



Convolving Directed Graph Edges via Hodge Laplacian for Brain Network Analysis

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Abstract. A brain network, viewed as a graph wiring different regions of interest (ROIs) in the brain, has been widely used to investigate brain dysfunction with various graph neural networks (GNNs). However, existing GNNs are built upon graph convolution that transforms measurements on the nodes, where ROI-wise features are not always guaranteed for brain networks. Therefore, the majority of existing graph analysis methods that rely on node features are inapplicable for network analysis unless a proxy such as node degree is provided. Moreover, the complex neurological interactions across different brain regions cannot be directly expressed in a simple node-to-node (i.e., 0-simplex) representation. In this paper, we propose a novel method, Hodge-Graph Neural Network (Hodge-GNN), that allows the GNN to directly derive desirable representations of graph edges and capture complex edge-wise topological features spatially via the Hodge Laplacian. Specifically, representing a graph as a simplicial complex holds a significant advantage over conventional methods that extract higher-order connectivity of a graph through hierarchical convolution in the spatial domain or graph transformation. The superiority of our method is validated in the Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) study, in comparison to benchmarking GNNs as well as state-of-the-art graph classification models.

Keywords: Hodge Laplacian · Brain Network · Alzheimer’s Disease

1 Introduction

The wiring system within the human brain can be modeled as a complex graph, where the anatomical regions of interest (ROIs) are represented as nodes, and

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the white matter connectomes define edges between them [9, 18]. The graph-based representation explains actual connections between different nodes, and thus brain network analysis has a significant advantage over traditional spatial analysis to investigate interactions of different ROIs. As various neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) are understood as a disconnection syndrome [2, 9], studies on the structural connectivities in the brain are of significant interest from both machine learning and clinical perspectives.

Recently, variants of graph neural networks (GNNs) have been successful in brain network analysis with feature aggregation and message-passing mechanism on graph nodes [4, 5, 18]. Notice that, regardless of whether it is spatial or spectral, existing methods heavily rely on graph convolution that operates with the node signals (i.e., ROI measures). Here, the topology of graph plays an indirect role as the domain of the signal, merely selecting specific neighborhood for feature aggregation. The problem becomes even more severe when it comes to actual connectivity analysis *without* ROI-wise measurements. To utilize GNN methods, auxiliary node-wise measures such as node degree and clustering coefficients are required to perform prediction tasks on the brain networks, and the contribution of connectomic features as a biomarker is often not fully investigated. To perform convolution on edges directly, heuristics such as line graph [15] or defining orthogonal matrices from graph Laplacian [21] exists, but they have disadvantages when the graph is directed or has many components.

In order to analyze the connectivity of brain networks directly, we propose a novel graph learning framework that allows a neural network to utilize the topological features by representing the brain network as a simplicial complex. We utilize the Hodge 1-Laplacian, i.e., \mathcal{L}_1 ; in geometry, the 1-simplex denotes a line segment, and the Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_1 includes connection between different line segments (i.e., edges) in a graph depending on their directions. Leveraging the Hodge Laplacian lets us obtain directed relationships between graph edges (i.e., a brain network) as an undirected graph (i.e., Hodge Laplacian), and the edge weights in the original graph become a signal on the nodes comprehended by the Hodge Laplacian. Spatial convolution with the \mathcal{L}_1 combines directed edge weights of the original graph based on the nodes that they are sharing. Together with a spatial graph convolution formulation, we construct our Hodge-Graph Neural Network (Hodge-GNN) which predicts labels of graphs purely based on the topology of the graphs without any node measures.

The **contributions** of our work are **1)** proposing a novel graph edge-learning framework on higher-order connectivity (i.e., connectivity between edges) of graphs with Hodge Laplacian, **2)** defining spatial edge convolution layer that operates on graph edges directly, and **3)** demonstrating superior performance on graph classification with brain connectivity from Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) with interpretability. Using Hodge-GNN, we depict brain connectivities that are highly associated with AD classification, which are corroborated by prior AD literature.

2 Related Work

Higher-order connectivity in Spatial domain. To capture the relation of higher-order graph structures, Morris et al. [24,25] proposed hierarchical k -GNNs, which are hierarchical GNN architectures based on the k -dimensional Weisfeiler-Lehman (WL) algorithm. By performing message passing directly between subgraph structures, k -GNNs enable the network to capture structural information that is not observable at the node-level. Despite their superiority over 1-GNN, k -GNNs require large memory and high computational cost due to their stacking of models, showing limitation in scalability and effectiveness on large graphs. The authors in [4] define range with diffusion instead of hop-distances and train on the range to obtain desirable node-embeddings.

Line Graphs. Line graph transformation interchanges the nodes and edges in the original graph respectively, allowing the node-wise graph convolution to be performed edge-wise, which makes the learning of edge-embeddings feasible [15]. However, line graphs lack the property of injectivity, which implies that different graphs can be transformed into a same line graph.

