THICK ACCRETION DISK MODEL FOR ULTRALUMINOUS SUPERSOFT SOURCES

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Received 2016 January 7; accepted 2016 January 18; published 2016 February 2

ABSTRACT

We propose a geometrically thick, super-Eddington accretion disk model, where an optically thick wind is not necessary, to understand ultraluminous supersoft sources (ULSs). For high mass accretion rates $M \gtrsim 30 \dot{M}_{\text{Edd}}$ and not small inclination angles $\theta \gtrsim 25^\circ$, where $\dot{M}_{\text{Edd}}$ is the Eddington accretion rate, the hard photons from the hot inner region may be shaded by the geometrically thick inner disk, and therefore only the soft photons from the outer thin disk and the outer photosphere of the thick disk can reach the observer. Our model can naturally explain the approximate relation between the typical thermal radius and the thermal temperature, $R_{\text{th}} \propto T_{\text{th}}^{2}$. Moreover, the thick disk model can unify ULSs and normal ultraluminous X-ray sources, where the different observational characteristics are probably related to the inclination angle and the mass accretion rate. By comparing our model with the optically thick outflow model, we find that a lower mass accretion rate is required in our model.

Key words: accretion, accretion disks – black hole physics – X-rays: binaries

1. INTRODUCTION

Ultraluminous supersoft sources (ULSs) are a particular group of X-ray binaries, with both a high luminosity of a few $10^{40}$ erg s$^{-1}$ and a supersoft thermal spectrum with a peak temperature $\lesssim 0.1$ keV (Di Stefano & Kong 2003). Recently, significant progress has been achieved for two individual ULSs, M101 X-1 and M81 ULS-1. For M101 X-1, Liu et al. (2013) confirmed that the system contains a Wolf–Rayet star and revealed that the orbital period is 8.2 days. Based on this orbital period, they proposed that the black hole probably has a mass around 20–30$\,M_{\odot}$. This is the first time the black hole mass in a ULS was measured by a dynamic method. For another ULS, M81 ULS-1, Liu et al. (2015) found blueshifted, broad H$\alpha$ emission lines, which indicate that there exists a relativistic baryonic jet. Moreover, the blueshifted value reveals the inclination angle $\theta < 60^\circ$. Consequently, since a white dwarf system is unable to launch such a relativistic jet, the model based on a white dwarf can be ruled out.

Two well-known models for ULSs are related to intermediate-mass black holes (IMBHs) and stellar-mass black holes, respectively. The model based on a standard thick disk (Shakura & Sunyaev 1973) around an IMBH can explain both high bolometric luminosity $L_{\text{bol}}$ and low inner disk temperature $T_{\text{in}}$ due to the relation $T_{\text{in}} \propto M_{\text{BH}}^{-1/4}$. However, compared with the well-known behaviors of Galactic black hole X-ray binaries (BHXBs), such a model may confront two difficulties. The first one is related to the relative luminosity. Usually, the disk-dominated thermal state of a BHXB occurs for $0.02L_{\text{Edd}} \lesssim L_{\text{bol}} \lesssim 0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$ (Maccarone 2003; McClintock et al. 2006), where $L_{\text{Edd}}$ is the Eddington luminosity. Such a range corresponds to $0.02 \lesssim \dot{m} \lesssim 0.3$, where $\dot{m} \equiv M/M_{\text{Edd}}$ is the dimensionless mass accretion rate, and $M_{\text{Edd}}$ is the Eddington accretion rate defined as $L_{\text{Edd}}/(\gamma c^{2})$. In the present work, we choose $\eta = 1/16$ corresponding to the well-known Paczyński–Wiita potential (Paczyński & Wiita 1980). For the IMBH model, however, the relative luminosity $L_{\text{bol}}/L_{\text{Edd}}$ is generally far below the lower limit 0.02. The second difficulty is related to the relativistic jet. The existence of a jet in M81 ULS-1 indicates that the jet may be a common phenomenon in ULSs. In galactic BHXBs, there exist two types of jets, i.e., the steady jet in the low/hard state, and the episodic jet during the transition between low/hard state and high/soft state (Fender et al. 2004). However, a standard thin disk around an IMBH should correspond to a purely soft state, which disagrees with the conditions for the above two types of jets. Thus, the IMBH model can be ruled out.

