FOOTPOINT MOTION OF THE CONTINUUM EMISSION IN THE 2002 SEPTEMBER 30 WHITE-LIGHT FLARE

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Received 2005 July 25; accepted 2005 December 19

ABSTRACT

We present observations of the 2002 September 30 white-light flare, in which the optical continuum emission near the Hα line is enhanced by ~10%. The continuum emission exhibits a close temporal and spatial coincidence with the hard X-ray (HXR) footpoint observed by RHESSI. We find a systematic motion of the flare footpoint seen in the continuum emission; the motion history follows roughly that of the HXR source. This gives strong evidence that this white-light flare is powered by heating of nonthermal electrons. We note that the HXR spectrum in 10–50 keV is quite soft with γ ≈ 7 and there is no HXR emission above 50 keV. The magnetic configuration of the flaring region implies magnetic reconnection taking place at a relatively low altitude during the flare. Despite a very soft spectrum of the electron beam, its energy content is still sufficient to produce the heating in the lower atmosphere, where the continuum emission originates. This white-light flare highlights the importance of radiative back-warming to transport the energy below when direct heating by beam electrons is obviously impossible.

Subject headings: Sun: flares — Sun: magnetic fields — Sun: X-rays, gamma rays

1. INTRODUCTION

Compared to ordinary solar flares, white-light flares (WLFs) manifest themselves with an enhanced emission in the optical continuum of a few or tens of percent, or even more in some extreme cases. The continuum emission originates in the lower chromosphere and below. Therefore, research on WLFs can reveal critical clues to energy transport and heating mechanisms in the solar lower atmosphere (Neidig 1989; Ding et al. 1999). Most of the WLFs observed so far belong to type I WLFs, which are spectrally characterized with a Balmer and Paschen jump and strong broadened hydrogen Balmer lines (Machado et al. 1986). Observations usually demonstrate a close temporal correspondence between the continuum and the hard X-ray (HXR) emissions in these WLFs (e.g., Hudson et al. 1992, 2006; Fang & Ding 1995; Neidig & Kane 1993; Matthews et al. 2003; Metcalf et al. 2003). This implies that the continuum emission is closely related to nonthermal heating of energetic electrons, which are assumed to be accelerated in the corona and then stream downward to the chromosphere. However, this process alone, in most cases, cannot efficiently produce the continuum emission, since very few electrons (E ≥ 200 keV) can penetrate to the lower chromosphere and below (Ding et al. 2003b). Therefore, radiative back-warming is further invoked to transfer the enhanced chromospheric radiation to deeper layers to produce the heating there and finally an enhanced continuum emission (Hudson 1972; Aboudarham & Hénoux 1987; Machado et al. 1989; Metcalf et al. 1990a, 1990b; Gan & Mauas 1994; Ding et al. 2003b). A recent radiative hydrodynamic model of solar flares, which includes the electron beam heating and radiative transport in a consistent way, reproduces a continuum enhancement comparable to the observed values (Allred et al. 2005). On the other hand, observations show that in some few very energetic events, electrons can be accelerated to very high energies, e.g., 300–800 keV (Xu et al. 2004, 2006). In such cases, a large amount of nonthermal electrons can penetrate deep into the atmosphere, and direct collisional heating may play an important role in producing the continuum emission. It has been widely accepted that nonthermal electrons, accelerated by magnetic reconnection in the corona, stream downward along magnetic fields and produce the HXR emission in the chromosphere via bremsstrahlung radiation (Brown 1971). According to this scenario, the apparent motions of HXR sources reflect the successive reconnection process between neighboring field lines in the corona (e.g., Qiu et al. 2002). Observations of footpoint motions can thus provide a test or constraint on theoretical models of solar flares. There are, up to now, quite a few observations revealing motions of HXR sources indicative of successive reconnection under various magnetic topologies (e.g., Sakao et al. 2000; Krucker et al. 2003). However, few examples have shown the motions of white-light continuum kernels that are related to the HXR sources. In this paper, we present observations of a white-light flare on 2002 September 30. We examine the temporal and spatial relationship between the continuum emission and the HXR emission during the flare and discuss its energetics. In particular, we discover a fairly good correlation between the motion history of the white-light kernel and the corresponding HXR source. We explain the observed continuum emission in terms of nonthermal heating by electron beams followed by the radiative back-warming effect.