Edge Convolution. [30] performed *edge convolution* by creating edge-embeddings from neighboring pair of point clouds. However, the suggested method requires node features to generate the edge-embeddings without any graph prior, and thus it requires rich node features to construct strong embeddings.

Spectral Filtering of Graph Edges. Huang et al. [14] defined spectral filters for graph signals of nodes and edges using the k -th Hodge Laplacian (HL) operators, i.e., HL-node and HL-edge, and showed effectiveness of capturing the edge-wise relation in heterogeneous brain functional networks. The authors in [21] performed kernel filtering in the spectral domain with a specialized orthonormal graph transform.

3 Preliminaries: Simplicial Complex Representation

A simplicial complex is a collection of simplices with various dimensional representations, where simplices refer to the basic blocks to represent objects in topological space. In detail, each simplex of various dimension can be seen as nodes (0-simplex), edges (1-simplex), triangles (2-simplex), and other higher dimensional counterparts. A simplicial complex composed of only 0-simplices is called a 0-skeleton, likewise, p -skeleton is composed of 0 to p -simplices. A graph, therefore, is a 1-skeleton with 0- and 1-simplices (nodes and edges) [1, 14, 19].

In a simplicial complex, a p -chain is defined as a sum of p -simplices, denoted as $c = \sum_i \alpha_i \sigma^i$, where σ^i are the p -simplices and the α_i are either 0 or 1 [8]. A chain complex is defined as the sequence of groups, each of which is made

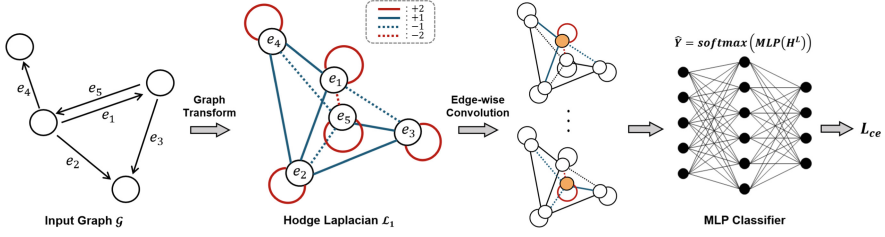


Fig. 1. The overall process of the proposed method: 1) deriving Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_1 from input graph \mathcal{G} . 2) edge-wise graph convolution on e with \mathcal{L}_1 . 3) Each edge (orange node) aggregates the information of neighboring edges in different weights given by \mathcal{L}_1 . 4) MLP takes edge-convolved features as an input and is updated by the loss.

up of p -chains. To represent the relationship between chain groups, a boundary operator $\partial_p : C_p \rightarrow C_{p-1}$ is defined. Here, C_p denotes the p -th chain group, and the boundary operator ∂_p maps p -simplex to its boundaries $((p-1)$ -simplex). For an oriented p -simplex σ^p , the boundary operator can be defined as

$$\partial_p(\sigma^p) = \sum_{i=0}^p (-1)^i [v_0, v_1, \dots, \hat{v}_i, \dots, v_p], \quad (1)$$

where $[v_0, v_1, \dots, \hat{v}_i, \dots, v_p]$ is a $(p-1)$ -simplex that is created by removing the vertex \hat{v}_i from the p -simplex $\sigma^p = [v_0, v_1, \dots, v_p]$ [1]. Also, the boundary operator ∂_p is represented using a boundary matrix \mathcal{B}_p to facilitate efficient computation of the Hodge Laplacian. The p -th boundary matrix \mathcal{B}_p can be defined as [23],

$$\mathcal{B}_p(i, j) = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } \sigma_i^{p-1} \subset \sigma_j^p \text{ and } \sigma_i^{p-1} \sim \sigma_j^p \\ -1, & \text{if } \sigma_i^{p-1} \subset \sigma_j^p \text{ and } \sigma_i^{p-1} \approx \sigma_j^p \\ 0, & \text{if } \sigma_i^{p-1} \not\subset \sigma_j^p \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

where σ_i^p is the i -th p -simplex, and \sim and \approx denote similar and dissimilar orientations respectively. The boundary matrix \mathcal{B}_p relates the two adjacent simplices, i.e., p - and $(p-1)$ -simplex, which will be used to define the Hodge Laplacian for higher-order graph representation in Sec. 4.1.

4 Proposed Method

The proposed method is composed of two components; graph transformation of adjacency matrix to Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_1 with edge-wise features, and edge-wise graph convolution using the \mathcal{L}_1 . With the traditional graph convolution formulation, the network can conduct transform of topological features directly instead of using them as indirect measures in previous GNNs.

