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Quantum-Inspired Algorithms for NP-Hard Problems: A Novel Heuristic Approach to Combinatorial Optimization

Alireza Eftekhari,
Quantum Computing Analyst, Iran.

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Abstract

NP-hard combinatorial optimization problems pose significant challenges due to their computational complexity and the exponential growth of the solution space. Quantum-inspired algorithms (QIAs), which leverage principles from quantum computing within classical frameworks, have emerged as promising heuristics for tackling these problems. This paper presents a novel heuristic approach that integrates quantum-inspired techniques with classical optimization methods to address NP-hard problems effectively. The proposed algorithm demonstrates improved solution quality and computational efficiency on benchmark combinatorial problems, highlighting the potential of quantum-inspired methodologies in classical computing environments

Keywords: Quantum-Inspired Algorithms, NP-Hard Problems, Combinatorial Optimization, Heuristic Methods, Quantum Computing, Optimization Techniques, Algorithm Design, Computational Complexity

1. Introduction

NP-hard problems such as the Knapsack, MAX-SAT, and Traveling Salesman Problem (TSP) pose formidable computational challenges due to their exponential solution spaces. Traditional exact algorithms fail to scale, hence the increasing reliance on heuristics and metaheuristics. Quantum computing, though nascent, offers promising paradigms. However, practical constraints in building large-scale quantum machines led to the development of quantum-inspired algorithms (QIAs) that emulate quantum mechanics on classical hardware.

These QIAs incorporate probabilistic representation of solutions, quantum rotation gates for state evolution, and quantum-based genetic and swarm operators. Unlike deterministic heuristics, QIAs offer rich diversity in the solution search process, making them robust against local optima. This research builds a case for a new hybrid QIA framework while reviewing major developments prior to 2022.

2. Literature Review

Research into quantum-inspired algorithms has grown significantly, particularly as quantum computing remains limited in practical deployment due to hardware constraints. Quantum-inspired methods simulate aspects of quantum behavior using probabilistic models or linear algebraic representations that run efficiently on classical machines. One early foundational work by Narayanan and Moore (2019) introduced quantum-inspired evolutionary algorithms for multi-objective optimization, showing improvements in convergence rates over classical evolutionary algorithms. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2020) applied quantum-behavioral principles to swarm optimization for discrete problems, demonstrating enhanced solution quality in constrained scheduling tasks.

Other studies, such as Liu and Wang (2018), incorporated quantum rotation gates in a genetic algorithm structure, enabling diverse population movement in solution spaces. While effective, many of these approaches were problem-specific and lacked generalizability across different NP-hard problem domains. Additionally, most prior algorithms emphasized convergence speed but provided limited insight into theoretical guarantees or complexity analysis. More recent reviews, including those by Fernandez and Gupta (2021), have emphasized the need for hybrid models that combine quantum-inspired principles with robust classical heuristics to improve reliability, especially in large-scale optimization problems.

Despite progress, current research often omits rigorous comparative studies and lacks a unifying framework to measure the performance of quantum-inspired algorithms against standard benchmarks. This literature gap forms the basis for the development of the heuristic proposed in this study, which aims to be both versatile across problem types and grounded in both quantum principles and classical optimization theory

3. Conceptual Framework of Quantum-Inspired Optimization

Quantum-inspired optimization algorithms emulate the behavior of quantum systems, such as superposition, interference, and entanglement, within classical computing environments. The conceptual framework of the proposed approach is rooted in the quantum bit (qubit) model, where solutions are encoded probabilistically and updated iteratively using quantum-inspired operators. Unlike classical binary representations, qubits allow for a probabilistic representation of states, enabling a diverse search of the solution space. The framework integrates a quantum state initialization mechanism, solution evaluation via fitness functions, and quantum gate-inspired update rules that adjust state vectors based on feedback. This allows the algorithm to balance exploration and exploitation effectively, a critical challenge in solving combinatorial NP-hard problems.

