y. Gao 1418

Numerical Simulation of Gas-Solid Two-Phase Flow in Air Pre-Cleaner Based on CFD
G.Y. Dong, Y.F. Tan, H.W. Li, C.H. Zhou, W.G. Wang and X. Hong 1423

Structure Design and Simulation of a Pulsar Navigation-Oriented X-Ray Detector
L.S. Liu, J. Zhang, J.W. Chen, F.C. Zuo and Z.W. Mei 1428

Parametric Design Model of Disc-Scoop-Type Metering Device Based on Knowledge Engineering
Y. Yang 1432

Automatic Process Intermediate Model Generation in Process Planning
X. Zhang, C. Liang and W.Y. Li 1436

3D CAD Model Retrieval Algorithm Based on Accessibility Cone Distributions
W. Qiang 1444

Numerical Calculation of the Ice Grow and Empirical Calculation Results
D. Sharapov and K. Shkhinek 1448

An Engineering Drawing Retrieval Method Based on Spherical Harmonics
Z.D. Wei 1455

Numerical Analysis on Mechanical Property of Bolted Joint
L. Yang, Z. Li and L. Yu 1459

The Optimization Design of Arm Bracket Structure Topology Based on ANSYS
S.M. Luo, Z.Y. Niu, W. Liu, F.F. Luo and J.J. Jiang 1464

Design and Analysis of Rack-Torsional Hydraulic Straightening Machine
S.C. Wang, Y. Wang, M. Wang and H.N. Chen 1470

Research on Even-Loading Mechanism of Multi-Planetary Gear Transmission
K.L. Mao 1476

Research on Dynamic Simulation and Analysis of NGW Planetary Gear Train Based on ANSYS
Y.B. Hou and S.B. Jiang 1480

Study on Failure Trend of L-Type Deflection Machine Structure on Basis of Static Strength Analysis
S.Y. Cao, Y.S. Sun and L. Xuan 1484

Static and Dynamic Characteristic Analysis for the HSR Series Linear Motion Guide
Y.M. Zhang, R.J. Gu and G.X. Yang 1488

Study on the Effect of Cone Diameter on the Cone Resistance and Steady Flow Force of Hydraulic Poppet Valve
J.Y. Shi 1493

Finite Element Analysis on Dynamic Characteristics of Maglev Suspension System
J.X. Tang, X.H. Jiang, J.M. Deng and T.F. Chen 1497

Dynamic Characteristics Research of Boring-Milling Ram Based on ANSYS
L.H. Deng, Z.L. Chen and Z.D. Zhou 1501

Hydrodynamic Analysis of Submarine of the Wave Glider
L.J. Jia, X.M. Zhang, Z.F. Qi, Y.F. Qin and X.J. Sun 1505

The 3D Solid Model and Finite Element Analysis of Working Device of Loader ZL16H
Q.B. Huang, D. Cao and J.Y. Dai 1512

Research Advances and Characteristics in Transplanting Mechanism of High-Speed Transplanter
K. Zhang, Y. Tao and K. Gao 1516

The Analysis of Rotary Kiln Thermal Characteristics Based on ANSYS and FLUENT
X.Y. Song and Q. Fan 1523

Analysis on Static Character of Piezoelectric Tubular Composite Actuator
Y.T. Ma, C. Wang, J.F. Zhong and Y.L. Wu 1529

Attitude Stability Analysis of Expendable BathyThermograph
J. Liu, L.B. Du, H.J. He and Z. Lei 1535

A Study of Performance Influence Caused by Mode Interference for Vibratory Cylindrical Gyroscope
Y. Tao, D.B. Xiao, B.J. Wang, D.F. Sun, J.W. Li and L.Q. Zong 1540

Optimization of 450mm Wafer Ashing Chamber by Computational Fluid Dynamics Simulation
Y. Cha, M. Kim, D. Lee, K. Kim, S. Yang and S. Park 1544

Process Simulation of Anchor Stirring in Crystallizer
Q. Wu, L.P. Guo, J.X. Chen, Y.H. Li and A.D. Lu 1548