2. OBSERVATIONS AND DATA ANALYSIS

According to the Solar-Geophysical Data (2002 September), the flare of 2002 September 30 is an M2.1/1B event that occurred in NOAA Active Region 0134 (N13°, E10°). The profiles of Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite (GOES) soft X-ray (SXR) fluxes show that the flare began at ~01:44 UT and peaked at ~01:50 UT. The hard X-ray (HXR) emission up to 50 keV of this flare was observed by the Reuven Ramaty High-Energy Solar Spectroscopic Imager (RHESSI), which provides unprecedented high-resolution imaging and spectroscopy capacity for solar flares (Lin et al. 2002). Note that this flare and the M2.6/2B flare on 2002 September 29 (Ding et al. 2003a; Chen & Ding 2005) are two homologous flares in the same active region. Using the imaging spectrograph of the Solar Tower Telescope of Nanjing University (Huang et al. 1995) and employing a scanning technique, we obtained a sequence of two-dimensional...
spectra of the Hα and Ca ii 8542 Å lines across the whole flaring region at a time cadence of ~15 s. There are 120 pixels with a spacing of 0\textquoteleft 85 along the slit and 50 steps with a spacing of 2\textquoteleft along the scanning direction. The spectra contain 260 wavelength pixels with resolutions of 0.05 and 0.118 Å for the Hα and Ca ii 8542 Å lines, and thus span a range of about 13 and 30 Å, respectively.

During the flare, the line widths of the Hα and Ca ii 8542 Å lines increase gradually and then decrease after the maximum phase; the peak values of FWHM are about 4.5 and 1.5 Å, respectively. We extract a narrow window in the far red wing of the Hα line (e.g., Δλ = 6 Å) and use it as a proxy of the nearby continuum. We check carefully the line profiles and ensure that the line emission has little influence on the continuum window. We define the continuum contrast as \( (I_f - I_b)/I_b \), where \( I_f \) is the flare intensity and \( I_b \) is the preflare background (taken about 1 hr before the flare) at the same point. By checking the mean intensity fluctuation outside the flaring region, we further estimate the measurement error of the continuum contrast to be below 1%.

Reduction of ground-based data includes dark-field and flat-field corrections. We co-align the Hα images in line wings with the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) Michelson Doppler Imager (MDI) continuum images (Scherrer et al. 1995) by correlating the sunspot features. The accuracy of image co-alignment is estimated to be ~2\textquoteleft.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Energetics of the Continuum Emission

We present in Figure 1 a sequence of images of this flare as seen in the Hα line center (gray scale), the continuum (Hα + 6 Å; white contours), and RHESSI 12–25 keV HXR (black contours). HXR images are reconstructed with the CLEAN algorithm from detectors 3–8, which yields an angular resolution of ~7\textquoteleft. Note that the flare is located near the solar disk center and the flaring loops are very compact. Therefore, the Hα or HXR emission from the loop top and the footpoints may probably be spatially mixed together due to the projection effect. We also select a 171 Å extreme-ultraviolet (EUV) image from the Transition Region and Coronal Explorer (TRACE; Handy et al. 1999) to show the large structure of the flaring region.

We investigate the origin of the continuum emission by examining its relationship with the HXR emission during the flare, which provides important information about the heating processes in the flaring atmosphere. As seen in Figure 1, the flare has a simple compact morphology in the continuum and the HXR emission, both of which reside at the main Hα ribbon; there is a close spatial coincidence between the continuum and the HXR emission. We also examine the temporal variation of the continuum contrast at the position denoted with the plus sign in Figure 1, where the maximum continuum contrast appears during the flare. As seen in Figure 2, the continuum contrast reaches a maximum of ~10% at ~01:49:17 UT and correlates well with the HXR emission during the flare.¹ Note that for this flare, the time profiles for the HXR emission below 50 keV are rather gradual and there is no HXR emission above 50 keV. Observations from the solar broadband Hard X-Ray Spectrometer (HXRS; Fárník et al. 2001) give similar results. The close temporal and spatial relationship between the continuum and HXR emission in this flare indicates that the continuum emission is strongly related to non-thermal energy deposition in the chromosphere.

Current WLF models have proposed electron beam heating plus the radiative back-warming effect to account for the observed continuum enhancement. Ding et al. (2003b) and Chen & Ding (2005) calculated the continuum contrast near the Ca ii 8542 Å and the Hα lines, respectively, as a function of the energy flux of the electron beam impacting a model atmosphere.

