Domain Walls in Normal and Superconducting States of Iron Pnictides

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The electronic and magnetic structures in the normal and superconducting states of iron pnictides are investigated by solving self-consistently the Bogoliubov-de Gennes equation. It is shown that strong electron correlations can induce domain walls, which separate regions with different spin density wave orders. At zero or low electron doping, 90° domain walls are formed while anti-phase domain walls are produced at higher electron doping. On the domain walls, larger electron densities are always present. The results agree qualitatively with recent observations of scanning tunneling microscopy and superconducting quantum interference device microscopy.

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The discovery of a new family of layered superconductors, i.e., the FeAs-based superconductors, could offer a new avenue to explore the mechanism of high temperature superconductivity [1-5]. Similar to the cuprates, the parent compounds of the FeAs-based superconductors also possess the antiferromagnetic ground state [4, 5]. With increasing electron or hole doping, antiferromagnetic order is suppressed and superconductivity appears in both the cuprates and the iron pnictides. However, different from the cuprates, due to the strong nesting effect between the hole Fermi surfaces around the Γ point and the electron Fermi surfaces around the M point, superconductivity and the spin density wave (SDW) orders can coexist in the electron-doped FeAs-based superconductors [6, 7]. Because each unit cell of the FeAs-based superconductors contains two inequivalent Fe ions, different arrays of magnetic moments on Fe ions in both normal and superconducting states could lead to diverse magnetic structures and uncommon electronic properties [8, 9].

Recently, in scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) experiments twin boundaries were observed in the normal state of Ca(Fe1-xCo2)x2As2 [10]. Across these twin boundaries, the a (b) axis of the crystal rotates through 90°. This means that the modulation direction of SDW is rotated by 90°. In other words, 90° domain walls are formed at the twin boundaries. In Ref. [11], superconducting quantum interference device microscopy (SQIDM) revealed that in the superconducting state of underdoped Ba(Fe1-xCo2)x2As2 with x < 0.07, the diamagnetic susceptibility is increased and the superfluid density is enhanced on the twin boundaries or 90° domain walls. In another STM experiment [12], Li et al. also observed a 90° anti-phase domain wall in the parent compounds of iron pnictides, on which the local density of states (LDOS) is much higher than that in the interior of magnetic domains. Therefore, domain walls exist universally in underdoped FeAs-based superconductors and affect strongly the electronic properties in the normal and superconducting states.

In this work, we study the complex electronic and magnetic structures in the underdoped FeAs-based superconductors by solving self-consistently the Bogoliubov-de Gennes (BdG) equation. We start from the model Hamiltonian $H = H_0 + H_{SC} + H_{int}$. Here $H_0$ is the two-orbital four-band tight-binding model proposed in Ref. [13], which describes correctly the characteristics of the energy band structure for the FeAs-based superconductors [14-19]. The hopping parameters $t_1$-$t_4$ in $H_0$ are depicted in Fig. 1.

The pairing Hamiltonian

$$H_{SC} = \sum_{\mathbf{i}\mu\nu}(\Delta_{\mathbf{i}\mu\nu}c_{\mathbf{i}\mu\uparrow}^\dagger c_{\mathbf{j}\nu\downarrow}^\dagger + \text{h.c.}),$$

where $\Delta_{\mathbf{i}\mu\nu}$ is the pairing between the orbital $\mu$ ($d_{xz}$ or $d_{yz}$) on the site $\mathbf{i}$ and the orbital $\nu$ ($d_{xz}$ or $d_{yz}$) on the site $\mathbf{j}$, and $c_{\mathbf{i}\mu\sigma}$ is the creation operator of an electron with...
spin $\sigma$ at the orbital $\mu$ on the site $i$.

The interaction Hamiltonian $H_{\text{int}}$ considered here only includes on-site Coulomb interaction $U$ and Hund coupling $J_H$. After taking the mean field treatment, $H_{\text{int}}$ can be expressed as [20]

$$H_{\text{int}} = U \sum_{i,\mu,\sigma \neq \sigma} \langle n_{i\mu\sigma} \rangle n_{i\mu\sigma} + (U - 3J_H) \sum_{i,\mu \neq \nu, \sigma} \langle n_{i\mu\sigma} \rangle n_{i\nu\sigma} + (U - 2J_H) \sum_{i,\mu \neq \nu, \sigma \neq \sigma} \langle n_{i\mu\sigma} \rangle n_{i\nu\sigma},$$

where $n_{i\mu\sigma} = c_{i\mu\sigma}^\dagger c_{i\mu\sigma}$.

We note that based on the model Hamiltonian $H$, the obtained LDOS[13,20], phase diagram [20], and spin susceptibility at different doping and temperature [21] for electron doped FeAs-based superconductors, and Andreev bound states at negative energy inside the vortex core [22] for hole doped FeAs-based superconductors are all consistent with the STM [23-26], nuclear magnetic resonance [6,7], and neutron scattering experiments [27-30].