Residual Stress Analysis of TIG Welding Process of Thin-Walled Stainless Steel and Red Copper
H.W. Liu, L. Huang, X. Guo and Y.L. Lv 1553

Simulation on Stress Relaxation of DD3 Nickel-Based Single Crystal Superalloy Based on Micro-Cell Model
Z.P. Ding, J. Zeng, X.P. Bai and J.H. Fang 1557

Study on Simulating the Temperature Field of P110 Oil Case for Quenching by Finite Element Method
Y. Zhou, B.S. Ou Yang and B.Z. Chen 1563

Computer Simulation of Aluminum Conductors Drawn in High Speed
M.X. Yang, J.T. Luan, T.G. Zhou and X.F. Zhang 1567

System Development of Processing Functional Gradient Material Part by Laser Rapid Prototyping
Q. Qin and G.X. Chen 1571

Simulation Study on Wax Injection for Investment Casting
B. He, D.H. Wang, F. Li and B.D. Sun 1575

The Lost Foam Casting Simulation of the Gray Cast Iron Linner
S.H. Yang and X.M. Du 1580

Numerical Simulation for Fluid Flow of Flow Channel Structure in the Injection-Rolling Nozzle during Polymer Continue Injection Direct Rolling
H.W. Peng, Y. Lou, Y.H. Lv, H.X. Wang, C.S. Wang and J.B. Li 1584

Development of Visualize Simulation System of Jet Milling Process
Y. Cui 1588

How to Increase the Accuracy of Analysis and Reduce the Computational Time in ANSYS in the Case of Deformation Study of Orthopedic Bone Plates
J. Malekani, P.K.D.V. Yarlagadda, B. Schmutz, Y.T. Gu and M. Schuetz 1592

Numerical Simulation of New Class-Honeycomb Sandwich Structure's Core
X. Li, L.C. Yu, Y.H. Zhou, Y. Li and X. Zhang 1601

Dynamics System Simulation Study of Locking Mechanism for Aviation Aircraft Based CATIA and ADAMS
X. Liu, N. Shan, T.J. Liu and X.Y. Hu 1607

Reliability Index Calculation of Lateral Load Bearing Single-Piles Based on ANSYS
R.Y. Zhang, F. Zhu, Z.Z. Lu and Y. Zhang 1612

Chapter 17: Product Design and Manufacture

Opened Performance of Hydraulic Support Electro-Hydraulic Valve Test Bench Design
X. Zhang, Y.Y. Wang, Y.B. Cui, M. Yu and Z.M. Zhao 1619

Research of Rolling Bearing Selection Based on Hybrid Algorithm
J.P. Tian, Y.C. Huang, H.L. Yang, P. Tang and G. Chen 1623

Testing and Evaluation of Baby Walkers Based on Product Injury Data
Y.Q. Feng, Y. Yin, X.R. Zhang and J.J. Xiao 1628

Research on the Maintainability Analysis and Design for Artillery Projectiles
X.D. Zhou, X.B. Gao and X.L. Du 1632

Manufacture of Nb_3Al Short Wires by RHQT Method Using a Newly Designed Apparatus
C. Chen, Z.M. Bai and P.X. Zhang 1638

A Protection Scheme for Standard Equipment to Avoid Harmful Random Large Current
S.Z. Qi, W. Han, S.B. Zhou, C. Li and K.J. Huang 1642

Optimal Design of Cooling Device for High Power LED Headlamp
C. Zhang, Y.X. Cai, J. Wang, X.H. Li and X.J. Zhao 1648

An Integrated Approach to Index Weight Based on Improved D-S Evidence Theory and Application of the Product Solution Evaluation
E. Hua, W. Han, D.Q. Chen and J. Zhang 1654

The Research of Public Rental System with Electric Car
J.M. Chen, L.X. Wang and Y.L. Ni 1659

Analysis on Apparel Marker Making's Technical Requirements and its Influencing Factors
C.Y. Huang 1663

Design of Holes Distance Adjustable Device of Duckbill Seeder
X.R. Lü, X.L. Lü and L.H. Zhang 1668

