

Vision-based Surgical Suture Looping through Trajectory Planning for Wound Suturing

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Abstract—Robot-assisted surgery (RAS) has revolutionized the field of surgery over the past few decades. Despite many successes, achieving full automation in these surgeries remains a challenging task. In this paper, a dynamic approach is proposed to automate knot tying with an in-house robot vision system. Through efficient path planning and coordination between two grippers, the workspace required for constructing the suture loop can be reduced while issues such as suture slippage and collisions between instruments can be eliminated. Visual images were employed to monitor the two grippers in real-time and their positions were evaluated using transformation matrices obtained experimentally. A Linear Quadratic (LQ) control scheme was applied to optimize the tracking performance of the two grippers. From the experiments, this visual evaluation method can achieve a position accuracy of 1 mm in the workspace. The proposed algorithm was evaluated and automatic suture looping operation was successfully performed in all six trials. Different parameters in the control scheme were also examined by introducing external impulse disturbances during the knot tying process. This proposed knot-tying approach demonstrates a simple and efficient way to construct a suture knot in a minimal workspace.

Note to Practitioners - A surgical operation usually takes several hours to complete, which is a test of surgeon's endurance. To better assist surgeons, several repetitive surgical tasks can be performed automatically with a robotic system. This paper presents a new method for robot-assisted surgical knot tying in a confined environment. Through simultaneous manipulation and trajectory planning of the two surgical grippers, suture loops were constructed while keeping the suture in tension. Images were employed to guide the grippers in completing the knot tying process with high precision. Experiments were conducted to demonstrate the automated suture looping operation with the system and the proposed method. The robustness of the method was also examined by introducing impulse disturbances and occlusions during the experiments. This proposed method does not require complicated hardware setup, allowing easy implementations on various surgical systems.

Index Terms—Automatic control, Collision avoidance, Path planning, Robot vision systems, Suture looping

I. INTRODUCTION

INNOVATIONS in medical technology are the significant drives to the rapid development of advanced robotic tools and systems for clinical applications. In particular, robot-assisted surgery (RAS) is increasingly adopted by surgeons to overcome the limitations of manual surgery [1]. Minimal

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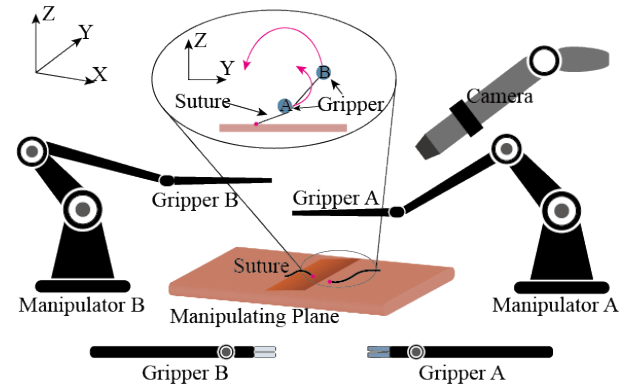


Fig. 1: Robotic system for surgical knot tying with two grippers to interact with the suture on the tissue surface.

invasive surgeries (MIS) such as laparotomy, cardiology, and urology are seeking assistances from robots with the aim of offering higher precision, dexterity and flexibility. The first robot introduced for surgical use was the Automated Endoscopic System for Optical Positioning (AESOP). This clinical equipment serves as a camera holder in an endoscopic environment, which can be automated for optimal positioning [2]. Afterwards, different commercial and in-house surgical robots were developed [3]. Nowadays, surgical robots with visual guidance and sensory feedback have become the standard in RAS. For instance, H. Mayer et al. [4] proposed to use KUKA robot and PHANTOM device as the platform to simulate the robotic heart surgery. Force sensors were added to monitor the force during the operation. Hynes et al. [5] developed a system that was capable of performing surgical tasks under minimal human supervision. The system employed both visual and kinematic models to coordinate the robot motion for tying a surgical knot. While these proposed robots were able to perform selected surgical tasks, achieving automations can help to enhance the accuracy and the efficiency by reducing human errors.

The commercial da Vinci surgical system was first introduced in 2000 for clinical practice [6] [7]. The dexterity of the system enables surgeons to perform more challenging endoscopic surgeries such as prostatectomy manipulations [8] [9], thoracic operations [10], abdominal surgeries [11], and thyroid operations [12]. Nevertheless, these surgeries were manually operated by surgeons, and their performance heavily depends on surgeons' clinical abilities and operational experiences [13]. To standardize general and tedious surgical subtasks and lesson surgeon fatigue in clinical surgery, autonomous manipulation through standard procedures should be further investigated.

To imitate the surgical task and eliminate large space consumptions [3], a robotic system usually consists of two robotic arms with grippers and a vision camera to provide hand-eye coordination as shown in Fig. 1. To evaluate 3D positions of the grippers from the vision camera, J. R. R. Mayer et al. [14] and El-Haddad et al. [15] employed a stereo-vision system, where 3D positions can be evaluated through triangulation. Chu et al. [16] proposed an algorithm for evaluating the spatial position of a particular micro-object from a single camera. The algorithm employed the image reflected from the surface as the additional feature for the evaluation. Espiau et al. [17] described another method for vision-based control in robotics, in which the proposed framework incorporated the visual system into the control loop to permit interactions between the robot and its surroundings. Putzer et al. [18] and Pycinski et al. [19] proposed the use of time-of-flight camera for navigating robots in a computer-aid surgery.

The instrument tie method is one of the common practices to tie a surgical knot [20] because of its ease of implementation. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the procedure consists of grasping the leading segment of the suture (Fig. 2 (a)), wrapping two suture loops around a gripper (Fig. 2 (b)-(c)), grasping the suture tail with another gripper (Fig. 2 (d)), and pulling the suture to tighten the knot (Fig. 2 (e)-(f)). This method has been successfully implemented using laparoscopic [21] and other robot systems [5] [22] [23]. For instance, Croce et al. [24] examined this instrument-tie method and other methods that are suitable for laparoscopic surgery. Gopaldas et al. [25] examined an alternative method to tie the knot, and the tool was manipulated to grasp the suture and rotated along its axle to form multiple suture loops. Guru et al. [26] proposed a novel robotic knot tying technique which can be used for shorter suture length. The suture was manipulated to loop around the other end of the suture, rather than the gripper, to complete the knot. Muffly et al. [27] examined 6-throw knot tying with da Vinci robot. Other common two-hand knot tying techniques have also described in [28] [29], which require higher dexterity from the manipulation tool.

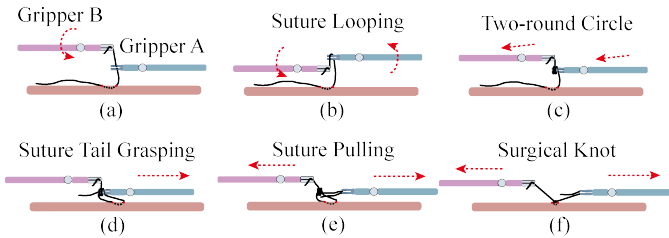


Fig. 2: General procedures of surgical knot tying: (a). Suture grasping; (b-c). Suture looping; (d). Suture tail grasping; (e-f). Suture pulling

A knot can be formed by using a fixture [30] or a unique tool [31] integrated at the end of the instrument. This knot tying approach requires adding new hardware to the system, which may not be suitable for use in some surgical scenes. Autonomous knot tying can also be performed through learning from demonstration to establish statistical models [32]–[34]. For instance, Mayer et al. proposed an autonomous approach

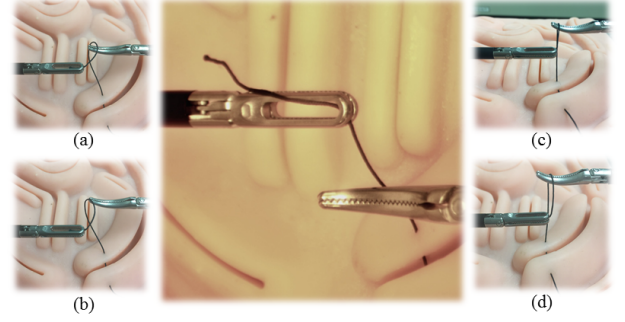


Fig. 3: (a) (b). Suture's slack and slippage while winding; (c) (d). Collisions of the gripper with the suture

for knot tying based on a single demonstration of the task with four robotic arms [35]. J. Takamatsu et al. presented a knot planning from observation (KPO) paradigm in [36], and a rope, rather than a suture thread, was examined in the experiment. Sen et al. [37] proposed a 3D printed suture needle angle positioner (SNAP) as the tool which can be combined with a sequential convex program to compute the needle path for multi-throw surgical suturing.

Besides, trajectory-based tasks were also investigated in various operating environments. Nageotte et al. [38] employed kinematic analysis and geometric modeling to generate the path that can minimize the tissue deformation while driving the needle. DiMaio et al. [39] proposed a potential field based path planning technique for needle placement and obstacle avoidance. Chow et al. [22] examined a new knot tying technique through roll-arc looping with the visual guidance.

The performance of knot tying through learning models heavily depend on the quality of training data, where a large amount of training data are usually hard to obtain due to privacy issue [40]. According to the studies, achieving high precision remains a challenging task [33], and failures were also observed in [35] [37]. In contrast, path planning using trajectory equations is one of the simplest methods to generate the path based on the known information (map). This approach is comparable to road-map planning approach [41], but it can also handle constraints such as suture slippages, suture slacks, and equipment collisions, as illustrated in Fig. 3.