The other model, which is based on a stellar-mass black hole, may also confront difficulties. First, for such a black hole, the accretion rate ought to be around or super Eddington due to the high luminosity. In our Galaxy, however, such a supersoft spectrum has never been found among the approximately 20 identified BHXBs, some of which are likely to achieve or be above Eddington luminosity such as GRS 1915+105. Second, many ultraluminous X-ray sources (ULXs) have been found in nearby galaxies, most of which are believed to be stellar-mass black holes with super-Eddington accretion (for a review, see Feng & Soria 2011). If ULSs are in the same scenario, then a question will arise: how can the super-Eddington accretion around a stellar-mass black hole show the apparently different radiation characteristics?

In this Letter, we will propose a new model to understand ULSs, and try to unify ULSs and ULXs in the same frame. The remainder of this Letter is organized as follows. The thick accretion disk model is proposed in Section 2. Application of such a model to ULSs is presented in Section 3. Conclusions and discussion are made in Section 4.

2. THICK DISK MODEL

As mentioned in the previous section, ULSs are likely to be powered by super-Eddington accretion around stellar-mass black holes. The classic model for super-Eddington accretion is the slim disk (Abramowicz et al. 1988). The half-thickness $H$ of
slim disks approaches the radius $R$, which are geometrically much thicker than the standard thin disks. Recent simulations have made great progress on the super-Eddington accretion process, including the identification of an important new energy transport mechanism in addition to the diffusion, i.e., the vertical advection of radiation (Jiang et al. 2014; Sadowski & Narayan 2016), the radiation-powered baryonic jet (Sadowski & Narayan 2015), the strongly anisotropic feature of radiation (Narayan et al. 2016; Sadowski & Narayan 2016), and the presence of strong wind (Obscura & Mineshige 2011; Yang et al. 2014; Moller & Sadowski 2015; Sadowski & Narayan 2015, 2016). In addition, such simulations showed that the disk is geometrically thick, i.e., the opening angle between the photosphere and the equatorial plane is quite large. For example, Narayan et al. (2016) made global simulations for the case $\dot{m}=11$ and showed a geometrically thick accretion disk, where the polar angle of the photosphere is around 25°. As a consequence, the inner disk will be invisible to an observer with an inclination angle of $\theta > 25°$. On the other hand, some analytical works also pointed out that the super-Eddington accretion disk, which is optically thick and probably advection dominated, is likely to be geometrically thick rather than slim if the gravitational force of the central black hole is well treated (Gu & Lu 2007, Gu et al. 2009, Gu 2012). In the present work, we propose a geometrically thick, super-Eddington accretion model for ULXs, where the hot inner disk can be shaded and the hard photons from this part cannot be observed if the inclination angle is not small. The high bolometric luminosity and the low thermal temperature of ULXs suggest a large photosphere radius, $R_{\text{bb}} \gtrsim 100 R_g$, where $R_g \equiv 2GM_{\text{BH}}/c^2$ is the Schwarzschild radius. Thus, the mass accretion rate ought to be extremely high such that the flow can have a geometrically thick inner disk extended to $\gtrsim 100R_g$. In this scenario, there are two necessary conditions for ULXs, i.e., high mass accretion rates and not small inclination angles. We would stress that a basic assumption in our model is that an optically thick wind does not exist, which is unnecessary to explain the observational properties of ULXs. A cartoon picture of such a model, which includes ULXs and ULXs, is shown in Figure 1. It is seen from this figure that the accretion disk can be separated into two parts by a typical transition radius $R_\text{tr}$, i.e., an inner thick disk ($R \lesssim R_\text{tr}$) and an outer thin disk ($R \gtrsim R_\text{tr}$). In the classic theory for super-Eddington accretion, there exists a transition radius that connects an inner slim disk and an outer thin disk (e.g., Abramowicz et al. 1988; Watarai et al. 2000). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, for the super-Eddington accretion case, the inner disk is more likely to be geometrically thick rather than slim. That is why we propose a thick inner disk here. In addition, the system may have a baryonic jet as revealed by Liu et al. (2015). Such a baryonic jet was also found in simulations with a relativistic speed of $\sim 0.3c$ (Sadowski & Narayan 2015a). Since the jet can extend to a large distance, it may be observed even for large inclination angles. For the individual source, M81 ULS-1, as mentioned in the first section, the blueshifted H$\alpha$ emission lines indicate that the inclination angle ought to be $\theta < 60°$.