Analysis of Metering and Billing Models of Private Pure Electric Vehicle Oriented Operation
J.Y. Lin, B. Li, C. Liu and Q.C. Chen 1672

A Successful Service Innovation Model for Shortening the Design Process
S. Bien, M.W. Hsu, J. Tsai and T. Lo 1678

Shaftless Driving Development Research on Sheet-Fed Offset Press
Y.B. Wei, H.Y. Zhang and C.G. Liu 1682

Analogical Transfer: A Practical Approach to Innovative Product Design
J. Zhang 1687

Improved Design of General Layout on Wide Format Thermal Transfer Printing Equipment
H.M. Sun, Q.L. Deng and J. Jing 1691

Selection of New Energy Vehicle Fuels and Life Cycle Assessment
W. Huang, X. Zhang and Z.Q. Hu 1695

Numerical Simulation and Experimental Study on Oil-Water Separation of Fiber Bundle Filter
Z.B. Liu, J. Tang, H. Wang and J. Mao 1699

A Short Analysis of the Interactive Design in the Modern Product Design
W. Si and L.L. Liu 1705

Study on Experimental Device of Removing TRS Gas with ClO_2
X.P. Song, Q.X. Xie, D.H. Liang, W.Q. Zhou, K. Huang, J.Z. Lin and W. Wei 1710

Design of Test Bench for Automotive Leaf Spring
K.M. Hao, W.B. Xu, B. Li and X.L. Feng 1718

Rearview Mirror Product Design Based on Reverse Engineering Technology
X. Zhang and S.S. Wang 1723

Conceptual Product Design Methodology through Functional Analysis
F.I. Romli, A.S. Mohd Rafie and S. Wiriadidjaja 1728

Research of Fuzzy Cost Model for Selective Disassembly Planning
Z.Q. Zhou, G.H. Dai and Z.R. Wu 1732

Design and Application of Online Calibration System for Automatic Verification Pipeline of Electric Energy Data Acquisition Terminal
L.J. Dong 1736

Evaluation of Abaya Design Using Thermal Manikin
S. Tashkandi, S. Kanesalingam and L.J. Wang 1744

Chapter 18: Advanced Manufacturing Technology

Research on Workstation-Oriented Production Logistics Optimization of Chinese Discrete Manufacturing Enterprises
L. Jiang and H.Y. Wang 1751

The Simulation and Optimization of Chain Tool Magazine Automatic Tool Change Process
Y.L. Yan, Y.C. Yin, Z. Xiong and L. Wu 1758

Information Fusion of Multi-Source Isomerous Nc Machining in Networked Manufacturing
P.Y. Liu, J.F. Wang and Y.H. Zhang 1762

Working Hours Calculation for CNC Milling Machining Center
Z.Q. Ma, M. Gu, P. Zhang, L. Sun and C.Q. Xia 1766

The Complexity in Assembly Manufacturing System
F. He and H.P. Zhu 1770

A Vision of Cloud Manufacturing Service Paradigm for Group Manufacturing Companies: A Tendency of Manufacturing Resources Sharing
J.T. Zhou 1776

Ergonomics Simulation and Application in Production Assembly Line
J.F. Liu and M. Chen 1780

Fiber Configuration of Air Jet Vortex Spinning Yarns
Y.H. Zhong, J.H. Ma and M.J. Xing 1784

Chapter 19: Computer Applications and Mathematical Modeling

Design and Implementation of Authentication Server with High Concurrency
Q. Xiong, X.F. He and J. Tang 1791

Research on Data Destruction Mechanism with Security Level in HDFS
J. Qin, Y.P. Zhang and P. Zong 1795

OD-Characterization of Symmetric Group S57
M. Yang 1799

Boost Keywords Conversion of Search Engine
Y.Y. Xu, P.J. Zou and Z. Fang 1803

Classify the Search Result Based on IBM OminiFind Edition and UIMA
J.X. Du, X.D. Sun and Z.M. Geng 1807