For this flare, we can apply a single power-law fitting to the photon spectrum for the HXR source during the maximum phase, as seen in Figure 3. The power-law spectrum extends down to ~10 keV and has an index of \( \gamma = 7.4 \), which is much

¹ In the far blue wing of the Hα line (Δλ = ~6 Å), the continuum develops similarly and reaches a maximum contrast of ~8%. In a near-infrared window near the Ca ii 8542 Å line, we detect a much lower contrast of the continuum (~2%).
larger than the often observed values, e.g., 3–5. In the scenario that the above HXR emission is produced via thick-target bremsstrahlung (Brown 1971) by nonthermal electrons with an assumed low-energy cutoff of 20 keV, the nonthermal electron power is derived to be \( \sim 3 \times 10^{28} \) erg s\(^{-1}\), and the energy flux \( F_{20} \) is estimated to be \( \sim 2.0 \times 10^{10} \) ergs cm\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\) (an average value from 01:49:00 to 01:50:00 UT). According to Chen & Ding (2005), an energy flux of \( \sim 2.0 \times 10^{10} \) ergs cm\(^{-2}\) s\(^{-1}\) can produce an increase of the continuum emission near the H\(\alpha\) line of roughly 10%, which is consistent with the observed continuum contrast in this WLF.

We should note that the estimation of the energy content of nonthermal electrons suffers from great uncertainties, mostly due to the uncertainty of the low-energy cutoff, especially when the spectrum is very steep. Sui et al. (2005) constrained the low-energy cutoff to a very narrow range of \( 24 \pm 2 \) keV for an M1.2 solar flare by assuming thermal dominance at low energies and a smooth evolution of thermal parameters from the rise to the impulsive phase of the flare. If we take the low-energy cutoff to be 15 or 25 keV, the energy flux would rise to 6 times or drop to only 25% of the above value, respectively. The latter case could not meet the requirement of sufficient heating to account for the continuum contrast.

The observational facts that the continuum contrast reaches \( \sim 10\% \) and that the HXR spectrum is very soft imply that electrons of very high energies are not the necessary condition for the generation of the continuum emission in WLFs. Nonthermal electrons of intermediate energies deposit most of their energy in the upper chromosphere, while the radiative back-warming effect plays the right role in sufficiently heating the lower chromosphere and below.

**3.2. Footpoint Motion History**

It has been recognized that the apparent HXR footpoint motion maps the successive reconnection process during solar flares. Different magnetic configurations around the flaring regions can result in different patterns of HXR footpoint motions. For example, using the Yohkoh HXT observations, Sakao et al. (2000) found that the double HXR footpoints move antiparallel in seven out of the 14 flares studied. Since the launch of RHESSI in 2002 February, more research has been dedicated to this topic. For example, Krucker et al. (2003) found a systematic motion of one HXR footpoint nearly parallel to the magnetic neutral line in the 2002 July 23 X4.8 solar flare. Liu et al. (2004) observed an increasing separation of two HXR footpoints, which is predicted by the magnetic reconnection process in the well adopted solar flare model (Kopp & Pneuman 1976).

Compared to the large number of solar flares detected in HXR, SXR, H\(\alpha\), etc., detection of WLFs is very sporadic because of the fact that WLFs represent only a small fraction of solar flares; most importantly, the white-light continuum emission is usually constrained in a small area and limited to a time period during the impulsive phase. There are few studies on the source motion as seen in the continuum in the past decades owing to the rare detection of WLFs and the low cadence of observations. The flare under study has a relatively simple morphology in both the HXR and continuum emission, which enables us to trace and study the footpoint motion in both wavelengths during the flare. Comparison of the footpoint motion history in the HXR and continuum emission sheds new light and puts constraints on the modeling of WLFs.

We plot in Figure 4 the centroids of the continuum emission (plus signs) at the time during which ground-based observations were made, as well as the centroids of the 12–25 keV HXR emission (diamonds), superposed on the MDI longitudinal magnetogram. Here the centroid refers to the intensity-weighted mean position of those parts of the source that have intensity \( \geq 50\% \) of the maximum source intensity. It is very obvious that the continuum source and the HXR source move in a similar trend: they first move westward and then turn back to the east after the maximum phase (at \( \sim 01:50:08 \) UT). Meanwhile, both the westward and eastward motions are nearly parallel to the magnetic neutral.
line (dashed line). After the turnover, the source moves along a line more apart from the magnetic neutral line.

To demonstrate the relationship between the footpoint motion and the magnetic configuration of the flare, we further conduct potential field extrapolation of the MDI magnetogram using the code of Sakurai (1982), which can provide rough information about magnetic connectivity around the flaring region. As shown in Figure 5, the flare is confined to a series of low-lying magnetic loops. A possible picture for the flare is as follows: first, the footpoint moves westward as a result of the successive reconnection between the low-lying magnetic loops; then, the reversal of the footpoint motion may be related to triggering of nearby larger loops more distant from the magnetic neutral line.