On the contrary, for a small inclination angle, an observer is able to see the hard photons from the inner disk. Moreover, according to the simulation results (e.g., Figure 17 of Narayan et al. 2016), the isotropic equivalent luminosity can be far beyond the Eddington one ($\sim 10^4L_{\text{Edd}}$ for $\theta < 25°$, as shown by the filled red circles in their Figure 17). Thus, a super-Eddington accreting stellar-mass black hole may appear as a normal ULX to the observer with small inclination angles, as illustrated by Figure 1.

It is known that the spin of a stellar-mass black hole can be measured through the X-ray continuum-fitting method (Zhang et al. 1997), which is based on the standard thin disk theory. However, McClintock et al. (2006) found that the spin parameter $a_*$ of GRS 1915+105 decreases for high luminosity $L \gtrsim 0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$. Obviously, the value of $a_*$ cannot exhibit significant change in a relatively short timescale. The reason is that the inner radius $R_\text{in}$ moves outward for $L \gtrsim 0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$, and therefore it is larger than the radius of the innermost stable circular orbit $R_{\text{ISCO}}$. A possible physical explanation is that the disk will inflate for $L \gtrsim 0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$ and therefore the innermost region may be shaded (McClintock et al. 2006). We would stress that such outward moving $R_\text{in}$ above $0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$ is not a unique phenomenon for GRS 1915+105, which is verified as a near extreme Kerr black hole. For another BHXB LMC X-3 with low spin (Steiner et al. 2014), it was also found that $R_\text{in}$ moves outward for $L \gtrsim 0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$ (Steiner et al. 2010). Even with a new spectral model “slimbb,” which is based on theoretical works on slim disks (e.g., Sadowski et al. 2011) and the energy advection is taken into account, $R_\text{in}$ still moves outward beyond $0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$ (Straub et al. 2011). In our opinion, the theoretical work (Sadowski et al. 2011) has achieved great progress on the slim disk model, but may not be so accurate due to the approximate vertical component of the gravitational force. As discussed in Gu (2012), if the gravitational force is well treated (such as using the spherical coordinates), the inner disk will be much thicker, which may provide a clue to solve the inconsistent $a_*$ problem. Moreover, the outward moving $R_\text{in}$ was also found in neutron star X-ray binaries (e.g., XTE J1701–462, Weng & Zhang 2011) and ULXs (e.g., NGC 1313 X-2, Weng et al. 2014). Thus, we can regard $0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$ as a general upper limit luminosity for the standard thin disk, beyond which such a model may be invalid.

Previous theoretical works (e.g., Watarai et al. 2000; Kato et al. 2008) showed that the typical transition radius $R_\text{tr}$ is proportional to $\dot{m}$, we therefore assume the following equation.

$$R_\text{tr} = \lambda \dot{m} R_g,$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where $\lambda$ is a dimensionless parameter. The value of $\lambda$ can be estimated as follows. For a non-spinning black hole, we can regard $R_{\text{ISCO}} = 3R_g$ as the inner radius for luminosity below the critical value $0.3L_{\text{Edd}}$, which corresponds to $\dot{m} = 0.3$. Beyond the critical value the inner radius will start to move
outward. Thus, $\lambda \sim 10$ may be a good choice since it can match the above equation ($R_a = R_{\text{ISCO}}$) at the critical point $\dot{m} = 0.3$. We therefore adopt $\lambda = 10$ for the following analyses.

For a large inclination angle, since the inner disk is invisible, the luminosity from the outer thin disk ($R \gtrsim R_a$) can be derived as

$$L_{\text{disk}} \approx \int_{R_a}^{\infty} \frac{3GM_{\text{BH}}\dot{M}}{8\pi R^3} \cdot 4\pi R \, dR = 1.2L_{\text{Edd}}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

It is interesting that the above equation implies that $L_{\text{disk}}$ is independent of $\dot{m}$.