In this paper, we present a new robotic knot tying technique, which aims at reducing the workspace required to construct a surgical knot through simultaneous manipulation and co-ordination between two grippers. The 2D spatial trajectories of grippers described in [42] were re-formulated so that the decreasing rate of the suture length during the winding process was factored in the trajectory equations. The position offset along the center-of-axis direction was introduced between the two grippers to facilitate the efficient formation of the suture loop. The proposed work show advantages in workspace saving required as compared to [22] [29] [43]. Different from Mayer's works using haptic sensors [4] [35], a simple in-house robotic system with a single camera was employed to compute the position information. This knot-tying method requires a manipulator with only 3 degrees of freedom (DOF) to perform and this method can be easily implemented using more sophisticated surgical robots.

Compared with [23] [35] [44], this technique could also eliminate the need of adding markers on standard surgical instruments. The control scheme in [45] was further examined for visual servoing of the grippers. Derivations on the transformation between the image and the robot coordinates were provided and the accuracy in visual evaluation of the gripper position was examined through experiments. The control scheme was enhanced to handle object occlusion and new sets of experiments were conducted to evaluate the performance and robustness of the control scheme.

The paper is organized as follows: Section II introduces the experimental set-up and the algorithm used in robotic knot tying. Section III describes the methodology for formulating the spatial trajectory planning for the suture looping task, the transformation matrix, and the dynamic control of the system. Section IV provides results and discussions on the robustness of the visual system and the performance of the automatic suture looping. A summary is given at the end of this article.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE SYSTEM

A. Experimental Setups

The robotic system employed to conduct the experiment is shown in Fig. 4. Two laparoscopic grippers are attached to two motorized manipulators, MP-285, and these manipulators are connected to the MPC-200 controller. Each manipulator can provide 3 DOFs and the travel distance in every axis is 25 mm. In addition, a high-resolution camera is mounted on a stand to capture images in real-time. The overall surgical task of knot tying is performed on an artificial tissue, and the system is configured on an anti-vibration table to isolate the disturbances from the surrounding environment.

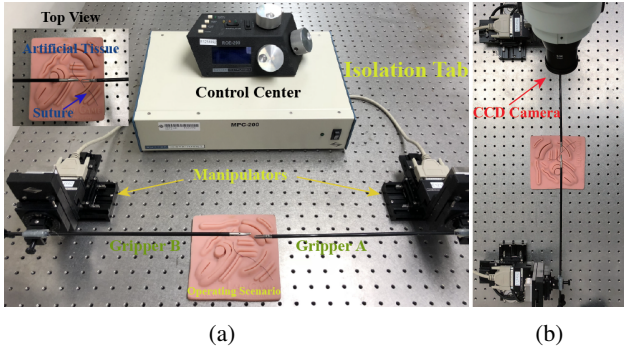


Fig. 4: Robotic system: (a). Overview; (b). Top view

B. System Programming

A customized algorithm was developed to enable communications between the controller of the manipulators and the visual camera, which can guide the grippers to follow the planned trajectory for automated knot tying. The core parts of the program were outlined in Table I.

Precise evaluation of the gripper location $\mathcal{L}_{(x_L, y_L)}$ through the image could be influenced by environmental noises. To enhance the precision, a background subtraction method was adopted. Firstly, an image of the surgical scene \mathbb{B}_I^G was captured, and two grippers were manipulated to the field for the operation. Fig. 5 (a) shows the camera image, denoted as

TABLE I: Algorithm 1 - Object detection

1	Capture the background image: $mat \mathbb{B}_I \xrightarrow{GaussianBlur} mat \tilde{\mathbb{B}}_I^G$
2	$\xrightarrow{save} file_{background}$
3	Truncate patterns of grippers: $mat \mathbb{G}_A \ \& \ \mathbb{G}_B \xrightarrow{save} file_{pattern}$
4	for current camera image $mat \mathbb{C}_I \xrightarrow{GaussianBlur} mat \tilde{\mathbb{C}}_I^G$ do
5	$mat \tilde{\mathbb{S}}_I^G \leftarrow \{\tilde{\mathbb{C}}_I^G - \tilde{\mathbb{B}}_I^G\}(subtraction)$
6	end
7	Each searching point $(x', y') \in \{\mathbb{G}_A \ \ \mathbb{G}_B\}$
8	for all $(x_i, y_i) \in \tilde{\mathbb{S}}_I^G$ do
9	$mat \mathbb{V}_{(x_i, y_i)} \leftarrow SQDIFF_{NORMED}(x_i, y_i)$
10	$= \frac{\sum_{(x', y')} [T(x', y') - I(x_i + x', y_i + y')]}{\sqrt{\sum_{(x', y')} T_{(x', y')}^2 \cdot [\sum_{(x', y')} I(x_i + x', y_i + y')]^2}}$
11	end
12	Detected location: $\mathcal{L}_{(x_d, y_d)} \leftarrow argmin\{\mathbb{V}_{(x_i, y_i)}\}$
13	Visualize detected positions of two grippers in GUI windows.

\mathbb{C}_I , before the operation. With this image as the reference, the background subtraction algorithm [46] [47] was employed to obtain the current image after subtraction as $\tilde{\mathbb{S}}_I^G$. Then, the template matching algorithm [48] was utilized and templates of the two grippers \mathbb{G}_A and \mathbb{G}_B were used to compute the correlation value $\mathbb{V}_{(x_i, y_i)}$ at each image point (x_i, y_i) within the search area (x', y') . The locations with the highest correlation were identified as the grippers and their image coordinates were shown on the screen for visual monitoring in Fig. 5. (b) and (c).

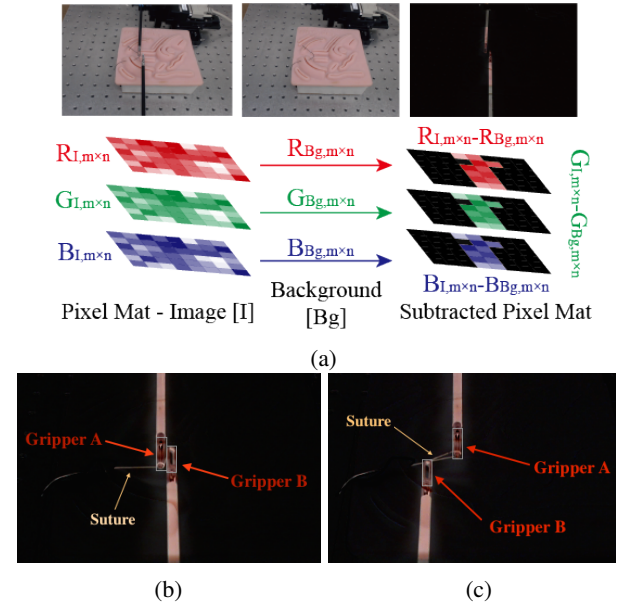


Fig. 5: Illustrations of the background subtraction algorithm and the object tracking. (a). The working principle of the background subtraction; (b)-(c). Two instances of the object tracking with the subtraction operation

III. METHODOLOGY

To tie a surgical knot automatically with a robotic system, the procedure involves three main components: generate a non-slippage and collision-free trajectory to dynamically construct

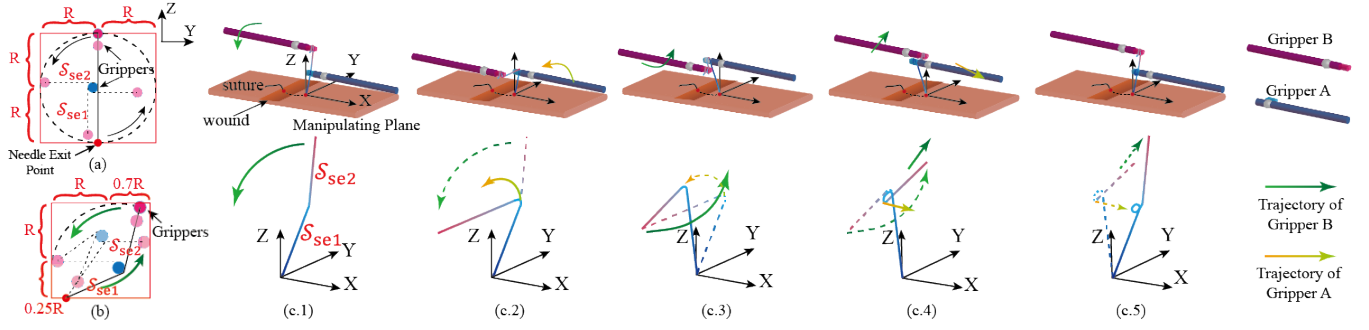


Fig. 6: 2D sketch of the workspace using (a). traditional method (b). proposed method; (c.1-c.5). Details of the proposed suture looping process at different key stages

the suture loops, correlate the coordinates between the robot and the image frame, and develop a control strategy to optimize the operational performance.

A. Spatial Trajectory Planning of Two Grippers

After a wound is stitched up with a suture, the first step to tie a surgical knot is to wrap the suture around a gripper (Gripper A) to form suture loops.

Conventionally [22] [29] [43] [49], the looping practice is to wind a full circle around an idle gripper as shown in Fig. 6 (a), which consumes a large workspace. In contrast, our proposed approach revamps the practice by dynamically repositioning its center at different stages, as shown in Fig. 6 (b).

The two grippers, initially at their respective positions with Gripper B grasping the leading segment of the suture, were manipulated to complete the suture winding as shown in Fig. 6 (c.1-c.5). The lengths of two suture segments, between the needle exit point and Gripper A, \mathcal{S}_{se1} , and between two grippers, \mathcal{S}_{se2} , can be selected according to the size of the suture loop.