A Searching Algorithm for Path Test Data Generation
L.M. Jia, N. Li, Z.Y. Chen and W. Guo 1812

The Research of Software Testers Training Mode Based on O-Ring Theory
L.M. Jia, M.J. Zhou and Z.Y. Chen 1816

Based on .Net Platform Framework Construction of MCN
Q.H. Zhan 1820

A Comparison of Approaches to Opinion Mining
G. Wang and C.W. He 1824

Convergence of Wavelet Expansions at Generalized Continuous Points
S.G. Zhao and G. Tian 1828

Design on Virtual Machine Frame of Cloud Computing Platform
J. Wu, F.Z. Zhao and Y.D. Dong 1832

The Weakly Chain Transitive Maps
X. Meng 1836

The Research of Group Hierarchy Access Control in E-Government System
S.J. Qin and K.E. Li 1840

Research on Standard Domain and Non Standard Domain Based on SIP Protocol
L.P. Zhu, S.M. Jiang, Y.X. Zhu, J.Z. Zhang and W. He 1844

A Novel Method Based on Ant Colony Optimization for Gene Selection
G.D. Cui, G. Wang, Y. Li and J.Z. Fan 1850

The Application and Development of the Internet of Things in Intelligent Buildings
S.W. Ji, H.Y. Teng and J.F. Su 1854

Studying on the Industrial Competitiveness of Internet of Things in China's Provinces Based on Principal Component Analysis
J.J. Li, Y. Zhang and N. Ma 1858

Research the Influence of Entrepreneurs' Cognition on Dynamic Capability Based on Resources Restriction
X.Q. Zhu and Z.H. Du 1862

On the Dynamical Properties of the Sun-Earth-Moon Restricted Four Body Problem
Y.Y. Zhang, N. Li and Y.J. Li 1869

Construction of the Air Offensive Operation Battlefield Support System Based on the Internet of Things Technology
Z.F. Sun, X. Ma and D.X. Sun 1873

Structural Reliability Optimization Design Based on Artificial Neural Network
L.R. Sha and Y. Yang 1877

Software Design of Quartz Crystal Test and Sort System
Y. Wang, D. Li and Y.L. Wang 1881

Design and Analysis of Optimization Algorithm for a Class of Uncertain Linear System
H. Liu 1885

Study of Solutions for a Non-Newtonian Filtration Equation with Nonlocal Boundary Condition
J.B. Zhang and Y.Z. Gao 1889

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A. Al Owad, M.A. Karim and L. Ma 1893

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L.R. Sha and Y. Yang 1907

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J.X. Du, Z.M. Geng and X.D. Sun 1911

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A Lightweight-Leveled Software Automated Test Framework
J.P. Zhao, X.Y. Liu, H.M. Xi, L.Y. Xu, J.H. Zhao and H.M. Liu 1919

Chapter 20: Industrial Engineering and System Analysis

An Activity and Resource Advisory System for Manufacturing Process Chains Selection at the early Stage of Product Development
J. Suteja The, P.K.D.V. Yarlagadda, M.A. Karim and C. Yan 1927

Reliability Modeling and Availability Simulating Based on GSPN Considering Hardware, Software and Human Factors
Y.C. Xu, B. Dong, Y. Li, G.J. Shen and M.L. Luo 1932

Study on Manufacturing Enterprises Distribution Center Location
S.W. Ji, T.T. Huang and Y.F. Zhang 1938

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J.J. Chen and Y.S. Wu 1947

Non-Logistics Indicators Evaluation of Workshop Process Layout
Z.Q. Ma, D.Y. Wang, T. Wang, L. Sun, Q. Cheng and J. Wei 1952

Analysis and Application on Coupling Operation of Solar Water Heating-Boiling System
L.C. Gao, S.Q. Shen, Q.Y. Hao and J. Xiao 1956

Studies on Small Pieces of Cargo Distribution by Intercity Passenger Bus
S.W. Ji and N. Zhang 1963

Efficiency and Economy Research of a Tunnel Kiln's Flue Gas Heat Exchanger
J. Li, Y.H. Zhu and J. Sun 1967