The eigenvalues and eigenfunctions of $H$ can be obtained by solving self-consistently the BdG equation, i.e.

$$\sum_{J,\nu} \left( H_{ij\nu\sigma} - \Delta_{ij\nu} \sigma \right) \left( \frac{u_{j\nu\sigma}^n}{v_{i\nu\sigma}^n} \right) = E_n \left( \frac{u_{j\nu\sigma}^n}{v_{i\nu\sigma}^n} \right),$$

where $H_{ij\nu\sigma}$ is the matrix element of $H$ with spin $\sigma$ between the orbital $\mu$ on the site $i$ and the orbital $\nu$ on the site $j$. The superconducting pairing $\Delta_{ij\nu\sigma} \equiv \frac{1}{2}(c_{j\nu\uparrow}^\dagger c_{j\nu\downarrow} - c_{j\nu\downarrow}^\dagger c_{j\nu\uparrow})$ in real space is associated with the eigenvalues $E_n$ and the eigenfunctions $(u_{j\nu\sigma}^n, v_{i\nu\sigma}^n)$, and has the form

$$\Delta_{ij\nu\sigma} = \frac{V_{ij\nu\sigma}}{4} \sum_n \left( u_{i\nu\sigma}^n v_{j\nu\sigma}^{n*} + u_{j\nu\sigma}^{n*} v_{i\nu\sigma}^n \right) \tanh(\frac{E_n}{2k_BT}).$$

at temperature $T$. Here, $k_B$ is the Boltzmann’s constant, and $V_{ij\nu\sigma}$ is the pairing potential between the orbitals on the sites $i$ and $j$. The corresponding local electron density reads

$$n_i = \sum_{n,\mu} \left( |u_{i\mu\uparrow}^n|^2 f(E_n) + |v_{i\mu\downarrow}^n|^2 [1 - f(E_n)] \right),$$

where $f(E_n)$ is the Fermi function, and the local magnetic moment $m_i = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{\mu} \langle n_{i\mu\uparrow} \rangle - \langle n_{i\mu\downarrow} \rangle$.

In order to interpret the complex domain wall structures seen by STM experiments on the iron pnictides, we investigate the strong Coulomb correlation on Fe sites. In our calculations, we have employed the hopping parameters in Ref. [13], i.e. $t_1 = 1$, $t_2 = 0.4$, $t_3 = -2.0$, and $t_1 = 0.04$, and have chosen $U = 4.8$, $J_H = 1.3$, and $V_{ik\nu\sigma} = 1.1$ for $\mu = \nu$ and $|i - j| = \sqrt{2}$, and 0 for all other cases. Note that only the electron pairings between the same orbitals on the next nearest neighboring Fe sites are considered. Such a choice of the pairing potential leads the superconducting order parameter to be $s_\pm$-wave type.

In Fig. 2, we present the zero temperature images of electron density $n_i$, magnetic order $m_i$, and superconducting order $\Delta_i$ at electron dopings $x = 0.04$ and 0.16.

![Figure 2](http://example.com/fig2.png)

**FIG. 2:** (Color online) The images of electron density $n_i$, magnetic order $m_i$, and superconducting order $\Delta_i$ at electron dopings $x = 0.04$ and 0.16.

Across the domain walls, the modulation direction of magnetic order rotates through 90° at $x = 0.04$ while the phase of magnetic order changes sign at $x = 0.16$. So the anti-phase domain walls, predicted previously in Ref. [8], are realized in the higher electron doped case. We observe that on both 90° domain walls and anti-phase domain walls, there are always higher electron densities $n_i$, as shown in Fig. 2 (a) and (d). Therefore, it is expected that superfluid density is enhanced on these domain walls, which coincides with the observations of SQIDM experiments [11]. However, the superconducting order parameter $\Delta_i$ has a larger magnitude on 90° domain walls, but has a smaller magnitude on anti-phase domain walls (see Fig. 2 (c) and (f)).

In order to see clearly the variations of $n_i$, $m_i$, and $\Delta_i$ with distance from the domain walls, in Fig. 3, we give their values on the line $y = 14$. Fig. 3(a) and
ever, by adjusting suitably the hopping parameters 
Fermi surfaces and the electron Fermi surfaces. How-

around the $U$ \( M \) be due to the fact that a strong Coulomb interaction 
tween the theoretical results and experimental data could 
than the experimental value. The main difference be-

ished and the experimental value can be obtained. When 
(d) show that more electrons are accumulated near all 
the domain walls. On 90° domain walls at \( x = 0.04 \) in 
Fig. 3(b) and (c), both \( m_i \) and \( \Delta_i \) have their maximum 
values. Oppositely, on anti-phase domain walls at \( x = 0.16 \) in Fig. 3(e) and (f), \( m_i \) almost vanishes, and \( \Delta_i \) has 
the minimum values. Therefore, except for the electron 
density, the magnetic and superconducting properties on the 
two kinds of domain walls are very different.