Since the HXR emission in 12–25 keV may contain a considerable thermal contribution from the hot plasma in the flaring loop, the HXR centroid mentioned above may represent the weighted center of both the footpoint and loop top sources. However, we believe that the centroid motion is mainly from the motion of the footpoint source. For this reason, we also check the source motion in 25–50 keV, at which thick-target bremsstrahlung emission is dominant. The results show that the motion pattern is similar to what is found above during the maximum phase when the 25–50 keV HXR images are available.

Although there is a very good spatial correspondence of the continuum emission to the 12–25 keV HXR emission as the flare goes on, there still exists a clear offset of $2'' - 4''$ between the centroids of the continuum and the HXR source, as shown in Figure 4. Because of the limit of the spatial resolution and uncertainty of image co-alignment, we cannot draw a clear conclusion as to whether the offset is really physical or not.

On the other hand, some active phenomena show evidence of local heating in the lower atmosphere (at chromospheric levels and below), such as the type II WLFs and Ellerman bombs (e.g., Ding et al. 1999; Chen et al. 2001). In such cases, magnetic reconnection is assumed to take place in the lower atmosphere, where the plasma is much denser and partially ionized. There is, however, no theory that can deal with the particle acceleration in the lower atmosphere. In such levels, the plasma is highly collisional, and the energy released through magnetic reconnection is mostly consumed by ionizing the plasma. Therefore, we can postulate that few particles can be accelerated to very high energies. If the accelerated electrons still follow a power-law distribution, the slope may be much steeper as compared to those cases in which reconnection occurs in the corona.

Now we discuss the details of the flare on 2002 September 30. First, there are some aspects similar to the type A flares or thermal hot flares mentioned by Tanaka (1987) and Dennis (1988): The time evolution of the HXR emission below 50 keV is very gradual, and there is no visible increase of HXR emission above 50 keV; the HXR spectrum in 10–50 keV follows a non-thermal power law with a very steep slope of $\gamma \approx 7$. Such features are possibly linked to a higher density at the energy release site (Dennis 1988). Second, as seen from Figure 4, the magnetic configuration and the footpoint motion imply a scenario of magnetic reconnection taking place in a series of low-lying magnetic loops during the flare. Thus, we propose that the scenario of magnetic reconnection relatively low in the atmosphere may explain the quite soft HXR spectrum observed in this flare. However, we also note that this explanation is very speculative.

Since we do not find a HXR footpoint pair from RHESSI images, we are unable to directly measure the loop size and altitude. By assuming semicircular loops symmetrically straddling over the magnetic neutral line, the loop altitude is roughly estimated to be the mean distance between the footpoint and the neutral line, i.e., $\sim 2'' - 5''$ ($\sim 1500 - 3500$ km) above the photosphere, which falls in between the upper chromosphere and the lower corona. This fact seems to support our conjecture that this flare occurs in a relatively low site.

As shown in § 3.2, during the maximum phase, the HXR spectrum follows a power law that extends down to $\sim 10$ keV, and the derived energy flux of beam electrons is sufficient to account for the continuum contrast. On the other hand, since the HXR spectrum is very soft, thermal plasma may contribute largely...
to the HXR emission in the low energies, e.g., below ~20 keV. We show in Figure 2 that the plasma temperature, which is derived from the background-subtracted GOES 0.5–4 Å and 1–8 Å SXR fluxes (e.g., Thomas et al. 1985; Garcia 1994), well matches the development of the continuum emission. Matthews et al. (2003) also showed that some WLFs exhibit a stronger correlation with the SXR emission than with the HXR emission. Therefore, another possible origin of the continuum emission, i.e., thermal heating plus preferentially the back-warming effect, is worth investigating in the future.

4. CONCLUSIONS

After a synthesizing analysis of the WLF on 2002 September 30, we find that there is a fairly close relationship in both time and space between the continuum and the HXR emission during the flare. We discover a footpoint motion seen in the optical continuum; the motion history follows roughly that of the HXR source. This gives strong evidence that this WLF is powered by energetic electrons followed by the radiative back-warming effect. The magnetic configuration of the flaring region implies magnetic reconnection taking place at a relatively low layer during the flare. The HXR spectrum is thus very soft, possibly due to a low efficiency of electron acceleration at low altitudes. However, the energy content of the electron beam is still enough to produce the heating in the lower atmosphere, where the continuum emission originates. Radiative back-warming is of course an important mechanism to transport the energy below when direct heating is obviously impossible.

We would like to thank H. Hudson and the referee for constructive comments that helped improve the paper. We are grateful to the RHESSI, SOHO MDI, TRACE, and HXRS teams for providing the observational data and to T. Sakurai for interpreting the HXRS data. SOHO is a project of international cooperation between ESA and NASA. This work was supported by NKBRSF under grant G20000784, NSFC under grants 10025315, 10233040, and FANEDD under grant 200226.

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