To complete a suture loop, five main stages were designed in our method. Firstly Gripper B moves along a semi-round trajectory, centered by Gripper A, which was sketched in Fig. 6 (c.1) and (c.2). In the second stage as shown in Fig. 6 (c.3), centered at Gripper B, Gripper A circled up while keeping the suture portions \mathcal{S}_{se1} and \mathcal{S}_{se2} in tension. Then, movements of Gripper B followed up, tracing a semi-round trajectory that was centered at the new position of Gripper A, and reaching a height, at which \mathcal{S}_{se2} was parallel to the manipulating plane. This process was sketched in Fig. 6 (c.3) and (c.4). Next, Gripper A adjusted its position, and two grippers simultaneously moved and approximated their original locations. Finally, two grippers reached their destinations of the first loop. Following the same procedures, the second loop can be accomplished.

To eliminate suture slack and slippage as shown in Fig. 3 (a) and (b), the grasped segment should be maintained vertical to the manipulating plane and kept in tension. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that Gripper B could collide with the suture segment \mathcal{S}_{se1} near the needle exit point when constructing the loop, resulting in improper alignment in the X direction as shown in Fig. 3 (c) and (d). To avoid such problem, Gripper

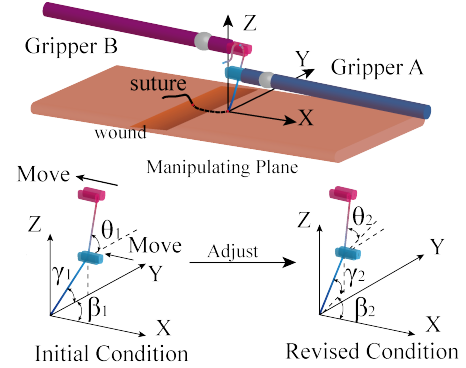


Fig. 7: Initial and revised orientations of the suture

B with the grasped suture should be slightly moved along the X-axis to provide a clearance with respect to Gripper A.

In Fig. 7, the 3D poses of the suture and the grippers were shown using angle notations. The angle between the projection of \mathcal{S}_{se1} on the XY plane and the X-axis is defined as β , and the angle between \mathcal{S}_{se2} and XY plane is defined as θ . Besides, γ indicates the angle between \mathcal{S}_{se1} and XY plane.

The shifting in the X-axis can alter the angle β , and a proper displacement that ensures a sufficient clearance should be computed. Meanwhile, the incremental value of β should be maintained at a minimal level, which aims to prevent the suture's creeping down the gripper's tip when winding. To make this looping process more reliable and convenient to be implemented, the planned trajectory was simplified as only moving in Y-Z coordinates, and keeping X coordinates of two grippers fixed. The locations of two grippers in X direction can be calculated using the following equations:

$$\begin{cases} x_A = \mathcal{S}_{se1} \cdot \cos\gamma \cdot \cos\beta \\ x_B = \mathcal{S}_{se1} \cdot \cos\gamma \cdot \cos\beta + \mathcal{S}_{se2} \cdot \cos\theta \cdot \cos\beta \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

To plan the reference trajectories, the 2D sketches of the dominating looping motions in Y-Z plane were outlined in Fig. 8 (a)-(c). The required trajectories of two grippers can be represented by a series of key points in Y-Z plane.

To begin planning the trajectory, different parameters can be figured out according to the size of the suture looping. For a 20mm suture loop, \mathcal{S}_{se1} , \mathcal{S}_{se2} , θ are selected to be 20mm, 21mm and 75° respectively. The horizontal offset of gripper A (H_A) is set as 5mm and γ can be computed

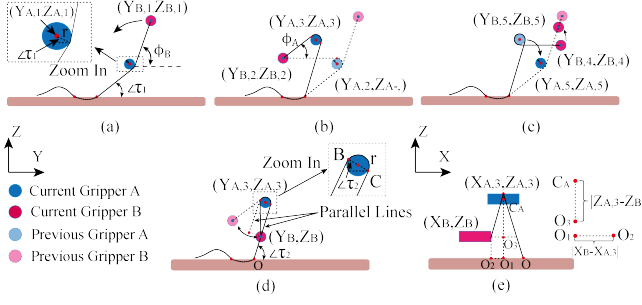


Fig. 8: Trajectory Planning of Two Grippers in Y-Z Plane (a). Stage One; (b). Stages Two-Three; (c). Stages Four-Five; (d)-(e). The shortest distance between the suture and the gripper during the looping process

using $\arcsin(H_A/S_{se1})$. R_m is the length of the projection of S_{se2} in Y-Z plane, which can be computed as $R_m = \sqrt{(S_{se2} \cdot \sin\theta)^2 + (S_{se2} \cdot \cos\theta \cdot \sin\beta)^2}$. r is the radius of Gripper A, which is equal to $2mm$. Φ_B is the dynamic angle of Gripper B in different sections, which denotes the angle between S_{se2} and Y-axis in the 2D situation as shown in Fig. 8 (a). Similarly, Φ_A indicates the angle between S_{se1} and Y direction in the plane, which is shown in Fig. 8 (b). The range for the two angles to travel at different stages are listed as $\Phi_{B,1 \Rightarrow 2} \in [\theta, \pi]$, $\Phi_{A,2 \Rightarrow 3} \in [0, \alpha = \frac{\pi}{4}]$, $\Phi_{B,3 \Rightarrow 4} \in [\alpha + \pi, 2\pi]$, $\Phi_{A,4 \Rightarrow 5} \in [\pi, 11\pi/9]$. The needle exit point is the origin, and the planned paths of two grippers can be computed with the following equations:

$$\begin{cases} y_{B,1 \Rightarrow 2} = S_{se1} \cdot \cos\gamma \cdot \sin\beta + [R_m - \pi \cdot r \cdot \frac{\Phi_{B,1 \Rightarrow 2} - \theta}{\pi - \theta}] \cdot \cos(\Phi_{B,1 \Rightarrow 2}) \\ z_{B,1 \Rightarrow 2} = S_{se1} \cdot \sin\gamma + [R_m - \pi \cdot r \cdot \frac{\Phi_{B,1 \Rightarrow 2} - \theta}{\pi - \theta}] \cdot \sin(\Phi_{B,1 \Rightarrow 2}) \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{cases} y_{A,2 \Rightarrow 3} = y_{B,2} + (R_m - \pi \cdot r) \cdot \cos(\Phi_{A,2 \Rightarrow 3}) + r \cdot \sin(\Phi_{A,2 \Rightarrow 3}) \\ z_{A,2 \Rightarrow 3} = z_{B,2} + (R_m - \pi \cdot r) \cdot \sin(\Phi_{A,2 \Rightarrow 3}) - r \cdot \cos(\Phi_{A,2 \Rightarrow 3}) \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

$$\begin{cases} y_{B,3 \Rightarrow 4} = y_{A,3} + (R_m - 2\pi r \cdot \frac{\Phi_{B,3 \Rightarrow 4} - 2 \cdot \alpha}{2 \cdot \pi - 2 \cdot \alpha}) \cdot \cos(\Phi_{B,3 \Rightarrow 4}) \\ z_{B,3 \Rightarrow 4} = z_{A,3} + (R_m - 2\pi r \cdot \frac{\Phi_{B,3 \Rightarrow 4} - 2 \cdot \alpha}{2 \cdot \pi - 2 \cdot \alpha}) \cdot \sin(\Phi_{B,3 \Rightarrow 4}) \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

$$\begin{cases} y_{A,4 \Rightarrow 5} = y_{B,4} + (R_m - 2\pi \cdot r) \cdot \cos(\Phi_{A,4 \Rightarrow 5}) \\ z_{A,4 \Rightarrow 5} = z_{B,4} + (R_m - 2\pi \cdot r) \cdot \sin(\Phi_{A,4 \Rightarrow 5}) \end{cases} \quad (5)$$

where $y_{N,i \Rightarrow j}$ and $z_{N,i \Rightarrow j}$ denote the coordinates of Gripper N in Y and Z axes from Stage (i) to Stage (j). During the manipulation at each stage, only one gripper is moved and the other one remains stationary. When looping the suture around one gripper, the length of R_m was reduced continuously. This

phenomenon was also taken into account in the trajectory equations to compute the gripper positions. The orientation angle β is essential to several parameters, including the minimal distance between the suture and the gripper as sketched in Fig. 8 (d) and (e). Based on the required clearance of this minimal distance, the value of β can be figured out for the task. Therefore, the planned trajectories of grippers can be consequently generated using Eq.(1)-(5).

Robot-assisted looping process has been examined by a number of groups. In [43], an interchangeable end-tool was employed to grasp the suture, which would increase the tool size and hence, the possibility of collision between tools. In contrast, grippers with smaller tips are more dexterous to manipulate the suture. Murphy et al. [29] proposed a theoretical analysis of square knot tying using the instrument tie method. In their work, only one gripper was used to wind the suture, and the other gripper remained stationary as shown in Fig. 6 (a). Chow et. al. [22] proposed a ‘‘Spiral Rolling’’ method to manipulate the suture loop using one moving gripper. Comparing the workspace, the instrument tie method in Fig. 6 (a) requires a workspace of $4R^2$ if assuming the length of S_{se1} and S_{se2} as R . In our approach, the required space is $2.125R^2$, which is only approximately 53% of the traditional method. The alternative ‘‘Rolling Arc Lopping’’ method proposed in [22] would even require nearly 4 times of the workspace as compared to our approach.

B. Computations of Transformation Matrix

Using a single camera, the visual information can be obtained, and the relationship between the image location and the robotic location of an object can be expressed as:

$$\vec{G}_{N,i} = PRT \cdot \vec{G}_{N,R} \quad (6)$$

where $\vec{G}_{N,i} = [y_{N,i}, z_{N,i}, f]^T$ denotes the location of Gripper N in the image frame, $\vec{G}_{N,R} = [x_{N,R}, y_{N,R}, z_{N,R}, 1]^T$ indicates the coordinate of this gripper in the robot coordinate. Besides, we use $\vec{G}_{N,C} = [x_{N,C}, y_{N,C}, z_{N,C}, 1]^T$ to denote its location in the camera coordinate. R and T denote the rotational and the translational matrices required for the frame transformation, and P is the perspective transformation matrix [50]. The sketch of the visual system is shown in Fig. 9.