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J.J. Chen, Y.X. Zhang and T.T. Huang 1972

Applying Lean Construction to Construction Project
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H.Z. Chen and S.S. Du 1984

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M.C. Xiong 1990

Study on Application of Combination Control Mode in Technological Transfer
M.C. Xiong 1994

Research on the Logistic Management under the Conditions of Industry Chain
M.C. Xiong 1998

An Economic Comparison between Electric and Conventional Vehicles Based on System Dynamics
J.Q. Xu, Y.P. Yang and R.S. Yin 2003

Chapter 21: Engineering Management and Engineering Education

Profit Allocation and Realization in Regional Technology Transfer Alliance Based on Game Theory
D. Hu and J.D. Yan 2011

Research on Core Competitiveness of Chinese Retail Industry Based on O2O
S.W. Ji, X.Y. Sun and D. Liu 2017

Research on Value Chain of China's Railway Oil Supply Chain
J.J. Chen, K. Yan and T.T. Huang 2021

Research on the Selection of Logistics Service Innovation Mode Based on Industrial Clusters
S.W. Ji, H. Li and H.W. Shi 2025

Analysis of Production Management System of Electronic Manufacturing Industry
H.Z. Yang, X.Y. Cao and B.Y. Cao 2029

Study on the Countermeasures of Aviation Equipment Maintenance Knowledge Management
L.Z. Xiao, Y.S. Cui, X.K. Wang, J.B. Liu and X.B. Xu 2033

Study on Situation and Countermeasures of College Students' Self-Employment
Y. Yao, X. Meng and Y.R. Yu 2037

The Cultivation of the Creative Talents of Normal University Based on Information Technology
M. Bie, W. Xiao and J.G. Liu 2041

The Construction of Engineering Projects Environmental Performance Auditing
X.N. Qu 2045

Patent Storage Research of Cooperation between S&T-Oriented Small-Micro Enterprises and Universities in University-Industry-Government Based on EPQ Model with Shortage
W.Q. Lin and S.B. Su 2049

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An Activity and Resource Advisory System for Manufacturing Process Chains Selection at the Early Stage of Product Development

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Abstract. Designers need to consider both the functional and production process requirements at the early stage of product development. A variety of the research works found in the literature has been proposed to assist designers in selecting the most viable manufacturing process chain. However, they do not provide any assistance for designers to evaluate the processes according to the particular circumstances of their company. This paper describes a framework of an Activity and Resource Advisory System (ARAS) that generates advice about the required activities and the possible resources for various manufacturing process chains. The system provides more insight, more flexibility, and a more holistic and suitable approach for designers to evaluate and then select the most viable manufacturing process chain at the early stage of product development.

Background

In designing a product, designers must not only consider the functional issues of a product, but also the production process issues at the early stage of product development. For that reason, designers should not only know various concepts that can be used to satisfy the functional requirements of a product, but also the various production processes that can be used to produce the product and its components. Designers are familiar with various concepts that can satisfy functional requirements of a product. However, it is difficult for them to select the most viable production process for the following reasons. First, there are a large number of existing manufacturing and assembly processes. Second, there is usually more than one process that can be used to manufacture the components and assemble them into a product. Third, most of the components and products require a sequence of process or process chain. Last, most designers are familiar with a very limited number of manufacturing and assembly processes. As a result, designers face the challenges of satisfying both functional and production process requirements.

In the next section, the work of various researchers on manufacturing process chains selection is reviewed. Then, this paper will describe a framework of an Activity and Resource Advisory System (ARAS) that is not only able to generate the viable manufacturing process chains, but also to assist designers in evaluating the viable manufacturing process chains at the early stage of product development. In the last section, conclusion is presented.