4.1 Hodge Laplacian of Brain Network Data

Let $\mathcal{G} = (\mathcal{V}, \mathcal{E})$ be a directed weighted graph, where \mathcal{V} is a set of nodes, and \mathcal{E} is a set of directed edges consisting of ordered tuples, (u, v) , s.t. $u, v \in \mathcal{V}$, which denotes an edge from u to v . \mathcal{E} is indexed with $\{e_i\}_{i=1}^E$, $|\mathcal{E}| = E$ is the number of edges, and $|\mathcal{V}| = N$ is the number of nodes.

Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_p , also known as the p -Laplacian is a generalization of graph Laplacian on higher simplices, i.e., nodes (0-simplices) to p -simplices. The Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_p is defined using the $\mathcal{B}_p(i, j)$ in Eq. (2) as:

$$\mathcal{L}_p = \mathcal{B}_p^T \mathcal{B}_p + \mathcal{B}_{p+1} \mathcal{B}_{p+1}^T. \quad (3)$$

From Eq. (3), the Hodge 0-Laplacian, \mathcal{L}_0 , is equivalent to graph Laplacian, defined as $\mathcal{L}_0 = \mathcal{B}_1 \mathcal{B}_1^T$, where $\mathcal{B}_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times E}$ is a boundary matrix for the 1-simplex, i.e., an incidence matrix relating nodes to edges.

To enable the graph representation to hold connectivity over edges, we construct Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_1 . As a 1-skeleton, i.e. topological graph, is composed of 0 and 1 simplex only (i.e., $\mathcal{B}_2 = 0$), the $\mathcal{L}_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{E \times E}$ is derived as:

$$\mathcal{L}_1 = \mathcal{B}_1^T \mathcal{B}_1. \quad (4)$$

Considering the vertices $u, v, t \in \mathcal{V}$, s.t. $u \neq v \neq t$, each element $\mathcal{L}_1(i, j)$ is defined as:

$$\mathcal{L}_1(i, j) = \begin{cases} 2 & e_i = e_j \\ -2 & e_i = (u, v), e_j = (v, u) \\ 1 & (e_i = (u, v), e_j = (u, t)) \text{ or } (e_i = (u, v), e_j = (t, v)) \\ -1 & (e_i = (u, v), e_j = (t, u)) \text{ or } (e_i = (u, v), e_j = (v, t)) \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (5)$$

A directed weighted graph \mathcal{G} can be represented as a binary adjacency matrix $A \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ and a weight matrix $\mathcal{W} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ for A . Since \mathcal{W} holds features for each edge, we can extract the non-zero components of \mathcal{W} , which serves as a signal $\mathcal{W}_{\mathcal{E}} \in \mathbb{R}^E$ on \mathcal{L}_1 .

4.2 Convolving Graph Edges via Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_1

GCN [31] performs aggregation of the neighboring node features as:

$$H^{(l+1)} = \sigma(AH^{(l)}W^{(l)}), \quad l = 0, \dots, L, \quad (6)$$

where $A \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ is an adjacency matrix, and $W^{(l)}$ is a parameter matrix of the l -th layer. $H^{(l)} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times K}$ is the output of the l -th convolution layer with K features, where $H^{(0)}$ is the input of node feature vectors, and $\sigma(\cdot)$ is a non-linear activation function. From a spatial perspective, the graph convolution relates the neighboring node features to generate the node embedding utilizing the adjacency matrix as a relational matrix that provides the direct neighboring information.

From a weighted adjacency matrix $A \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$, we can extract Hodge Laplacian $\mathcal{L}_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{E \times E}$ and $W_{\mathcal{E}}$ which is a vector of edge weights considered as measurements on the nodes of \mathcal{L}_1 . With \mathcal{L}_1 , we construct a Hodge graph neural network (Hodge-GNN) whose l -th layer is defined as:

$$H^{(l+1)} = \sigma(\mathcal{L}_1 H^{(l)} W^{(l)}), \quad l = 0, \dots, L, \quad (7)$$

where $W^{(l)}$ is a learnable weight parameter and $H^{(l)} \in \mathbb{R}^{E \times K}$ is the output from the l -th convolution layer, with $H^{(0)} = W_{\mathcal{E}}$. The key component here is $\mathcal{L}_1 H^{(l)}$, described as Edge-wise Convolution in Fig. 1.

When it comes to graph analysis, most of existing GNN methods assume that features on the nodes exist for node-wise analysis. However, when the measurements on the nodes do not exist, and the analysis must be performed solely with the graph topology and edge information, other GNN methods must define an auxiliary node-wise measures such as node degree and clustering coefficients. Unlike the previous approaches, our framework enables the information from adjacent edges to be given different weights, either positive or negative, depending on the topology of the graph, and the edge-wise convolution can now relate the edge features and generate edge embeddings, allowing the network to utilize the hidden topological features that were not seen in the original input graph form.