Similar to other visual servo systems, lens distortions were assumed to be negligible [51] [52], but serve distortion can be corrected through precalibration with chessboard images [53].

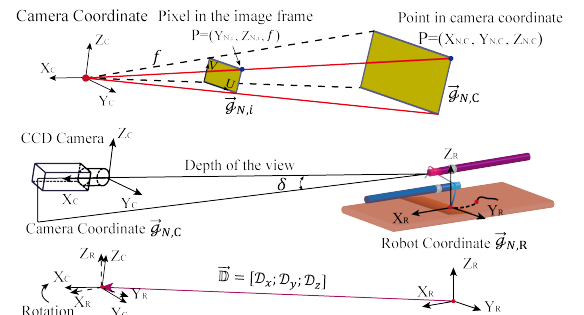


Fig. 9: The camera and robot coordinates of the visual system

Based on the theory of the perspective projection, the correlation between the image frame and the camera coordinates can be calculated as:

$$\frac{f}{x_{N,C}} = \frac{y_{N,i}}{y_{N,C} \cdot m} = \frac{z_{N,i}}{z_{N,C} \cdot m} \quad (7)$$

where m stands for the value (pixel/mm) between the image pixel and the camera coordinates, and f is the focal length of the camera. Using the homogeneous coordinates, the relationship between $\vec{G}_{N,i}$ and $\vec{G}_{N,C}$ can be derived as:

$$\begin{bmatrix} y_{N,i}w \\ z_{N,i}w \\ w \end{bmatrix} = \underbrace{\text{diag}(mf, mf, 1)}_{\mathcal{P}} \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 1 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x_{N,C} \\ y_{N,C} \\ z_{N,C} \end{bmatrix} \quad (8)$$

With respect to the robot coordinates, the camera coordinates only rotates around Y axis, and $\vec{\mathbb{D}} = [D_x; D_y; D_z]$ denotes the displacement offsets between the camera frame and the robot frame. Thus the ideal transformation matrix T_R^D can be expressed as:

$$T_R^D = R \cdot T = \begin{bmatrix} \cos\delta & 0 & \sin\delta & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 \\ -\sin\delta & 0 & \cos\delta & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 & D_x \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & D_y \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & D_z \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \quad (9)$$

where δ is the rotation angle of the Y-axis. Thus, the relationship between $\vec{G}_{N,C}$ and $\vec{G}_{N,R}$ can be derived as:

$$\begin{bmatrix} x_{N,C} \\ y_{N,C} \\ z_{N,C} \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} = T_R^D \cdot \begin{bmatrix} x_{N,R} \\ y_{N,R} \\ z_{N,R} \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \cos\delta & 0 & \sin\delta & D_x \cdot \cos\delta + D_z \cdot \sin\delta \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & D_y \\ -\sin\delta & 0 & \cos\delta & -D_x \cdot \sin\delta + D_z \cdot \cos\delta \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x_{N,R} \\ y_{N,R} \\ z_{N,R} \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} \quad (10)$$

Using Eq. (8)-(10), and letting $\mathcal{F} = m \cdot f$, the correlation between the image frame and the robot coordinates becomes:

$$\begin{bmatrix} y_{N,i}w \\ z_{N,i}w \\ w \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathcal{P} & \mathbf{0} \\ \mathbf{0} & 1 \end{bmatrix} \cdot T_R^D \cdot \vec{G}_{N,R} = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & \mathcal{F} & 0 & \mathcal{F} \cdot D_y \\ -\mathcal{F}\sin\delta & 0 & \mathcal{F}\cos\delta & -\mathcal{F}D_x\sin\delta + \mathcal{F}D_z\cos\delta \\ \cos\delta & 0 & \sin\delta & D_x\cos\delta + D_z\sin\delta \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x_{N,R} \\ y_{N,R} \\ z_{N,R} \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} \quad (11)$$

Thus, the image location $[y_{N,i}, z_{N,i}]^T$ can be denoted as:

$$\begin{cases} y_{N,i} = \frac{y_{N,R} \cdot \mathcal{F} + \mathcal{F}D_y}{x_{N,R} \cdot \cos\delta + z_{N,R} \cdot \sin\delta + D_x\cos\delta + D_z\sin\delta} \\ z_{N,i} = \frac{-x_{N,R} \cdot \mathcal{F}\sin\delta + z_{N,R} \cdot \mathcal{F}\cos\delta - \mathcal{F}D_x\sin\delta + \mathcal{F}D_z\cos\delta}{x_{N,R} \cdot \cos\delta + z_{N,R} \cdot \sin\delta + D_x\cos\delta + D_z\sin\delta} \end{cases} \quad (12)$$

In a fixed visual system, the displacement vector $\vec{\mathbb{D}}$ between the camera and the robot shown in Fig. 9 should be constant. To loop the suture, two grippers do not involve movements in X coordinate, and hence $x_{N,R}$ is a constant. Owing to the large depth of the visual system, the small tilt angle δ becomes negligible and can be approximated as zero. Thus, for both grippers, $z_{N,R} \cdot \sin\delta \approx 0$, and $(x_{N,R} \cdot \cos\delta + D_x\cos\delta + D_z\sin\delta)$ can be regarded as a constant. Therefore, the denominators of $y_{N,i}$ and $z_{N,i}$ can be regarded as a constant \mathbb{C}_1 . Besides, $(-x_{N,R} \cdot \mathcal{F}\sin\delta - \mathcal{F}D_x\sin\delta) \approx 0$. Thus, Eq. (12) can be further derived as:

$$\begin{cases} y_{N,i} = \frac{\mathcal{M}_{11} \cdot y_{N,R} + \mathcal{M}_{12} \cdot z_{N,R} + \mathbb{C}_2}{\mathbb{C}_1} \\ z_{N,i} = \frac{\mathcal{M}_{21} \cdot y_{N,R} + \mathcal{M}_{22} \cdot z_{N,R} + \mathbb{C}_3}{\mathbb{C}_1} \end{cases} \quad (13)$$

where $\mathbb{C}_1 = x_{N,R} \cdot \cos\delta + D_x \cdot \cos\delta$, $\mathbb{C}_2 = \mathcal{F}D_y$, $\mathbb{C}_3 = \mathcal{F}D_z \cdot \cos\delta$, $\mathcal{M}_{11} = \mathcal{F}$, $\mathcal{M}_{22} = \mathcal{F} \cdot \cos\delta$, and $\mathcal{M}_{12} = \mathcal{M}_{21} = 0$. Eq. (13) can be expressed as:

$$\begin{bmatrix} y_{N,i} \\ z_{N,i} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathcal{M}_{11}/\mathbb{C}_1 & \mathcal{M}_{12}/\mathbb{C}_1 \\ \mathcal{M}_{21}/\mathbb{C}_1 & \mathcal{M}_{22}/\mathbb{C}_1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} y_{N,R} \\ z_{N,R} \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} \mathbb{C}_2/\mathbb{C}_1 \\ \mathbb{C}_3/\mathbb{C}_1 \end{bmatrix} \quad (14)$$

which can be further derived as:

$$\begin{bmatrix} y_{N,R} \\ z_{N,R} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathcal{M}_{11}/\mathbb{C}_1 & \mathcal{M}_{12}/\mathbb{C}_1 \\ \mathcal{M}_{21}/\mathbb{C}_1 & \mathcal{M}_{22}/\mathbb{C}_1 \end{bmatrix}^{-1} \left\{ \begin{bmatrix} y_{N,i} \\ z_{N,i} \end{bmatrix} - \begin{bmatrix} \mathbb{C}_2/\mathbb{C}_1 \\ \mathbb{C}_3/\mathbb{C}_1 \end{bmatrix} \right\} \quad (15)$$

With these derived results, it can be updated that $\vec{G}_{N,i} = [(y_{N,i}), (z_{N,i})]^T$. Since the X coordinates were fixed, grippers' motion $\vec{G}_{N,R}$ can be simplified to the 2D condition as $[(y_{N,R}), (z_{N,R})]^T$. Besides, $\vec{\mathcal{O}}_N = [\mathbb{C}_2/\mathbb{C}_1, \mathbb{C}_3/\mathbb{C}_1]^T$, and $\mathcal{T}_N = \begin{bmatrix} \mathcal{M}_{11}/\mathbb{C}_1 & \mathcal{M}_{12}/\mathbb{C}_1 \\ \mathcal{M}_{21}/\mathbb{C}_1 & \mathcal{M}_{22}/\mathbb{C}_1 \end{bmatrix}^{-1}$. Thus, the relationship between the position in the image frame and the Y-Z position in the robot coordinates of Gripper N can be expressed as:

$$\vec{G}_{N,R} = \mathcal{T}_N(\vec{G}_{N,i} - \vec{\mathcal{O}}_N) \quad (16)$$

$\vec{\mathcal{O}}_N$ can be used to denote the offset between the origin of the image frame and the projection of the robot coordinate's origin in this frame. This value can also be computed in the calibration process and denoted as $(y_{N,i}^*, z_{N,i}^*)$.