Literature Review

According to Lovatt and Shercliff, there are two approaches in selecting the manufacturing process [1]. In the first approach, the existing manufacturing processes are evaluated in parallel. It means that manufacturing processes are screened and eliminated based on all design requirements simultaneously. Then, the viable manufacturing processes, which meet all the design requirements, will be retrieved and suggested. In the other approach, the existing manufacturing processes are evaluated in sequence. The manufacturing processes are screened and eliminated stage by stage based on the design requirements until viable manufacturing processes are selected. Most of the research works found in the literature implement the sequential selection approach. Compared to the parallel

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approach, this approach allows greater detail to be shown at each stage and designers can access more refined manufacturing process information [1]. It allows designers to consider more information before selecting the most viable manufacturing process. However, the use of this approach requires more time during the selection process compared to the parallel approach.

A large number of manufacturing processes exist in practice. For that reason, they need to be classified into a hierarchy to make the selection process more organised and efficient. According to the classification proposed by Esawi and Ashby, there are four hierarchy levels of manufacturing processes, which are kingdom, family, class, and member [2]. The kingdom of manufacturing processes contains many families. Each family contains many classes. Lastly, each class has many members, which are characterised by a set of attributes. Most of the research selects the manufacturing process alternatives at the class-level. The lower the manufacturing process level, the more specific the information that is available. The more specific the information, the more accurately the manufacturing process can be ranked.

As already explained in the introduction, most of the components are rarely manufactured by only conducting a single process. Instead, they mostly require a sequence of processes or process chain. For that reason, it is necessary to generate viable manufacturing process chain alternatives instead of single process alternatives. Various research works found in the literature had been conducted to select and rank the viable manufacturing process chain alternatives. Esawi and Ashby considered the process chain at the conceptual design stage by combining the individual processes to build up the process chain [2]. This approach adds a considerable amount of complexity to the selection problem. To reduce the complexity, another suggested approach is to choose from common or widely used process alternatives, either single process or process chain [3]. Dimitrov, Wijck, Beer, and Dietrich propose a model to select the best process chain from several common process chains, which are unlikely to change in the near future [4]. They use a chart to show the most suitable process chain that meets the requirements. A similar approach is also proposed by Liu, Cui, Meng, and Li in their paper [5]. This approach can only be applied if several process chains can be used to manufacture a component and each process chain is always performed in the same sequence. Research by Gupta, Chen, Feng, and Sriram, develops a system that can generate advice about process sequences and material selection [6]. The approach first generates several combinations of primary processes and materials. Then, the approach adds secondary, tertiary and surface treatment processes into each combination based on the detailed form requirements and then constructs several process sequences. This research also provides the cost of each process at the generated process chains. Blanch, Ferrer, and Garcia-Romeu propose a model to build manufacturing process chains during the embodiment design phases [7]. First, a list of manufacturing processes that can satisfy most of or all design parameters and feature design parameters are generated. If there is at least one unresolved design parameter, a new list of processes will be added to the first process to create a process chain. The sequence of the process is defined by using manufacturing process sequencing rules. The output of this research work is a ranking of the manufacturing processes based on the estimated manufacturing cost.

None of the research gives designers more insight than just a ranked list of viable manufacturing processes or process chain. They do not give any understanding of the influence of the design requirements to the ranking criteria. This understanding is useful when a trade-off is required in selecting the manufacturing processes. The existing research uses fixed data and assumptions to determine the rank. None gives any flexibility to designers in adjusting the data or assumptions. This approach could lead to an error in ranking the manufacturing process if the ranking is based on data or assumptions that are not matched with the actual situation of the company. Another weakness of the research described above is that most concerned only with the economical aspects, especially the manufacturing cost, to rank the viable manufacturing process chains. To calculate the manufacturing cost, most of the research uses the traditional cost estimation method. The traditional cost estimation method is simple to use, but could result in undercosting or overcosting. Last, only manufacturing process information is taken into consideration to rank the viable manufacturing process chains. As

process chain comprises a sequence of processes, information such as how to do the material handling and how to store a work-in-process component also needs to be considered.

In summary, none of the research has provided any assistance for designers to evaluate the manufacturing process chains according to their particular circumstances. For that reason, it is important to develop a system that is not only able to select the most viable manufacturing process, but also assist designers to evaluate them according to their individual situations.

