Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 13, No. 2, 2025

Electric Propulsion Systems for Ships: Technological Advances and Application Prospects

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Abstract: As an efficient and environmentally friendly marine power solution, ship electric propulsion systems have garnered widespread attention in the shipping industry in recent years. This paper reviews the development history, key technologies, current applications, and future trends of ship electric propulsion systems. From the composition of electric propulsion systems, control strategies, and optimization methods to case studies in practical applications, this paper thoroughly explores the advantages of electric propulsion systems in improving ship efficiency, reducing environmental pollution, and enhancing operational flexibility. Additionally, it provides corresponding recommendations and prospects regarding the current technological challenges and future development directions, aiming to offer a comprehensive reference for practitioners and researchers in the shipbuilding industry.

Keywords: Ships; Smart Cabin; Remote Monitoring; Fault Warning; Energy Efficiency Optimisation.

1. Introduction

With the increasing global emphasis on environmental protection and sustainable development, the shipping industry is facing tremendous pressure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve energy utilization efficiency. Although traditional diesel engine propulsion systems are technologically mature, they have limitations in terms of environmental protection and energy efficiency. As an efficient and low-pollution power solution, electric propulsion systems are gradually becoming a significant development direction for ship power systems. Electric propulsion systems can not only significantly reduce fuel consumption and pollutant emissions but also enhance operational flexibility and reliability. This paper provides a comprehensive review of ship electric propulsion systems from multiple perspectives, including their development history, key technologies, current applications, and future development trends.

2. The Development History of Ship Electric Propulsion Systems

2.1. Early Exploration and Preliminary Application

The concept of electric propulsion systems for ships can be traced back to the late 19th century. In 1833, the first experimental electric-powered vessel was born, but due to the technological limitations of the time, it failed to gain widespread application. By the early 20th century, with the advancement of power electronics technology, electric propulsion systems began to be applied in some small vessels. However, due to the large size and low efficiency of electrical equipment at that time, electric propulsion systems did not become a mainstream choice.

2.2. Technological Breakthroughs and Rapid Development

Since the 1980s, significant breakthroughs have been made in power electronics technology, particularly with the rapid development of frequency converters and motor control technologies, laying the foundation for the widespread application of electric propulsion systems in ships. During this period, electric propulsion systems were gradually adopted in large vessels such as oil tankers, cargo ships, and passenger ships [1]. The advantages of electric propulsion systems became increasingly evident, including higher efficiency, lower noise and vibration, and greater operational flexibility.

2.3. The Rise of Modern Electric Propulsion Systems

Entering the 21st century, with increasing global emphasis on environmental protection and the pursuit of a low-carbon economy, electric propulsion systems have garnered broader attention. Modern electric propulsion systems have not only achieved greater technological maturity but have also made significant progress in cost control and system integration. In recent years, with advancements in battery technology, energy storage technology, and intelligent control systems, the application prospects of electric propulsion systems in marine vessels have expanded considerably[2].

3. Composition of Ship Electric Propulsion Systems

3.1. The Basic Architecture of Electric Propulsion Systems

The electric propulsion system of a ship typically consists of the following main components: the power generation system, power distribution system, propulsion motor, propeller, and control system. The power generation system is responsible for supplying electricity and usually includes diesel generator sets, gas turbine generator sets, or renewable energy power generation equipment. The power distribution system distributes electricity to various loads, including the propulsion motor and other shipboard equipment. The propulsion motor is the core component of the electric propulsion system, commonly employing AC asynchronous motors or permanent magnet synchronous motors. The propeller converts the mechanical energy of the motor into the ship's propulsion force, with common types including screw propellers and podded propulsors. The control system coordinates the operation of all components to achieve efficient and stable propulsion functionality.

3.2. Key Equipment and Technologies

3.2.1. Power Generation System

The power generation system is a critical component of ship electric propulsion systems, with its performance directly impacting the overall system's efficiency and reliability. Traditional power generation systems primarily consist of diesel generator sets. However, with technological advancements, an increasing number of ships are adopting gas turbine generator sets and renewable energy generation equipment, such as solar panels and wind turbines. These new-generation power generation devices not only enhance power generation efficiency but also reduce environmental pollution.

3.2.2. Propulsion Motor

The propulsion motor is the core component of the electric propulsion system, with its performance directly affecting the ship's propulsion efficiency and operational flexibility. Common types of propulsion motors include AC induction motors, permanent magnet synchronous motors, and brushless DC motors. AC induction motors offer advantages such as simple structure and low cost but have relatively lower efficiency. Permanent magnet synchronous motors feature high efficiency, high power density, and excellent dynamic performance but come at a higher cost. Brushless DC motors, on the other hand, are characterized by high efficiency, low noise, and long service life, making them suitable for applications requiring high reliability[3].