Since evaluating cameras' intrinsic parameters are time-consuming, and the relationship between $\vec{G}_{N,R}$ and $\vec{G}_{N,i}$ can be derived as the form in Eq. (16), the transformation matrix \mathcal{T}_N used to map the relationship between $\vec{G}_{N,R}$ and $\vec{G}_{N,i}$ can be computed using an experimental approach through the least-squares estimation method in [54], and the equation can be expressed as:

$$\mathcal{T}_N = (G_{N,R}) \cdot (G_{N,i})^T \cdot [(G_{N,i}) \cdot (G_{N,i})^T]^{-1} \quad (17)$$

To calculate this \mathcal{T}_N in the calibration process, the gripper was commanded to \mathcal{K} points in the workspace, and \mathcal{K} groups of image coordinates $(\vec{G}_{N,i})_{\mathcal{PK}} = [(y_{N,i})_{\mathcal{PK}}, (z_{N,i})_{\mathcal{PK}}]$ can be obtained using Algorithm 1, and their respective robot coordinates, $(\vec{G}_{N,R})_{\mathcal{PK}} = [(y_{N,R})_{\mathcal{PK}}, (z_{N,R})_{\mathcal{PK}}]$, can also be acquired through the motor encoders of the manipulators.

Equation (18):

$$G_{N,i} = \begin{Bmatrix} [(y_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}1} - (y_{N,i})^*] - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(y_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}j} - (y_{N,i})^*] & \cdots & [(y_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}\mathcal{K}} - (y_{N,i})^*] - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(y_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}j} - (y_{N,i})^*] \\ [(z_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}1} - (z_{N,i})^*] - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(z_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}j} - (z_{N,i})^*] & \cdots & [(z_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}\mathcal{K}} - (z_{N,i})^*] - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(z_{N,i})_{\mathcal{P}j} - (z_{N,i})^*] \end{Bmatrix}$$

$$G_{N,R} = \begin{Bmatrix} (y_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}1} - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(y_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}j}] & (y_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}2} - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(y_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}j}] & \cdots & (y_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}\mathcal{K}} - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(y_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}j}] \\ (z_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}1} - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(z_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}j}] & (z_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}2} - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(z_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}j}] & \cdots & (z_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}\mathcal{K}} - \frac{1}{\mathcal{K}} \sum_{j=1}^{\mathcal{K}} [(z_{N,R})_{\mathcal{P}j}] \end{Bmatrix}$$

The detailed expressions of $G_{N,i}$ and $G_{N,R}$ were listed in Eq. (18). Using this method, the transformation relationship can be quickly constructed without investigating the intrinsic parameters using this experimental calibration approach.

C. Optimal Control Scheme

In this research, two grippers were required to follow the planned trajectories to complete the suture loop. To account for uncertainties or impulse disturbances in manipulation, a controller with visual feedback was added to the robotic system to enhance the performance of driving grippers.

Since targets of planned trajectory were time-variant, the LQ controller was implemented because it could minimize the one-step delay by computing the input that could optimize the error at the next step when tracking moving objects, and consequently improve the robustness of the operation. Besides, the LQ controller was adopted because it is simple design and it can be conveniently implemented in general vision-based systems.

For an input $\vec{u}_N(n)$ of Gripper N, the desired position at the next time step ($n+1$) can be computed in the state-space form as:

$$\vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}(n+1) = \vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}(n) + \mathcal{B}(n) \cdot \vec{u}_N(n) \quad (19)$$

where $\mathcal{B}(n)$ is the coefficient matrix of the input. $\vec{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}$ is employed to denote the planned trajectory.

The strategy [55] [56] in designing the LQ controller was to minimize a cost function that placed a cost on the error between the real position and planned position of grippers in the next time step, $[\vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}(n+1) - \vec{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}(n+1)]$, and a cost on the control input $\vec{u}_N(n)$. The cost function is:

$$E(n+1) = [\vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}(n+1) - \vec{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}(n+1)]^T \cdot \mathcal{Q} \cdot [\vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}(n+1) - \vec{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}(n+1)] + \vec{u}_N^T(n) \cdot \mathcal{L} \cdot \vec{u}_N(n) \quad (20)$$

where \mathcal{Q} and \mathcal{L} are the weighting matrices. Substituting Eq. (19) into Eq. (20) yields:

$$E(n+1) = [\vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}(n) + \mathcal{B}(n) \cdot \vec{u}_N(n) - \vec{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}(n+1)]^T \cdot \mathcal{Q} \cdot [\vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}(n) + \mathcal{B}(n) \cdot \vec{u}_N(n) - \vec{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}(n+1)] + \vec{u}_N^T(n) \cdot \mathcal{L} \cdot \vec{u}_N(n) \quad (21)$$

By differentiating Eq. (21) with respect to $\vec{u}_N(n)$, and setting the gradient of the error term to zero [57], the optimal control input $\vec{u}_N(n)$ can be calculated as:

$$\vec{u}_N(n) = -[\mathcal{B}^T(n) \cdot \mathcal{Q} \cdot \mathcal{B}(n) + \mathcal{L}]^{-1} \cdot \mathcal{B}^T(n) \cdot \mathcal{Q} \cdot \underbrace{[\mathcal{T}_N \cdot (\vec{\mathcal{G}}_{N,i}(n) - \vec{\mathcal{O}}) - \vec{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}(n+1)]}_{\text{error}} \quad (22)$$

Two weighting matrices, \mathcal{Q} and \mathcal{L} , can provide tunability on the system performance by setting more or less emphasis on the error of the gripper's motion and on the control input, respectively. Here, these two matrices were chosen to be scalar matrices to set equal weighting on the entry for each axis as:

$$\mathcal{Q} = \mathcal{T}_1 \cdot I \quad \mathcal{L} = \mathcal{T}_2 \cdot I \quad (23)$$

where I is an identity matrix, \mathcal{T}_1 and \mathcal{T}_2 are the tuning parameters of \mathcal{Q} and \mathcal{L} , respectively. Different values for \mathcal{T}_1 and \mathcal{T}_2 should be evaluated through tests to determine the optimal pairs for the tracking task. After system tuning, the computed input $\vec{u}_N(n)$ was sent to the micro-manipulators to drive the grippers accordingly.

D. Estimation of Lost Track Point

When using visual images for control purpose, image occlusion could lead to unstable or lose track of target when using the pattern matching algorithm, resulting errors in computing the control inputs. In this work, Gripper B could be temporarily blocked by Gripper A when winding the suture in Stage Three, as sketched in Fig. 10 (a).

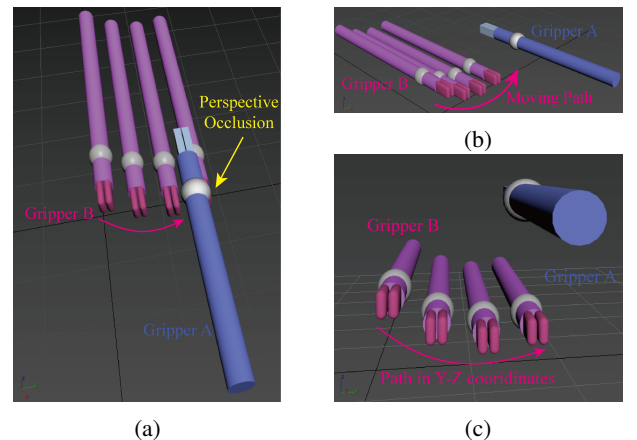


Fig. 10: Occlusions of grippers during the suture looping procedure. (a). Perspective occlusion of Gripper B; (b) (c). Moving trajectory of Gripper B

In this situation, the false detection of the gripper position may occur, and improper information could be fed to the controller, resulting a severe error in positioning the gripper in the next interval. To resolve the occlusion problem, the position of the corresponding gripper will be substituted by an estimated position when lost of track occurs.

During the manipulation, the gripper could be blocked at the t^{th} time step. This kind of lost tracking phenomenon is not common in the knot tying and it may only happen in two or three times. As illustrated in Fig. 10 (b) and (c), the path of the occluded gripper was sketched. The planned 2D trajectory in this period was similar to a second-order polynomial curve. Using the information in previous ε steps, the prediction model can be established as:

$$\vec{G}_{N,R}(t - \varepsilon | t - 1) = S_{t-\varepsilon|t-1} \cdot J_{t-1} \quad (24)$$

where $\vec{G}_{N,R}(t - \varepsilon | t - 1)$ denotes the matrix containing the information of gripper positions in the previous ε steps, $S_{t-\varepsilon|t-1}$ is the time step matrix, and J_{t-1} denotes the parameters of the estimation model, which can be computed as:

$$J_{t-1} = \begin{bmatrix} j_{11} & j_{12} \\ j_{21} & j_{22} \\ j_{31} & j_{32} \end{bmatrix}_{t-1} = \begin{bmatrix} S_{t-\varepsilon}^2 & S_{t-\varepsilon} & 1 \\ S_{t-\varepsilon+1}^2 & S_{t-\varepsilon+1} & 1 \\ \dots & \dots & \dots \\ S_{t-1}^2 & S_{t-1} & 1 \end{bmatrix}^{-1} \cdot \begin{bmatrix} y_{N,R}(t - \varepsilon) & z_{N,R}(t - \varepsilon) \\ y_{N,R}(t - \varepsilon + 1) & z_{N,R}(t - \varepsilon + 1) \\ \dots & \dots \\ y_{N,R}(t - 1) & z_{N,R}(t - 1) \end{bmatrix} \quad (25)$$

The matrix J_t will iteratively updated at each time interval t . Thus, the occluded position $\hat{G}_{N,R}(t)$ can be estimated as:

$$\hat{G}_{N,R}(t) = S_t \cdot J_{t-1} \quad (26)$$

If successive occlusions happen in the manipulation, the pre-predicted locations can be taken as the input, and iteratively update the model parameters. The general procedures of our control scheme were summarized in Table. II.