A Framework of Activity and Resource Advisory System

This paper describes a framework of Activity and Resource Advisory System (ARAS) that not only generates a list of viable manufacturing process chains, but also advice about the required activities and the possible resources for each process chain. The aim of the system is not to provide the ranking of the manufacturing process chains, but to assist designers in evaluating the manufacturing process chains at the early stage of product development. At the early stage of product development, there is only a rough idea of the shape, material and scale of production [3]. Therefore, the inputs of the system are production volume, material, main shape, envelope size, minimum thickness, and additional features of a component. Size tolerance, surface roughness, material properties, and surface finish can be inputted if it is required. In developing the system, manufacturing processes are classified into primary, secondary, and tertiary types according to classification by Esawi and Ashby [2]. A primary type forms the shape to a component. A secondary type modifies and adds a feature to an already shaped component. Finally, a tertiary type adds quality to a component without affecting its shape and the feature geometry. The system consists of the member-level primary, secondary, and tertiary manufacturing processes databases, which are viable for various materials, production volumes, main shapes, common shapes of raw material, additional features, size tolerance, surface roughness, material properties, and surface finish. It also consists of activity and resource databases for various manufacturing processes. In addition to these databases, the system implements a knowledge-based system to generate the viable manufacturing process chains.

Figure 1 shows the framework of the system. The framework consists of the following steps:

- Step 1. Generate all primary processes that can be used to form the required main shape of a component with its material, envelope size, and minimum thickness in the required production volume.
- Step 2. Generate all secondary processes that can be used to modify the common shape of raw material into the required main shape of the component with its material, envelope size, minimum thickness, and size tolerance in the required production volume.
- Step 3. Generate all primary processes that can be used to add the additional features to the already shaped component.
- Step 4. Generate all secondary processes that can be used to add the additional features to the already shaped component.
- Step 5. Generate all tertiary processes that can be used to achieve the required size tolerance of the component and achieve its required surface roughness if it is not achieved without affecting the shape and features geometry of the component.
- Step 6. Generate all tertiary processes that can be used to achieve the required material properties and improve surface finish of the component without affecting the shape, features geometry, size tolerance, and surface roughness of the component.
- Step 7. Create a list of viable manufacturing process chains. First, the system starts listing the generated processes from Steps 1 and 2. Then, the system adds the generated processes from Steps 3 and 4 as the second process, third process, and so on in process chains. If the same process is generated from Step 1 and Step 3, then the system only list the first process from Step 1. The system also performs a similar action for Steps 2 and 4. After that, the system adds the generated process from Steps 5 and 6 sequentially. The generated process from Steps 5 and 6 will not be added on the list if the required size tolerance, surface roughness, material properties, and surface finish are already achieved in the previous step.

- Step 8. Generate the required activities for each viable manufacturing process chain and possible resources that can be used to perform each activity.