We would like to mention that when \( x < \sim 0.02 \), \( n_i \) and 
\( m_i \) have similar patterns with those at \( x = 0.04 \), except \( \Delta_i = 0 \). Therefore, the 90° domain wall structure also 
exists in the normal state of the FeAs-based supercon-
ductors, and is consistent with the observations of STM 
experiments [10]. However, we do not get the solution of complex 90° anti-phase domain wall seen in the par-
rent compounds [12], which cannot be formed under the 
period boundary condition.

Our calculations also show that with increasing elec-
tron doping, the magnetic order \( m_i \) is gradually sup-
pressed and finally vanishes at \( x \sim 0.2 \), which is larger 
than the experimental value. The main difference be-
tween the theoretical results and experimental data could 
be due to the fact that a strong Coulomb interaction 
\( U \) leads to renormalization of the hole Fermi surfaces 
around the $\Gamma$ point and the electron Fermi surfaces 
around the $M$ point in the FeAs-based supercon-
ductors, which enhances the nesting effect between the hole 
Fermi surfaces and the electron Fermi surfaces. How-

ever, by adjusting suitably the hopping parameters $t_2$ 
and $t_3$ in $H_0$, which determine the sizes and shapes of 
the Fermi surfaces, the nesting effect could be dimin-
ished and the experimental value can be obtained. When 

\( x < \sim 0.08 \), the 90° domain walls always exist while the 
anti-phase magnetic domains show up at \( x \sim 0.15 \). 
When $\sim 0.08 < x < \sim 0.15$, SDW and superconductiv-
ity uniformly coexist. We also note that the solution of anti-phase domain wall structure is a metastable state in 
the above range, which has a slightly higher energy than 
the ground state.

Now we calculate the LDOS on and near the domain 
walls in order to compare with the STM experiments. 
The expression of LDOS at energy $\omega$ on the site $i$ is 

\[
\rho_i(\omega) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{n \kappa k} \left( |u_{n \uparrow \kappa k}|^2 \delta(E_{nk} - \omega) + |v_{n \downarrow \kappa k}|^2 \delta(E_{nk} + \omega) \right),
\]

where \( N \) is the number of wave vectors $\kappa$, $(u_{n \uparrow \kappa k}, v_{n \downarrow \kappa k})$ 
and $E_{nk}$ are the eigenfunctions and eigenvalues of the 
Fourier transformed BdG equation, respectively. In cal-
culating $\rho_i(\omega)$, we have taken the delta function $\delta(x) = \Gamma / \pi (x^2 + \Gamma^2)$ with quasipartical damping $\Gamma = 0.005$, and 
a 30 x 30 supercell is used.

Fig. 4 shows the LDOS images on a 28 x 28 lattice 
at different energies and electron dopings. It is obvious 
that when $\omega = \pm 0.02$, $\rho_i(\omega)$ has the maximum value 
on the 90° domain walls at \( x = 0.04 \), but has the minimum 
value on the ant-phase domain walls at \( x = 0.16 \). Here 
we also omit the LDOS image with $x = 0.0$, which is 
similar to that of $x = 0.04$.

However, the LDOS images change with energy $\omega$. In 
Fig. 5, we give the energy dependence of the LDOS 
$\rho_i(\omega)$ at the sites on and near domain walls with dif-
ferent electron dopings. In both $x = 0.0$ and 0.04, obvi-
FIG. 5: (Color online) Energy dependence of LDOS $\rho_i(\omega)$ with electron dopings $x = 0.0, 0.04$, and $0.16$ at the sites on and near domain walls. The arrows point to the coherence peaks with maximum superconducting order parameter $\Delta_i$ in the panels of $x = 0.04$ and $0.16$

ously, $\rho_i(\omega)$ at $(14, 14)$ on the $90^\circ$ domain wall is always larger than that on the other sites when $\omega \in (-0.18, 0.1)$. In contrast, $\rho_i(\omega)$ at $(1, 14)$ on the anti-phase domain wall is always smaller than that on the other sites when $\omega > -0.13$. We note that when $\omega \in (-0.2, 0.2)$, the curves of $\rho_i(\omega)$ with $x = 0.0$ resemble those measured by the STM experiments in the parent compounds [25]. The coherence peak at positive energy is higher at both $x = 0.04$ and $0.16$ due to the coexistence of SDW and superconductivity [13,20]. The asymmetry of the coherence peaks was also observed by the STM experiments [23-25].

In summary, we have studied the electronic and magnetic properties in the electron underdoped iron pnictides. Due to strong electron correlations, the parent compounds are formed at the twin boundaries producing below the structural transition of the parent compounds. The existence of the domain wall structures leads to the nonuniformity of the electron density and the superconducting order parameter in real space. Therefore, inhomogeneity of superconductivity is intrinsic in the underdoped iron pnictides. The $90^\circ$ domain walls and the supercurrent properties on them have been confirmed by the STM and SQIDM experiments. However, the anti-phase domain walls at the higher electron doping are not experimentally reported yet. We hope that such a magnetic structure could be verified by future STM experiments.

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