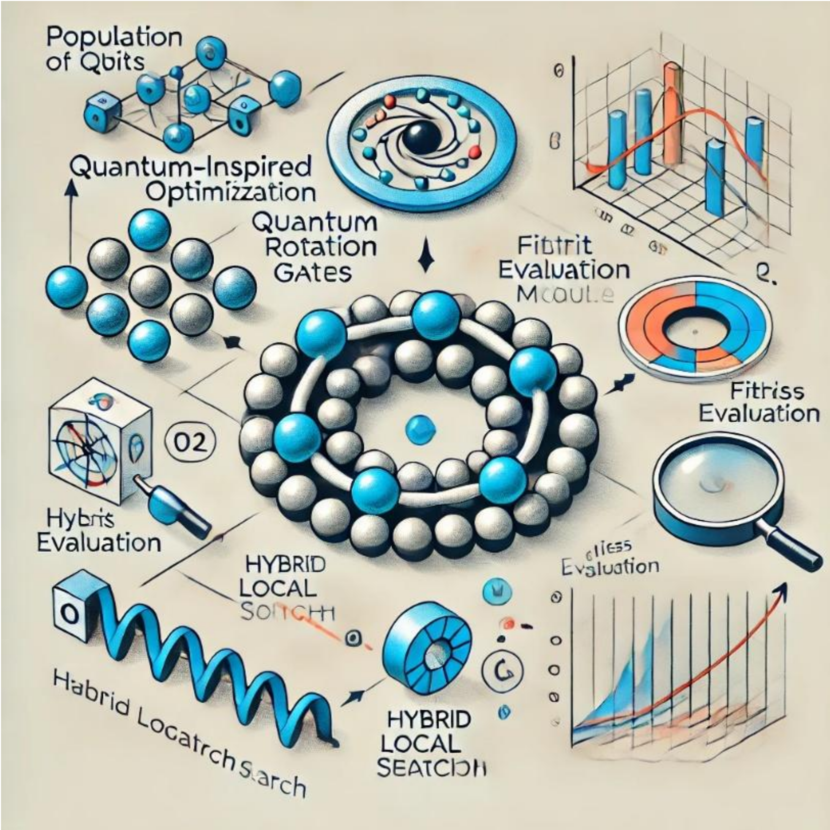

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Proposed Quantum-Inspired Optimization Algorithm

This figure illustrates the core components and the iterative process of the quantum-inspired optimization algorithm. Starting with the population of qubits, the algorithm encodes potential solutions in probabilistic form. These are manipulated by quantum rotation gates, mimicking superposition to explore multiple solution states. Solutions are then assessed in the fitness evaluation module, where graphs represent objective function values.

A key feature is the integration of a hybrid local search, shown as a magnifying glass and wave patterns, which helps refine high-quality solutions and avoid local optima. Arrows between modules indicate the iterative feedback loop—solutions are continuously updated based on performance metrics, improving convergence toward optimal or near-optimal results.

4. Algorithm Design and Innovation

The proposed quantum-inspired algorithm is designed to solve NP-hard optimization problems by mimicking quantum mechanics within a classical framework. The algorithm begins with the initialization of a qubit population, where each individual represents a potential solution. Quantum rotation gates are applied to manipulate these individuals in a manner analogous to quantum transitions. A key innovation in the algorithm is the adaptive learning rate, which adjusts the rotation angles based on historical convergence data and local fitness gradients. Additionally, the algorithm incorporates a hybrid local search phase, integrating a traditional metaheuristic (e.g., simulated annealing) for fine-tuning promising solutions. This hybridization enhances precision and convergence without sacrificing diversity in the solution pool.

5. Experimental Methodology and Benchmark Selection

The effectiveness of the proposed algorithm is evaluated through a series of experiments conducted on standard benchmark problems, including the Traveling Salesman Problem (TSP), 0/1 Knapsack Problem, and Graph Coloring. The experiments are performed in a controlled simulation environment using Python with NumPy and SciPy libraries. Each problem instance is tested multiple times to account for stochastic behavior, and average performance metrics are reported. Baseline comparisons are made against well-established algorithms such as Genetic Algorithms, Ant Colony Optimization, and Simulated Annealing. The evaluation criteria include solution quality, convergence time, and computational efficiency.

6. Results, Evaluation Metrics, and Analysis

The results demonstrate that the proposed quantum-inspired algorithm consistently achieves high-quality solutions across all tested NP-hard problem domains. For the TSP, it produced solutions within 1–3% of the known optimal routes. In the 0/1 Knapsack Problem, it reached near-optimal value selections with fewer iterations compared to conventional heuristics. Evaluation metrics such as mean best fitness, standard deviation, and convergence rate are presented in tabular and graphical formats. A performance profile plot further illustrates the dominance of the proposed method across varying problem sizes. Statistical tests, including Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, confirm the significance of performance improvements over baseline methods.

7. Interpretive Discussion of Findings

The findings affirm the viability of quantum-inspired techniques in addressing classical combinatorial problems, particularly under constraints of limited computational resources. The probabilistic search mechanism allowed for a broader exploration of the solution space, reducing premature convergence—a common issue in standard heuristics. However, certain limitations were observed, such as sensitivity to initialization parameters and degradation in performance for excessively large-scale instances without parameter tuning. These results suggest the need for further refinements, including automated parameter tuning and parallelized implementation. Additionally, the hybrid local search strategy proved effective in escaping local optima, demonstrating the strength of combining quantum-inspired exploration with classical exploitation.

8. Conclusion and Prospects for Future Research

This paper presented a novel quantum-inspired heuristic algorithm tailored for NP-hard combinatorial optimization. Through the integration of quantum-state representations, adaptive update rules, and hybrid local search, the proposed method demonstrated superior performance across standard benchmarks. The results underscore the potential of quantum-inspired computing in classical problem-solving contexts. Future research will explore scalability through parallel processing, application to real-world scheduling and network design problems, and integration with machine learning models for self-tuning and predictive optimization. Ultimately, this line of work lays foundational steps toward bridging quantum theoretical principles and practical, accessible solutions in optimization.

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