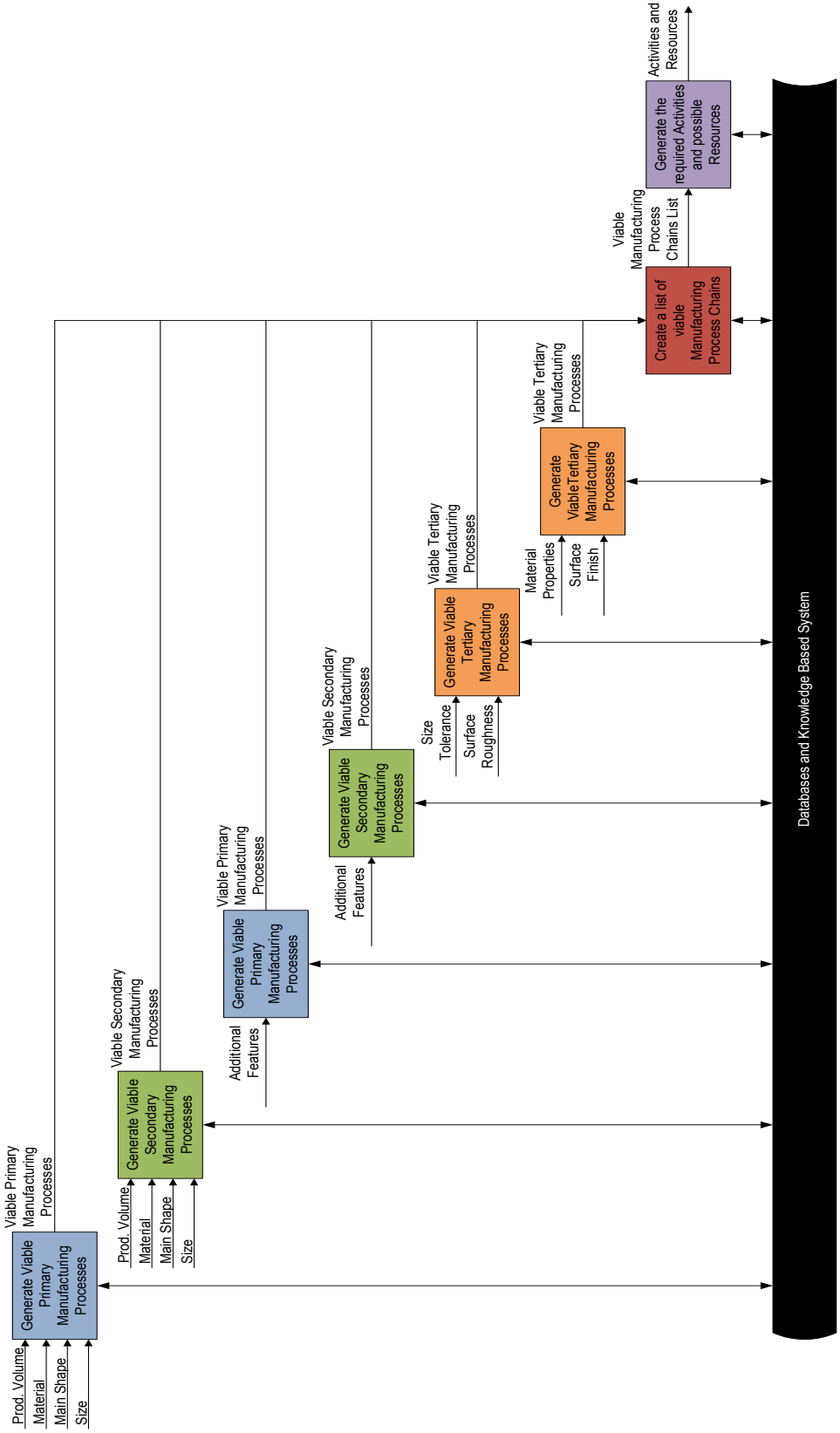

Fig. 1. Activity and Resource Advisory System Framework

The Activity and Resource Advisory System uses a different approach to systems found in other research for selecting the process chains. In selecting the manufacturing processes, the system implements a combination of the parallel and sequential selection approaches. The system accommodates the common shape of the existing raw material in selecting the process chains as outlined in Step 2. The viable manufacturing process alternatives are selected at the member-level instead of the class-level. In addition, the system generates the activity and resource advice for various process chains instead of a ranked list of the process chains.

The activity and resource advice generated by the system are useful for designers when making a trade-off. Designers can adjust the activity and resource data or assumptions to match with the actual situation of the company. By using this advice, the designers can evaluate the process chains based not only on the cost aspect, but also other aspects, such as the resource availability and environmental aspects. The system can be integrated with the existing Activity Based Costing System in order to estimate the manufacturing cost more accurately. Designers can evaluate the process chains based not only on manufacturing process activities, but also other activities between the processes, such as material handling and storage activities.

Conclusion

The Activity and Resource Advisory System (ARAS) is able to generate not only the list of viable manufacturing process chains, but also advice about the required activities and the possible resources for various manufacturing process chains. The system provides more insight, more flexibility, and a more holistic and suitable approach for designers to evaluate and then select the most viable manufacturing process chain at the early stage of product development.

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