Finally, the class prediction \hat{Y}^c for each class c is obtained by flattening the $H^{(L)} \in \mathbb{R}^{E \times K}$ and passing it through multi-layer perceptron (MLP), and applying a softmax yields

$$\hat{Y}^c = \frac{\text{MLP}(H^{(L)})^c}{\sum_{c' \in C} \text{MLP}(H^{(L)})^{c'}}. \quad (8)$$

The objective function defined by cross-entropy over all T samples is:

$$L_{ce} = - \sum_{t=1}^T \sum_{c \in C} Y_t^c \log \hat{Y}_t^c, \quad (9)$$

where $Y_t^c = 1$ if the class of t -th graph is c , otherwise $Y_t^c = 0$.

4.3 Interpretability of the Connectomes in Brain Dysfunction

To provide interpretability to the framework, we define gradient-based class activation map on the graph edges using the formulation in [27, 33]. Specifically, when a graph (i.e., \mathcal{L}_1 and $W_{\mathcal{E}}$) is inputted to the network, by tracking the backpropagating gradients of the score for a specific class c (i.e., \hat{Y}^c) with regard to each feature vectors $H^k \in \mathbb{R}^{E \times 1}$ of the final convolution layer of GNN (i.e., $H^{(L)}$) [27], the importance of each activation α_k^c and the heatmap \mathcal{H} of the specific class c can be computed as:

$$\mathcal{H}^c = \text{ReLU} \left(\frac{1}{K} \sum_k \alpha_k^c H^k \right), \quad \alpha_k^c = \frac{1}{Z} \sum_i \sum_j \left(\frac{\partial \hat{Y}^c}{\partial H_{ij}^k} \right). \quad (10)$$

Performing the edge-wise convolution from Hodge Laplacian \mathcal{L}_1 , this heatmap \mathcal{H}^c holds the contribution of each connectome to the classification of developmental stages in brain dysfunction (i.e., Alzheimer's Disease).

5 Experiments

5.1 Dataset and Experimental Settings

Dataset. Our dataset contains structural brain connectivity data derived from Diffusion Tensor Images (DTI) in Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) with tractography. Each sample is given as a directed weighted graph whose weights denote the *number of white matter fiber tracts* connecting two different ROIs and its corresponding diagnostic label. The ROIs and their connectomes were defined by the Destrieux atlas [7] with 148 cortical and 12 sub-cortical ROIs. As tractography involves probabilistic calculation, the connectivity matrix becomes non-symmetric with varying weights on the same connectivity matrices. The dataset is composed of $n=1824$ subjects within Control (CN, $n=844$), Early Mild Cognitive Impairment (EMCI, $n=490$), Late Mild Cognitive Impairment (LMCI, $n=250$), and AD ($n=240$) groups.

Table 1. Quantitative Comparison of Hodge-GNN with Baselines.

	Methods	Accuracy	Precision	Recall	F1-score
Conventional	SVM	58.31 ± 1.40	70.67 ± 3.44	44.49 ± 1.57	46.94 ± 2.36
	SLP	71.42 ± 3.42	68.91 ± 4.46	70.27 ± 3.39	69.16 ± 3.99
	MLP	72.41 ± 1.14	73.66 ± 1.29	67.47 ± 2.59	69.45 ± 1.22
	GCN (\mathcal{G}) [31]	70.16 ± 1.82	67.67 ± 2.46	66.82 ± 1.30	67.00 ± 1.88
	GCN (\mathcal{G}_L)	80.85 ± 3.10	81.21 ± 3.34	77.55 ± 2.93	79.09 ± 3.10
Spatial domain	1-2-GNN [25]	73.58 ± 1.12	71.44 ± 0.87	71.31 ± 1.41	71.15 ± 0.43
	1-2-3-GNN [25]	73.81 ± 1.91	72.39 ± 1.82	71.04 ± 2.64	71.25 ± 1.51
Spectral domain	MENET [21]	80.47 ± 1.82	79.30 ± 0.69	77.09 ± 1.59	77.92 ± 1.12
Edge Convolution	DGCNN [30]	72.61 ± 2.01	69.69 ± 2.29	69.11 ± 1.51	69.11 ± 1.90
Ours	Hodge-GNN	83.60 ± 1.93	84.75 ± 2.19	80.10 ± 1.87	82.03 ± 1.93

Edge Preprocessing. Unlike the widely used $A \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$ or $\mathcal{L}_0 \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times N}$, the adoption of $\mathcal{L}_1 \in \mathbb{R}^{E \times E}$ incurs an exponential rise in both memory and computational costs. Also, the E across different samples varies from 2138 to 11802 (6766 in average). To handle such problems, we used the intersection of edges across entire samples. This preprocessing step yields the number of edges to be $E = 530$, common across all subjects.