3.2.3. Propeller

The propeller is the key component that converts the mechanical energy of the motor into the ship's propulsion force. Common types of propellers include traditional screw propellers and podded propellers. Screw propellers are the most conventional type, offering advantages such as simple structure and low cost but with relatively lower efficiency. Podded propellers, in contrast, feature high efficiency, high flexibility, and low noise, making them suitable for ships requiring high operational flexibility[4].

3.2.4. Control System

The control system serves as the brain of the electric propulsion system, coordinating the operation of various components to achieve efficient and stable propulsion functions. Modern electric propulsion systems typically employ advanced control algorithms, such as vector control, direct torque control, and model predictive control. These algorithms enhance the system's dynamic performance and stability while reducing energy consumption and noise[5].

4. Optimization Methods for Ship Electric Propulsion Systems

4.1. Energy Management Optimization

Energy management optimization is a crucial approach to improving the efficiency of ship electric propulsion systems. By rationally allocating energy between the power generation system and energy storage system and optimizing the operating conditions of propulsion motors, the ship's energy consumption can be significantly reduced. Modern energy management optimization for ship electric propulsion systems often employs advanced optimization algorithms, such as dynamic programming, genetic algorithms, and particle swarm optimization. These algorithms enable real-time adjustment of system operating parameters to achieve optimal energy allocation.

4.2. Topology Optimization

Topology optimization is an essential method for enhancing the reliability and flexibility of ship electric propulsion systems. By optimizing the topology of the power generation system, power distribution system, and propulsion system, the system's redundancy and fault tolerance can be improved. Modern topology optimization for ship electric propulsion systems typically adopts modular and redundant designs to enhance system reliability and flexibility[6].

4.3. Control Algorithm Optimization

Control algorithm optimization is a key approach to improving the dynamic performance and stability of ship electric propulsion systems. By optimizing control algorithms, the system's dynamic response speed and steady-state accuracy can be enhanced while reducing energy consumption and noise. Modern control algorithm optimization for ship electric propulsion systems often leverages advanced control theories, such as adaptive control, fuzzy control, and neural network control. These algorithms enable real-time adjustment of control parameters to achieve optimal system performance.

5. Development Trends of Ship Electric Propulsion Systems

5.1. Intelligence and Automation

Intelligence and automation represent one of the significant development trends for ship electric propulsion systems. With advancements in artificial intelligence, big data, and IoT technologies, ship electric propulsion systems are gradually becoming more intelligent and automated. Intelligence and automation not only improve the ship's operational flexibility and reliability but also reduce crew workload and operational risks. In the future, ship electric propulsion systems will feature autonomous navigation, automatic obstacle avoidance, and intelligent decision-making capabilities, enabling unmanned ship operations[7].

5.2. High Efficiency and Energy Saving

High efficiency and energy saving are another critical development trend for ship electric propulsion systems. With advancements in energy storage, motor, and control technologies, ship electric propulsion systems are progressively achieving higher efficiency and energy savings. These improvements not only reduce operational costs but also minimize environmental pollution. In the future, ship electric propulsion systems will exhibit higher energy conversion efficiency and lower energy consumption, facilitating green navigation.

5.3. Multi-Energy Hybridization and Optimization

Multi-energy hybridization and optimization represent a key development trend for ship electric propulsion systems. With advancements in energy storage, motor, and control technologies, ship electric propulsion systems are increasingly adopting multi-energy hybridization and optimization. This approach enhances the ship's endurance and operational flexibility while reducing dependence on a single energy source. In the future, ship electric propulsion systems will integrate multiple energy sources for optimized performance.

6. Conclusion

As an advanced ship propulsion solution, ship electric propulsion systems have garnered significant attention in the maritime industry in recent years. This paper provides a comprehensive review of ship electric propulsion systems, covering their development history, key technologies, current applications, and future trends. Ship electric propulsion systems not only significantly reduce fuel consumption and pollutant emissions but also improve operational flexibility and reliability. However, current technologies still face challenges, such as low energy density, low power density, and complex system integration. In the future, with advancements in energy storage, motor, and control technologies, ship electric propulsion systems will progressively achieve intelligence and automation, high efficiency and energy savings, and multi-energy hybridization and optimization, providing critical support for the sustainable development of the maritime industry.

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