TABLE II: Algorithm 2 - The general procedures of the control scheme

1	for each loop n do
2	After driven by $\vec{G}_{N,R}(n)$
3	$\vec{G}_{N,i}(n) \leftarrow$ Algorithm 1
4	if ($GripperN \leftarrow$ Not Occlusion)
5	$\vec{G}_{N,R}(n) = \mathcal{T}_N \cdot [\vec{G}_{N,i}(n) - \vec{O}_N]$
6	end
7	if ($GripperN \leftarrow$ Occlusion)
8	$\hat{G}_{N,R}(n) = S_t \cdot S_{n-\varepsilon n-1}^{-1} \cdot \vec{G}_{N,R}(n - \varepsilon n - 1)$
9	end
10	$\vec{u}_N(n) \leftarrow \frac{LQ \text{ Controller}}{\{ \vec{G}_{N,R}(n), \vec{P}_{N,R}(n+1) \}}$
11	$\vec{G}_{N,R}(n+1) \leftarrow \{ \vec{G}_{N,R}(n), \vec{u}_N(n) \}$ (Eq. 19 and 22)
12	Manipulator $\xleftarrow{Send} \vec{G}_{N,R}(n+1)$
13	end

IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS OF ROBOTIC KNOT TYING

A. Accuracy Tests of the Visual System

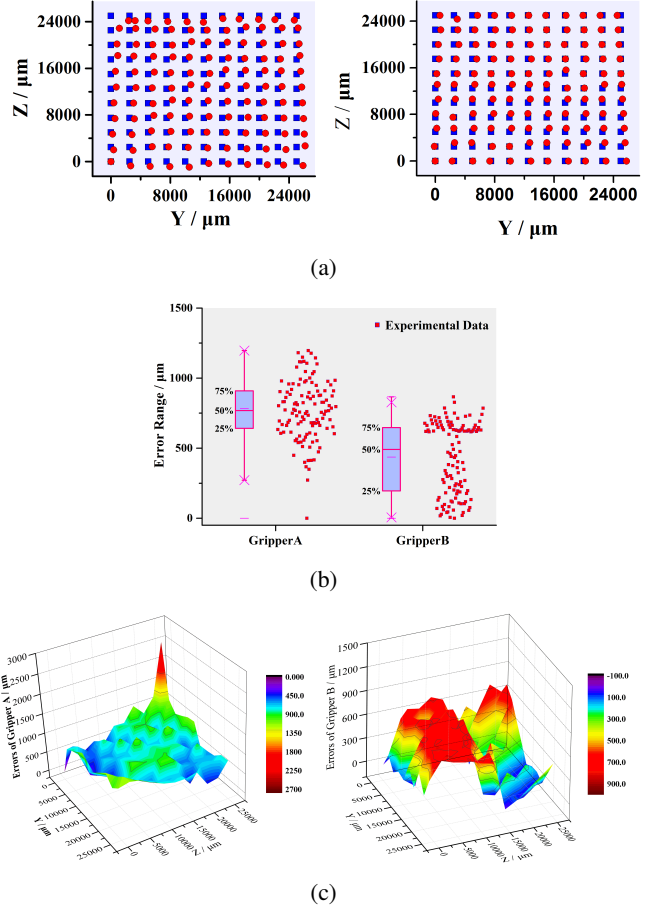


Fig. 11: Test results of the visual servoing system. (a). Planned and calculated positions of two grippers in Y-Z coordinates; (b). Box chart of test error results; (c). Errors between planned and calculated locations of two grippers at testing points

The automated process of the knot tying relies on visual feedback to compute the control inputs for task executions. Hence, it is important to ensure the accuracy of the vision-based evaluation method.

Prior to the knot tying operation, the gripper was first manipulated to the lower left corner of the camera frame and this position was taken as the initial position. Then, this gripper was moved at an increment of $2.5mm$ along the Y and Z directions to reach different points in the YZ plane. Image coordinates of the gripper were evaluated and transformed back to the robot coordinates for comparison with the theoretical values from the encoder. A set of 121 points were collected and results were summarized in Fig. 11 (a). The manipulating errors between the vision-based computed values and the input values were also computed and plotted in Fig. 11 (b).

It is noticed that the evaluation method provides comparable results on both grippers. The average errors of Gripper A and Gripper B were $0.78mm$ and $0.43mm$, and the largest error of two grippers was less than $1.25mm$. Besides, from

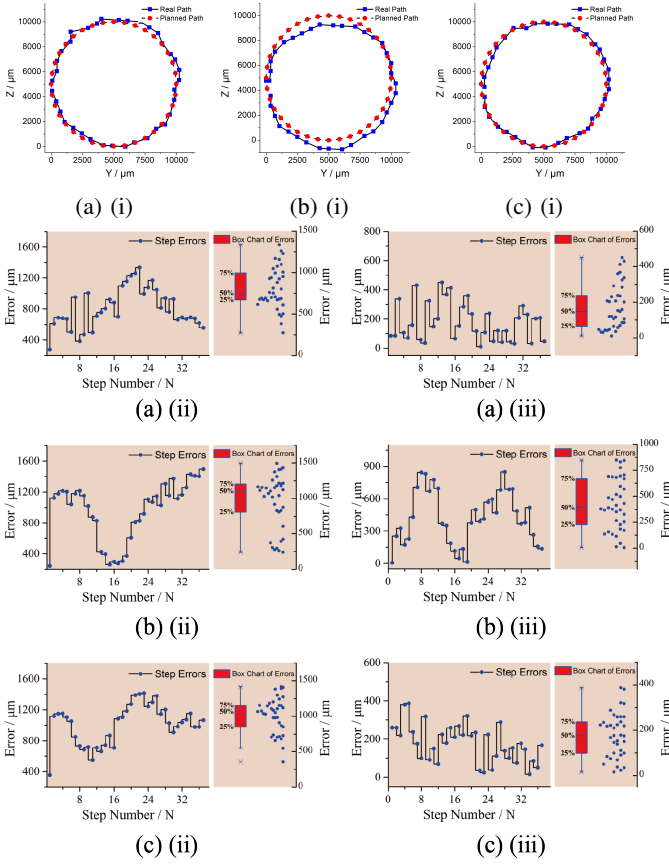


Fig. 12: (a)-(c). Experimental results from three trials using: $\mathcal{T}_1 = 3$, $\mathcal{T}_2 = 0.2$, Radius = $5000\mu m$. (i). Planned and real trajectories of the gripper; (ii). Time-dependent step errors of the gripper; (iii). Time-Independent step errors of the gripper

the analysis of the standard deviations of all these data, error tolerances of two grippers were $0.78mm \pm 0.26mm$ and $0.43mm \pm 0.25mm$. Considering our experimental set-up that has a $25mm \times 25mm$ plane workspace, the maximum values of tolerances $1.04mm$ and $0.68mm$ can be regarded as acceptable. Setting the bigger tolerance value as the threshold, for all 242 testing points, only 30 of them exceeded this limit.

It is also intuitively noticed from Fig. 11 (c) that large errors of Gripper A occurred when the position approached the image corner. The main reason might result from the camera distortion at the boundary, but the overall performance and accuracy of the object detection algorithm were proven to be effective for this suture looping task.

B. Selections of Tuning Parameters

In Section III-C, it was clarified that Q and \mathcal{L} should be properly selected by tuning \mathcal{T}_1 and \mathcal{T}_2 . To determine the optimal values for the tuning parameters in the LQ controller, one gripper was commanded to move along a round trajectory with a radius of $5mm$, and tracking performances with different tuning parameters were examined.

For the first set of the tuning parameters, three trials were conducted and the results were shown in Fig. 12. It was observed that the gripper can successfully follow the planned

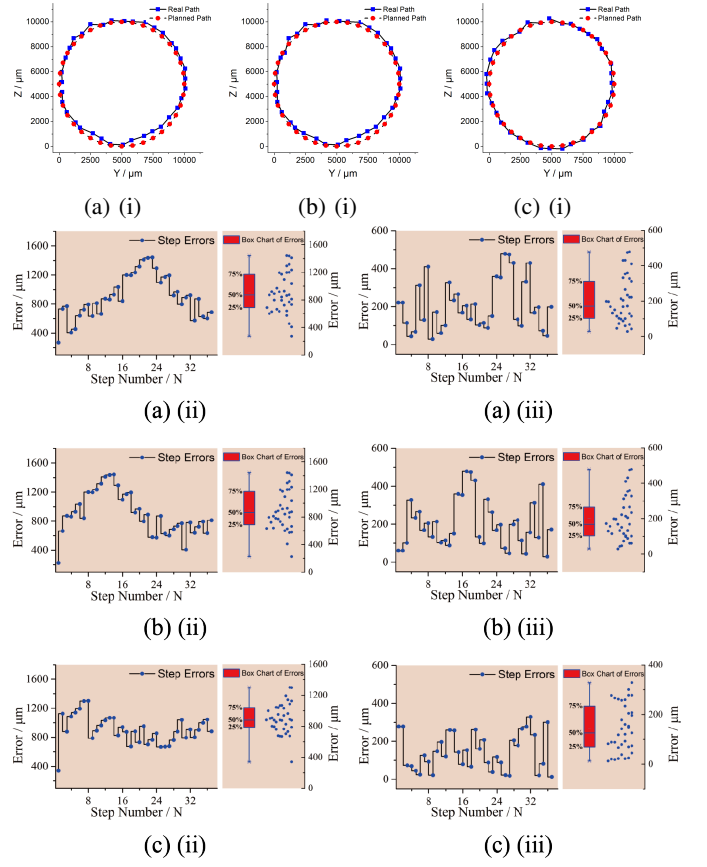


Fig. 13: (a)-(c). Experimental results from three trials using: $\mathcal{T}_1 = 5$, $\mathcal{T}_2 = 0.1$, Radius = $5000\mu m$. (i). Planned and real trajectories of the gripper; (ii). Time-dependent step errors of the gripper; (iii). Time-Independent step errors of the gripper

path in all three trials. Errors between real positions and planned positions in each time step can be treated as the time-dependent errors. They were sketched in Fig. 12. (a)(ii) (b)(ii) and (c)(ii). The average value of them was $0.92mm$.