Baselines. Our method is validated on various approaches, including conventional classification methods, neural networks, and graph methods of both spatial and spectral domain. In detail, we used support vector machine (SVM), single layer perceptron (SLP), multi-layer perceptron (MLP), and GCN [31] with original graph \mathcal{G} and line graph \mathcal{G}_L as the conventional classification method, as well as the hierarchical k -GNNs (1-2-GNN, 1-2-3-GNN) [25] and MENET [21] for spatial and spectral baselines respectively. Also, DGCNN [30] which extracts edge-embeddings with edge convolution from node features is compared as well.

Evaluation. 4-way classification is performed on the AD-specific groups. All models are evaluated using 5-fold cross validation (CV) for unbiased results. On the 4-way classification task for AD-specific groups, average accuracy, Macro-precision, Macro-recall, and Macro-F1-score (Table 1) are compared. Qualitative results of our experiment reveal the important connectivities in classifying AD stages (Fig. 2) from the trained model.

5.2 Experimental Results

Our Hodge-GNN is evaluated based on the 4-way classification of CN, EMCI, LMCI, and AD. The quantitative comparisons are shown in Tab. 1. As k -GNN, MEMET, and GCN with \mathcal{G}_L capture higher-order connectivity information, they performed better than the conventional GCN with \mathcal{G} . However, Hodge-GNN was more effective in the AD classification, achieving the highest performance in all measures by $\sim 3\%$ p over the second best method.

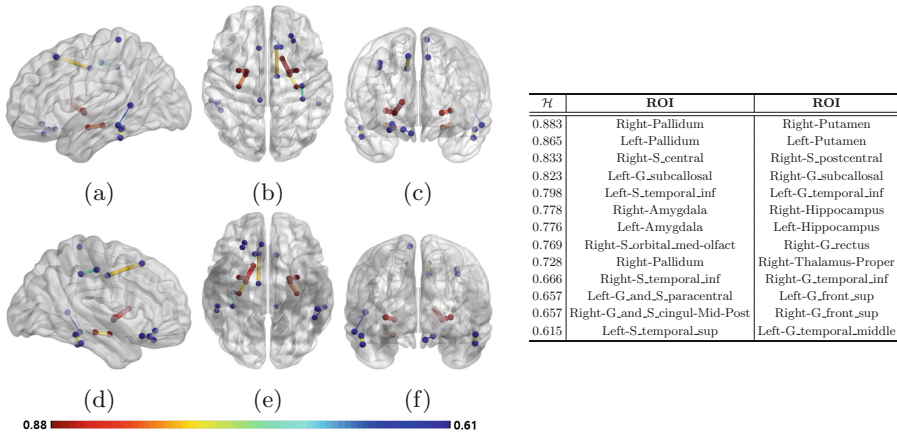


Fig. 2. Significant edges depicted from the AD analysis; (a),(d) outer view of left/right hemisphere, (b),(e) top/bottom, (c),(f) front/rear view. Blue node: cortical, Red node: subcortical region, Edge color/thickness denote class activation \mathcal{H} from Eq. (10) (Color figure online)).

5.3 Interpretation of AD via Trained Hodge-GNN

Using the computed importance from Eq. (10), significant edges for classifying the stages of Alzheimer’s Disease are depicted (Fig. 2). The significant edges are selected by taking intersection of the top- k edges for each class label. The top- k edges are the distinct edges obtained from the top-10 edges across the 5-fold cross validation. Thus, the selected edges represent common edges that shows high importance for classifying the brain dysfunction. During the progress of AD, ROIs of the brain show not only the shrinkage of volume but also weakening of connectivity [2,6]. As in Fig. 2, our classifier picked up connectome of ROIs in

the subcortical regions (i.e., amygdala, hippocampus, pallidum, putamen, and thalamus) [3, 10, 26], temporal lobe (i.e., inferior, middle, and superior temporal cortex) [3, 10, 11], frontal lobe (i.e., superior frontal gyrus) [10, 16], and other important regions that are highly related to AD [12, 20].

In addition, the depicted edges showed several symmetry found in both left and right hemispheres, such as pallidum-putamen and amygdala-hippocampus connectomes, both of which play a crucial role in the development of AD [13, 29, 32]. Interestingly, right pallidum was shared on two detected connectivities (i.e., with right-putamen and right-thalamus-proper), which highlights the importance of pallidum connectomes [17]. Also, out of the 17 ROIs consisting the detected connectivities, 5 ROIs (pallidum, amygdala, putamen, hippocampus, and thalamus) were from subcortical regions, denoting that they are critical for our AD-stage classification and subcortical areas are highly implicated in AD as in prior works [22, 28].

6 Conclusion

We proposed a novel framework for extracting edge-to-edge relations in graph spatial domain using Hodge 1-Laplacian, i.e., Hodge-GNN. The Hodge-GNN performs graph convolution on edges via shared nodes among edges and allows a downstream predictor to accurately classify different stages of AD. The validation experiment showed superiority of performance in prediction together with interpretable outcomes depicting specific connectomes and ROIs for effective AD analysis.

