Preface

Between April and July of 2001, I gave the Nachdiplom lecture series at ETH in Zurich. The lectures concerned the study of some non-linear partial differential equations related to curvature invariants in conformal geometry. A classic example of such a differential equation on a compact surface is the Gaussian curvature equation under conformal change of metrics. On manifolds of dimension four, an analogue of the Gaussian curvature is the Pfaffian integrand in the Gauss-Bonnet formula: on a Riemannian manifold \((M,g)\) of dimension four, denote the Weyl–Schouten tensor \(A\) as

\[
A_{ij} = R_{ij} - \frac{R}{6} g_{ij}
\]

where \(R_{ij}\) is the Ricci tensor and \(R\) is the scalar curvature of the Riemannian metric \(g\); denote the second elementary symmetric function of \(A\) as

\[
\sigma_2(A) = \sum_{i<j} \lambda_i \lambda_j = \frac{1}{2^4} (Tr A)^2 - |A|^2,
\]

where \(\lambda_i\) (\(1 \leq i \leq 4\)) are the eigenvalues of \(A\); then one has the Gauss Bonnet formula

\[
8\pi^2(\chi M) = \int \left(\frac{1}{4}|W|^2 + \sigma_2(A)\right) dv,
\]

where \(W\) denotes the Weyl tensor. Under conformal change of metrics, \(|W|^2 dv\) is point-wisely conformally invariant, thus \(\int \sigma_2(A) dv\) is conformally invariant. The main focus of these lecture notes is the study of the partial differential equation describing the curvature polynomial \(\sigma_2(A)\) under conformal change of metrics.

The notes are organized as follows: In Chapters 1 and 2, I discuss the equation prescribing Gaussian curvature on compact surface, provide background, and describe the main analytic tool, Moser–Trudinger inequalities, in the study. In Chapter 3, I describe the connection between Moser–Trudinger inequality to the Polyakov formula for the functional determinant of the Laplacian operator on compact surfaces. In Chapters 4 to 6, I discuss general conformal invariants, the connection of conformal invariants to conformal covariant operators on manifolds of dimension three and higher, with emphasis on a special 4-th operator (called the Paneitz operator) on manifolds of dimension 4. Finally in Chapters 7–10, I study the connection of the Paneitz operator to the curvature polynomial \(\sigma_2(A)\) described above. I also report the work of Chang–Gursky–Yang [23] on the existence on manifolds \((M^4, g)\) of solutions with \(\sigma_2(A) > 0\) under the assumptions that \(\int \sigma_1(A) > 0\) and \(g\) be of positive Yamabe class.

The lectures were given at an early stage, when the study of the fully non-linear PDEs like that of \(\sigma_2(A)\) were first developed. Since then, there has been much progress both in the form of existence and regularity results on such equations. Readers are referred to the article by Gursky–Viaclovsky [56], where a simpler proof, from a somewhat different perspective, of the main result in [23] discussed in these notes is given. There have also been important results on the
existence of general conformal invariants by Graham–Zworski [50] and Fefferman–
Graham [44]. There is also a more recent survey article [20] for recent developments
in this research field.

I wish first to thank Heiko von der Mosel, who originally took the notes
that form the basis of this publication. Without his assistance in organizing and
correcting, these notes could not have been published. I also wish to thank Meijun
Zhu, Fengbo Hang, Paul Yang, Sophie Chen, and Edward Fan for reading the
manuscript and making many useful suggestions. Finally, I would like to thank
the participants at ETH during the lectures for their input and interest; particular
thanks go to Michael Struwe for arranging for a very rewarding visit at ETH.

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September, 2004