Referring to the time-independent errors, which can be calculated as the shortest distance between the real trajectories and the standard circle, their values were plotted in Fig. 12. (a)(iii) (b)(iii) and (c)(iii). These outcomes revealed the deviations between the planned and the real trajectories. The average value of these time-independent errors was calculated as $0.26mm$.

From this group, server errors can be noticed, especially in the second trial. In this regard, the second set of parameters aiming to reduce these instabilities were selected. We increased the value of \mathcal{T}_1 , and decreased the value of \mathcal{T}_2 . Similarly, three trials were carried out and the results were shown in Fig. 13.

As expected, the gripper can still successfully follow the planned trajectory. Comparing to the first group, the average values of the time-dependent and time-independent errors were reduced to $0.89mm$ and $0.18mm$, respectively. The decrease of the time-independent error showed an improvement of the control scheme in the trajectory tracking performance. The error values tend to be more steady as compared with the

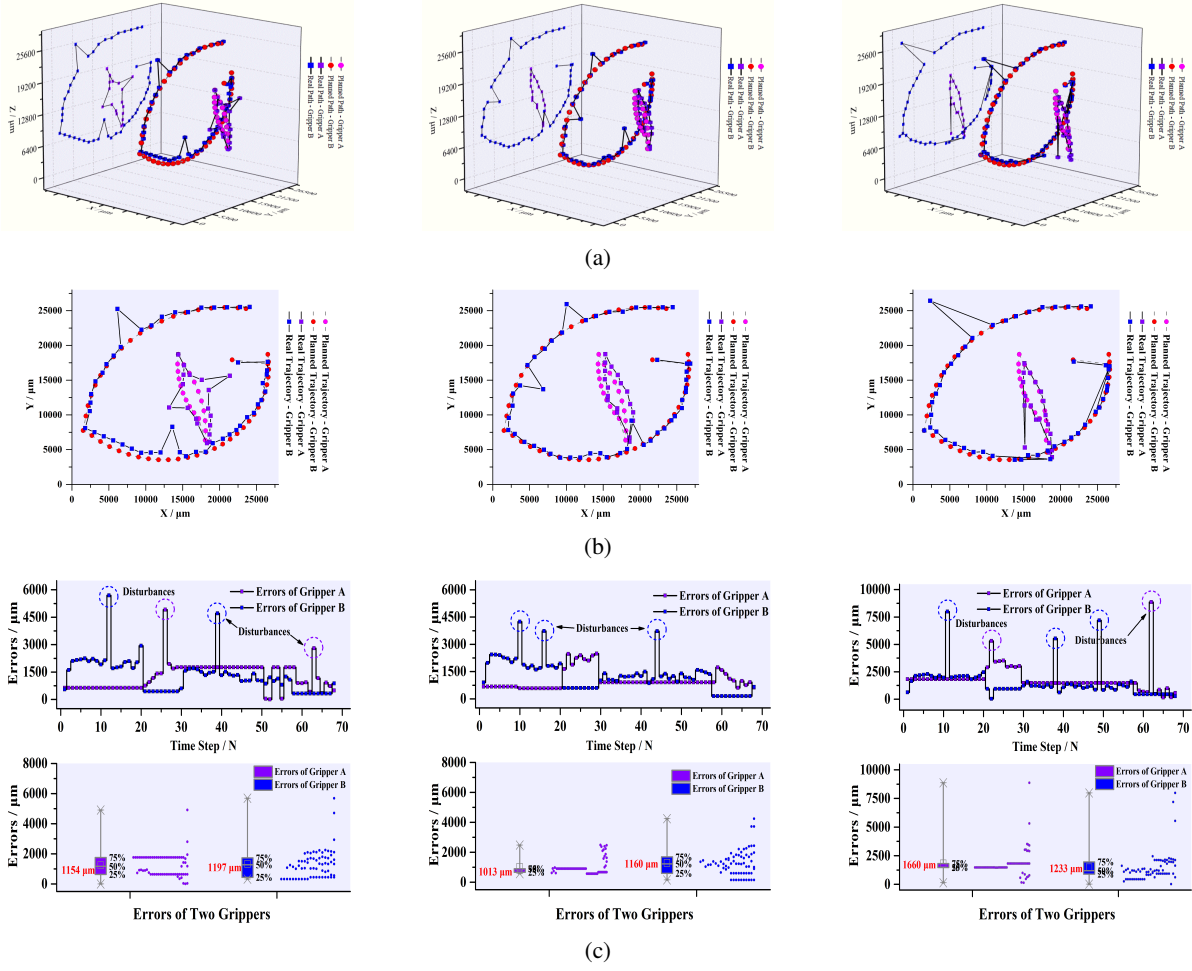


Fig. 14: Experimental results of suture looping under external impulse disturbances. $\mathcal{T}_1 = 5$, $\mathcal{T}_2 = 0.1$, unit: μm . (a). Planned and real spatial trajectories of two grippers, with trajectory projection in Y-Z plane; (b). Planned and real trajectories of two grippers in Y-Z coordinates; (c). Step errors via time steps of two grippers under impulse disturbances

previous group.

Different \mathcal{T}_1 and \mathcal{T}_2 were also examined, but there were no obvious improvements in the tracking performance. To avoid the over-tuning, $\mathcal{T}_1 = 5$ and $\mathcal{T}_2 = 0.1$ were selected.

C. Control Scheme Under External Impulse Disturbances

The robustness of the LQ control method is another vital element in automated RAS. External disturbances might happen in the surgery, and they could be applied to grippers as sudden impulses. To emulate such effect, biases were randomly exerted to the grippers and the response of the control scheme was evaluated.

During the test, grippers were commanded to construct loops without the suture by following the planned trajectory. Random biases were added to the gripper original inputs which shifted the grippers away from their planned positions. A total of 12 disturbances were added throughout the whole trajectories. With fixed X coordinates, three groups of the planned and the real trajectories were sketched in Fig. 14 (a). The corresponding paths in Y-Z plane were shown in Fig. 14 (b), and the error analysis was shown in Fig. 14 (c).

It can be noticed the LQ controller can quickly respond to such deviations and guide the gripper back to the planned trajectory. Since the targets are moving over time, prompt reaction to such sharp biases fully satisfies the requirements of the dynamic task, which can minimize influence from external disturbances and ensure the safety of the wound suturing.

The average values concerning the time-dependent errors of the two grippers were computed and listed in Table III. Referring to these results, they were within the range between 1.0mm to 1.7mm.

TABLE III: Mean Values of Time-dependent Errors ($\mathcal{T}_1 = 5$, $\mathcal{T}_2 = 0.1$, unit: μm)

Experiment Number	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Gripper A	1154	1013	1660
Gripper B	1197	1160	1233

D. Estimations of the Lost Track Points

Occlusions due to the presence of one gripper could result in the lost of track of another gripper's position in the image



Fig. 15: Lost-tracking of grippers in the suture looping process

frame as mentioned in Section III-C.

During the operation, Gripper B might be occluded by Gripper A as shown in Fig. 15. To resolve such problem, a second-order prediction model was established. Four groups of tests were conducted to validate the feasibility of the approach.

In the first two groups, there were no occlusions during the looping procedure, but we assumed that the visual system could not detect the position of Gripper B at some certain time steps. Hence, the prediction model could be employed to calculate its location. Treating the real locations as the ground truth, and comparing with the predicted ones, the accuracy of the prediction model could be preliminarily evaluated. The results of Group 1 and 2 were shown in Fig. 16. The prediction model was generated using the data from the previous six steps, and the parameters of these two models were listed in Table IV.

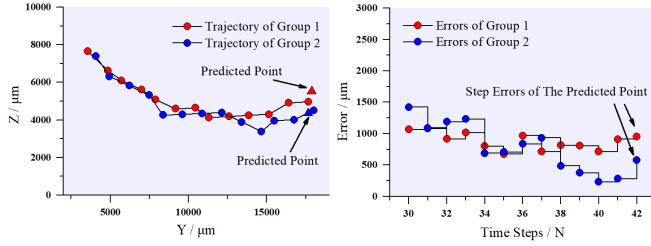


Fig. 16: Trajectories of Gripper B, comparison between the predicted and real points

TABLE IV: Parameters of J - Group 1 and Group 2

Group 1		Group 2	
j_{11}	j_{12}	j_{11}	j_{12}
35.18	100.29	-32.59	76.86
j_{21}	j_{22}	j_{21}	j_{22}
-1494.3	-7668.3	3672.1	-6017.1
j_{31}	j_{32}	j_{31}	j_{32}
18578	150699	-79087	121511
Errors compared with planned positions $\bar{\mathcal{P}}_{N,R}$			
950.1 μm		579.9 μm	
Errors compared with real positions $\bar{\mathcal{G}}_{N,R}$			
595.3 μm		390.4 μm	

In Fig. 16, the estimated Y-Z coordinates, as well as the step errors of Gripper B at the certain time step were indicated. The step errors were 950.1 μm and 579.9 μm . Comparing to the ground truth, errors between the predicted points and the real ones were only 595.3 μm and 390.4 μm , which were acceptable in our task.