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Author Index

A

Abrigo, Jill 715
Ahn, Sun Ho 515
Aizenberg, Natalie 590
Almeida, Silvia D. 33
Anderson, Stephan W. 768
Arbel, Tal 472
Arnold, Douglas L. 472
Atalay, Michael K. 515

B

Bacchi, Stephen 696
Bai, Harrison 515
Bai, Xiaoyu 72
Bercea, Cosmin I. 293, 304
Bian, Yueyan 558
Biederer, Jürgen 33
Bird, Alix 696
Bittman, Mark 663
Braren, Rickmer 420

C

Cai, Hongmin 230
Cao, Hanqun 579
Caron, Mathilde 569
Castro-Macías, Francisco M. 327
Chan, Nga Yan 715
Chandra, Shekhar S. 368
Che, Haoxuan 430
Chen, Boyan 23
Chen, Cheng 493, 715
Chen, Danny Z. 315
Chen, Ding-Jie 252
Chen, Guangyong 579
Chen, Hao 430
Chen, Jiazhou 230
Chen, Lei 3
Chen, Pu 526
Chen, Qiang 504

Chen, Ruidi 768
Chen, Shouyu 462
Chen, Xiangmei 526
Chen, Xin 146, 199
Cheng, Jian 632
Cheng, Jun 642
Cheng, Yanxiang 338
Cheng, Yuhan 430
Chin, Bennett 116
Cho, Jungchan 537
Choi, Sang Tae 537
Choi, Sang-Il 537
Chong, Joanna Su Xian 348
Chung, Moo K. 789
Cohen, Regev 569
Crozier, Stuart 368
Cui, Dingnan 622
Cui, Shuguang 44
Cui, Zhiming 136

D

Dai, Ning 526
Dai, Yuting 441
Deng, Xin 526
Derakhshani, Mohammad Mahdi 726
Di Veroli, Benjamin 106
Diab, Khassan 652
Ding, Ying 663
Ditt, Hendrik 737
Domingo, Enric 758
Dong, Bin 146, 241
Dong, Hexin 146, 241
Dong, Zijian 348
Dou, Qi 579, 715
Du, Lei 622
Du, Yu 706
Duan, Xiaoyu 63
Durrleman, Stanley 601
Durso-Finley, Joshua 472

E

Eilertsen, Gabriel 157
 Engstrom, Craig 368
 Escalon, Joanna G. 663

F

Falet, Jean-Pierre 472
 Fang, Tao 358
 Fang, Yanshu 706
 Fang, Yu 136
 Farris, Chad W. 768
 Fayad, Fayez H. 515
 Felder, Federico 13
 Feng, Yuying 220
 Feng, Zhijie 83
 Fournier, Nemo 601
 Freedman, Daniel 569
 Fu, Yibing 526
 Fuh, Chiou-Shann 252

G

Gao, Jin 272
 Gao, Xinbo 515
 Gao, Yuan 72
 Gao, Zheyao 178
 Garvin, Stina 157
 Ge, Zongyuan 210, 368
 Ghosh, Debashis 116
 Golany, Tomer 569
 Goldenberg, Roman 569, 590
 Gong, Haifan 547
 Gong, Yuqi 715
 Gu, Pengfei 315
 Guo, Dan 778
 Guo, Jianfei 199
 Guo, Lei 622
 Guo, Miaotian 283
 Guo, Xin 462

H

Han, Chu 715
 Han, Junwei 622
 Han, Xiaoguang 3, 83
 Hanna, Maria 663
 Hao, Boran 768
 Hatsutani, Taro 611
 He, Junjun 632
 Heng, Pheng-Ann 579
 Heussel, Claus P. 33

Hirsch, Roy 569
 Holste, Gregory 663
 Hou, Zeyi 482
 Huang, Bin 63
 Huang, Bingsheng 63
 Huang, Han 642
 Huang, Junzhou 674
 Huang, Kun 504
 Huang, Yaping 399
 Hwang, Yechan 789

I

Ichinose, Akimichi 611
 Iizuka, Satoshi 611
 Intrator, Yotam 590

J

Jäger, Paul F. 33
 Jaiswal, Ajay 663
 Jannes, Jim 696
 Jenkinson, Mark 696
 Ji, Zexuan 504
 Jiang, Lai 526
 Jiang, Yicheng 3
 Jiang, Yuncheng 44
 Jiang, Ziyu 663
 Jiao, Zhicheng 515
 Jin, Chao 220
 Jin, Haibo 430
 Jin, Ruiyang 94
 Jin, Yueming 348
 Jiraskova, Petra 420
 Joskowicz, Leo 106

K

Kang, Luoyao 547
 Katsaggelos, Aggelos K. 327
 Ke, Jing 379
 Keicher, Matthias 409, 420
 Kido, Shoji 611
 Kim, Junha 389
 Kim, Minjeong 389, 789
 Kim, Seon Ho 537
 Kim, Taesoo 389
 Kim, Won Hwa 789
 Kitamura, Yoshiro 611
 Kleinig, Timothy 696

Koelzer, Viktor H. 758
 Kooi, Thijs 389
 Kulkarni, Shreyas 515
 Kwan, Patrick 210

L

Lafarge, Maxime W. 758
 Lang, Ning 482
 Lao, Qicheng 283
 Lederman, Richard 106
 Lee, Go-Eun 537
 Lee, Hyeonsoo 389
 Legasto, Alan C. 663
 Lei, Baiying 558
 Lei, Haijun 558
 Lei, Meng 441
 Li, Ao 358
 Li, Chaoyi 747
 Li, Chichi 706
 Li, Chunli 72
 Li, Cong 23
 Li, Fei 63
 Li, Guanbin 3, 44, 83
 Li, Han 94
 Li, Haofeng 547
 Li, Jie 515
 Li, Jinpeng 579
 Li, Junyu 642
 Li, Meng 747
 Li, Quanzheng 493
 Li, Shangxuan 706
 Li, Shuo 338
 Li, Xianjun 220
 Li, Yang 515
 Li, Youhao 452
 Li, Zhen 44
 Lian, Chunfeng 220
 Litwiller, Daniel 116
 Liu, Furui 579
 Liu, Linfeng 368
 Liu, Siqi 3, 83
 Liu, Siyu 368
 Liu, Tianming 674
 Liu, Wei 358
 Liu, Yong 452
 Liu, Yuanye 178
 Liu, Zaiyi 146, 199, 241, 715
 Liu, Zhentao 136
 Livne, Amir 569, 590
 Lloret Carbonell, Eduard 379

López Diez, Paula 652
 Lourentzou, Ismini 685
 Lovell, Brian C. 747
 Lu, Hong 241
 Lu, Le 72, 146, 199, 241
 Lu, Zhiyong 189
 Lundström, Claes 157
 Luo, Jie 493
 Luo, Yin 358
 Luo, Yu 127
 Lüth, Carsten T. 33

M

Ma, Kai 168
 Ma, Wenao 715
 Ma, Xiao 504
 Maier, Andreas 737
 Maier-Hein, Klaus H. 33
 Mak, Calvin Hoi-Kwan 715
 Margeta, Jan 652
 Mathai, Tejas Sudharshan 189
 Matthews, Thomas Paul 778
 Maughan, Timothy S. 758
 Mbakwe, Amarachi B. 685
 Mehta, Deval 210
 Mehta, Raghav 472
 Men, Aidong 283
 Min, Xuhong 358
 Minkowitz, Shlomo 663
 Molina, Rafael 327
 Moradi, Mehdi 685
 Morales-Álvarez, Pablo 327
 Mukherjee, Pritam 189

N

Na, Saiyang 674
 Najdenkoska, Ivona 726
 Nakamura, Keigo 611
 Nan, Yang 13
 Nasrallah, Fatima 368
 Navab, Nassir 409, 420
 Ni, Dong 642
 Nolden, Marco 33
 Norajitra, Tobias 33

O

O'Brien, Terence 210
 Oakden-Rayner, Lauren 696
 Özsoy, Ege 409, 420

P

Palmer, Lyle J 696
 Pan, Sai 526
 Papanastasiou, Giorgos 13
 Park, Eunkyung 389
 Park, Joonhyuk 789
 Paschalidis, Ioannis Ch. 768
 Patou, François 652
 Paulsen, Rasmus R. 652
 Pawlowski, Nick 472
 Pellegrini, Chantal 409, 420
 Peng, Can 747
 Peng, Yifan 189, 663
 Pocevičiūtė, Milda 157

Q

Qi, Jiansong 399
 Qi, Wei 3
 Qiao, Yu 272
 Qin, Jing 127
 Qin, Ziyuan 283
 Qiu, Mingyan 146
 Quan, Tianhong 127

R

Ren, Zehua 220
 Rist, Leonhard 737
 Rittscher, Jens 758
 Rivlin, Ehud 569, 590
 Rueckert, Daniel 293, 304

S

Sapkota, Nishchal 315
 Schnabel, Julia A. 293, 304
 Scroop, Rebecca 696
 Shang, Muheng 622
 Shapiro, Ron 569
 Shen, Dinggang 136
 Shen, Guoyao 768
 Shen, Qingni 23
 Shen, Thomas C. 663
 Shen, Yiqing 379, 632
 Shi, Luyue 3
 Shi, Nannan 178
 Shi, Yonggang 55, 262
 Shi, Yu 72, 241
 Shi, Yuxin 178
 Shih, George 663
 Silosky, Michael 116