In Group 3, experiments with the real lost track scenario when looping the suture were examined. By employing the

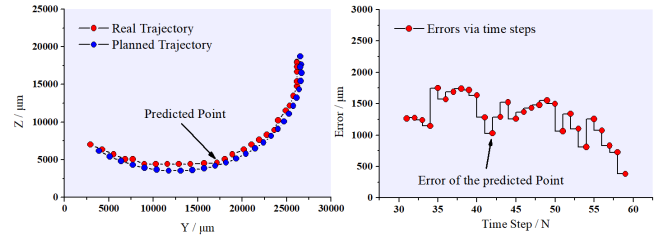


Fig. 17: Predicted location, real and planned trajectories of the gripper, and errors at each time step - Group 3

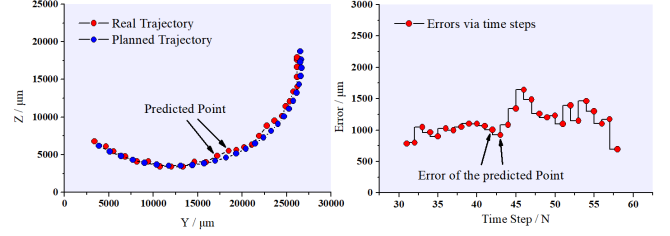


Fig. 18: Predicted location, real and planned trajectories of the gripper, and errors at each time step - Group 4

TABLE V: Parameters of J - Group 3 and Group 4

Group 3		Group 4			
		Model 1		Model 2	
j_{11}	j_{12}	j_{11}	j_{12}	j_{11}	j_{12}
23.21	8.75	-0.73	104.79	-0.51	75.71
j_{21}	j_{22}	j_{21}	j_{22}	j_{21}	j_{22}
-456.4	-659.5	1350.2	-8027.1	1332.4	-5707.2
j_{31}	j_{32}	j_{31}	j_{32}	j_{31}	j_{32}
-4637	16840	-38222	157155	-37867	110944
Errors compared with planned positions $\bar{P}_{N,R}$					
1027.3 μm		1005.4 μm		922.5 μm	

prediction model, the position of the lost track could be computed. In Fig. 17, the lost position was figured out, and it was noticed the predicted point could be smoothly fitted into the entire trajectory. Besides, the parameters of the prediction model were listed in Table. V, and the step error of the lost track point was computed as 1027.3 μm , which was maintained at a stable level.

In Group 4, successive occlusions happened in the manipulation when Gripper B was occluded in the camera frame at two continuous steps. To figure out the 1st lost track point, the prediction model was adopted. Treating the 1st predicted location as an input, the prediction model can be iteratively updated to estimate the 2nd lost track point.

The parameters of prediction models in two successive were also listed in Table. V, and with these on-line computed models, the lost track coordinates were figured out and shown in Fig. 18. Two predicted locations were smoothly fitted into the overall trajectory, and the time-dependent errors were 1005.4 μm and 922.5 μm respectively, which were also illustrated in the figure. It could be noticed there were no abrupt increase in the error during the manipulation, and their magnitude was maintained at a stable level, which revealed that the proposed scheme was robust to internal and external errors.



Fig. 19: Snapshots of the suture looping procedure - Captured from the CCD camera frame

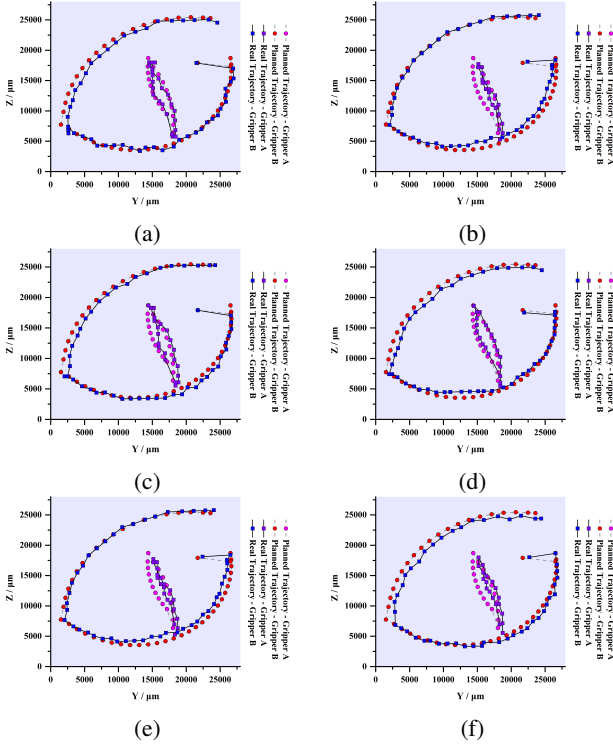


Fig. 20: Planned and real trajectories in the experiment. (a)-(f). Trajectories from Group 1 to Group 6

E. Experimental Results of the Suture Looping

Finally, the complete suture looping process was examined with a suture on an artificial tissue. The suture was stitched through the wound on the tissue, and Gripper B was manipulated to grasp the suture's leading segment. Gripper A was positioned with respect to the needle exit point, and trajectories were generated using Eq. (1) to (5). Combining with the visual feedback, inputs to the manipulators were computed using the LQ control method. Snapshots from one trial of the suture looping were shown in Fig. 19.

It can be noticed that two grippers followed their designed paths, and one loop was successfully constructed around Gripper A, consuming an average time around 408 seconds. In addition, suture slippage or collision did not occur during the operation. To comprehensively demonstrate the proposed

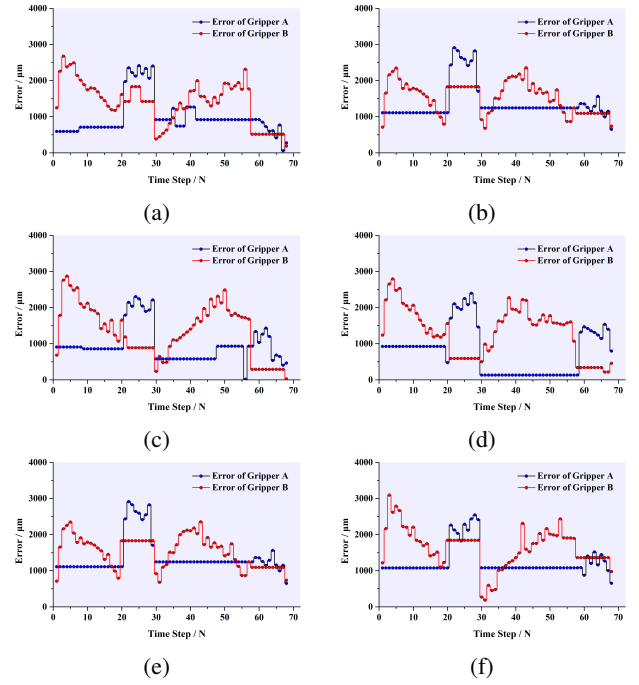


Fig. 21: Experimental errors between the planned and real trajectories via time steps. (a)-(f). Experimental Data from Group 1 to Group 6

TABLE VI: Mean values of step errors in the suture looping procedures; Parameters: $\mathcal{T}_1 = 5$, $\mathcal{T}_2 = 0.1$; Unit: μm

Experiment	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gripper A	987	1369	955	779	1369	1243
Gripper B	1402	1538	1340	1312	1538	1640

approach, six trials of suture looping manipulation were conducted. The planned trajectories, as well as the trajectories of the grippers evaluated from the vision information, were shown in Fig. 20. Calculating the mean values of the time-dependent errors in these trials, outcomes were listed in Table. VI. Besides, errors via time steps were shown in Fig. 21.

When adding the surgical suture to the process, larger deviations between the two trajectories can be observed. The increase in the tracking error was mainly due to the tension

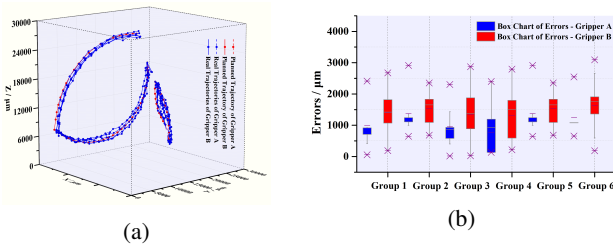


Fig. 22: (a). Planned trajectory and six groups of real trajectories obtained in the experiment; (b). Error distributions of Gripper A and Gripper B in six suture looping manipulations

force to shift the gripper position. Slight variations in the preload tension in the suture between the six trials also caused discrepancies in the position errors as shown in Fig. 20 and 21. Treating X coordinates of two grippers as fixed values, the spatial trajectories of grippers in six trials were sketched in Fig. 22 (a). With all error data, error distributions of two grippers were illustrated in Fig. 22 (b).

In Table. VI, the average step errors of Gripper A and B in six experiments were 1.1mm and 1.5mm , respectively. Gripper B had larger errors, which was due to its longer travel distance in the operation. Despite these errors, two grippers still successfully followed the planned paths and completed six trials, and no suture slippage or collision occurred.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, a complete set of solutions was proposed towards automating the suture looping procedure in surgical knot tying. Performances of the looping process through an in-house robotic system were carefully excogitated and investigated. To design efficient and reliable trajectories that were feasible to the task of suture looping, especially to the wound suturing scenario, equations leading the grippers to complete the procedure were formulated. The grippers of the system were coordinated such that the workspace required to construct the suture loop could be reduced, while issues such as suture slippage and collision could be eliminated. By mapping the coordinates between the image and the robot frames, the real-time positions of the grippers were evaluated from the camera and fed to the LQ control scheme to generate the inputs to the system. In the experiments, the accuracy of the object detection algorithm was validated, and different groups of tuning parameters for the LQ controller were investigated. The robustness of the control approach was examined by testing the performance of the system under external impulse disturbances and the lost track conditions during the looping process. The robotic system was examined to carry out the entire task, and the suture looping operations can be successfully conducted in all six trials, which validate the feasibility of the entire vision-based control system. This research provides a simple and efficient method to automate the tedious suture loop process and also proves a promising future of standardizing and automating similar subtasks in surgery using robots.

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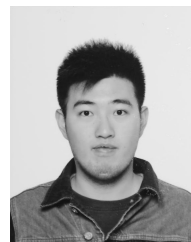


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