Simo-Serra, Edgar 611
 Simpson, Hugh 210
 Sirinukunwattana, Korsuk 758
 Sivathamboo, Shobi 210
 Smith, Luke 696
 Snoek, Cees G. M. 726
 Song, Qilong 358
 Sosna, Jacob 106
 Steinberger, Sharon 663
 Su, Jason 778
 Su, Na 504
 Su, Yanzhou 632
 Sühling, Michael 737
 Summers, Ronald M. 189, 663
 Sun, Anlan 441
 Sun, Yongheng 220

T

Taha, Ahmed 778
 Tang, Qian 338
 Tang, Yuxing 199, 241
 Taubmann, Oliver 737
 Tian, Mei 399
 Tian, Yi 399
 To, Minh-Son 696
 To, Xuan Vinh 368
 Tomiyama, Noriyuki 611
 Truong Vu, Yen Nhi 778
 Tu, Liyun 452

V

van Sonsbeek, Tom 726

W

Wald, Tassilo 33
 Walsh, Simon 13
 Wan, Xiang 3, 83, 547
 Wang, Cheng 706
 Wang, Dequan 272
 Wang, Dong 441
 Wang, Fakai 72
 Wang, Fan 220
 Wang, Haiying 283
 Wang, Jiaze 579
 Wang, Junli 146
 Wang, Liwei 441
 Wang, Lyuyang 685
 Wang, Miaomiao 220
 Wang, Minghui 358

Wang, Mingyu 63
 Wang, Nizhuan 136
 Wang, Qizheng 482
 Wang, Shu 72
 Wang, Xiaosong 272
 Wang, Yanqing 338
 Wang, Yin 462
 Wang, Zhangyang 663
 Wang, Zirui 23
 Weinheimer, Oliver 33
 Wen, Xuyun 168
 Whitbread, Luke 696
 Wiestler, Benedikt 293
 Wood, Ruby 758
 Worring, Marcel 726
 Wu, Dufan 493
 Wu, Fuping 178
 Wu, Guorong 230, 789
 Wu, Han 136
 Wu, Jih-Ciang 252
 Wu, Yilei 348
 Wu, Yunan 327
 Wu, Zhonghai 23

X

Xi, Duo 622
 Xia, Yingda 72, 146, 241
 Xiao, Yu 348
 Xie, Luyuan 23
 Xie, Yutong 696
 Xing, Fuyong 116
 Xing, Xiaodan 13
 Xu, Mai 526
 Xu, Minfeng 199
 Xue, Wufeng 642

Y

Yan, Ke 72
 Yan, Ruixin 482
 Yang, Defu 230
 Yang, Guang 13
 Yang, Jian 220
 Yang, Peng 558
 Yang, Qi 558
 Yang, Xin 379
 Yang, Xinyi 116
 Yao, Jiawen 72, 146, 241
 Ye, Jin 632
 Ye, Li 706

Ye, Xianghua 199
 Ye, Ziyin 63
 Yi, Huahui 283
 Yin, Kaige 83
 Yin, Lei 338
 Yin, Xiaoli 72
 Yuan, Mingze 146, 241
 Yuan, Songtao 504
 Yuan, Ye 127
 Yue, Jiaxin 262

Z

Zeng, Minyan 696
 Zhang, Daoqiang 168
 Zhang, Helen 515
 Zhang, Jiadong 136
 Zhang, Jianfeng 199
 Zhang, Jianpeng 199
 Zhang, Jianwei 55
 Zhang, Jin 622
 Zhang, Li 146, 241
 Zhang, Ling 72, 146, 199, 241
 Zhang, Lu 674
 Zhang, Minjianan 622
 Zhang, Ruimao 44
 Zhang, Shaoting 272
 Zhang, Sihui 399
 Zhang, Xin 23, 768
 Zhang, Xuanye 83
 Zhang, Yeja 315
 Zhang, Ying 399
 Zhang, Yuchen 558
 Zhang, Yunkun 272
 Zhang, Zetian 504
 Zhang, Zhao 441
 Zhang, Zhuya 63
 Zhang, Zixun 44
 Zhao, Peiang 94
 Zhong, Aoxiao 493
 Zhong, Zhusi 515
 Zhou, Feng 452
 Zhou, Jian 241
 Zhou, Jingren 72, 146, 199, 241
 Zhou, Juan Helen 348
 Zhou, Mu 272
 Zhou, S. Kevin 94
 Zhou, Teng 127
 Zhou, Wu 706
 Zhou, Xiuzhuang 482
 Zhou, Yanjie 452

Zhou, Zhixuan	230	Zhu, Qi	168
Zhu, Dajiang	674	Zhu, Qikui	338
Zhu, Dongmei	642	Zhu, Qingqing	189
Zhu, Jianping	462	Zhuang, Xiahai	178