As shown by Figure 1, apart from the outer thin disk, the radiation from the outer photosphere of the thick disk also contributes to the total luminosity for a large inclination angle. Since the radiative force should be less than the gravitational force at the photosphere, we may roughly assume that the former balances half of the latter, i.e., $L_{\text{disk}} \sim 0.5L_{\text{Edd}}$. Both $L_{\text{disk}}$ and $L_{\text{thin}}$ are the thermal radiation, so we may simply calculate the total bolometric luminosity as

$$L_{\text{bol}} \approx L_{\text{disk}} + L_{\text{thick}} = 1.7L_{\text{Edd}},$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

which is also independent of $\dot{m}$. We would stress that, even for the extreme value of $L_{\text{disk}}$ such as 0 or $L_{\text{Edd}}$, the variation of the total bolometric luminosity $L_{\text{bol}}$ is less than 30%, which will not have an essential influence on the present results.

The typical blackbody radius $R_{\text{bb}}$ and temperature $T_{\text{bb}}$ should match the relation

$$L_{\text{bol}} = 4\pi R_{\text{bb}}^2 \sigma T_{\text{bb}}^4.$$  \hspace{1cm} (4)

Equation (3) implies a saturation of $L_{\text{bol}}$ for a certain ULS. We therefore directly obtain the relation $R_{\text{bb}} \propto T_{\text{bb}}^{-2}$ with Equation (4) for varying accretion rates. Such a relation is in good agreement with the observational data, as revealed by Urquhart & Soria (2015). More interestingly, Equation (3) indicates $L_{\text{bol}} \propto M_{\text{BH}}$, which suggests that the central black hole mass can simply be estimated by the luminosity. For the particular ULS M101 X-1, which is the unique source with dynamic measurement, the black hole mass can be estimated by the luminosity $L_{\text{bol}} \approx 5 \times 10^{39}$ erg s$^{-1}$ and thus $M_{\text{BH}} \approx 23M_\odot$, which agrees with the dynamic result, i.e., probably 20–30$M_\odot$ (Liu et al. 2013).

A unified description of ULSs, normal ULXs, and BHXBs is shown in Figure 2, which is based on stellar-mass black hole systems. Galactic BHXBs are generally below the Eddington luminosity. According to our model, there are two necessary conditions for ULXs to appear, which are high accretion rates $\dot{m} \gtrsim 30$ and not small inclination angles $\theta \gtrsim 25^\circ$. For the other cases with super-Eddington accretion, i.e., $\dot{m} \gtrsim 30$ and $\theta \lesssim 25^\circ$ or moderate super-Eddington accretion $1 \lesssim \dot{m} \lesssim 30$, since the hot inner disk is visible to the observer and the isotropic equivalent luminosity is beyond the Eddington one, the sources are likely to appear as normal ULXs. We would stress that, even though ULXs have a wider range for the inclination angle (\(\theta \gtrsim 25^\circ\)) than ULXs (\(\theta \lesssim 25^\circ\)), the required mass accretion rate is much more critical for ULXs ($\dot{m} \gtrsim 30$) than for ULXs ($\dot{m} \gtrsim 1$). Thus, it is reasonable that we have found hundreds of ULXs whereas only several ULSs.

**3. APPLICATION TO ULSS**

The transition radius $R_a$ may be roughly regarded as the typical blackbody radius, i.e., $R_a \approx R_{\text{bb}}$. This is the location where the photosphere of the inner quasi-spherical part touches the equatorial plane. By combining Equations (1), (3), and (4) and we can derive the expression of $kT_{\text{bb}}$ as

$$kT_{\text{bb}} \approx 660 \dot{m}^{-\frac{1}{2}} \left(\frac{M_{\text{BH}}}{10M_\odot}\right)^{-\frac{1}{2}} \text{eV}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

Our analytic results (solid and dashed lines) together with the observations (symbols) are shown in Figure 3. The two horizontal blue dashed lines correspond to fixed black hole masses, $M_{\text{BH}} = 3M_\odot$ and $30M_\odot$, which are based on Equation (3). The two inclined red solid lines correspond to fixed accretion rates $\dot{m} = 30$ and 100, which are derived by
combining Equations (3) and (5). The symbols represent observational results of a set of seven ULSs, which are taken from Table 2 of Urquhart & Soria (2015). It is seen from Figure 3 that most of the symbols are located between the two blue dashed lines and also between the two red solid lines, i.e., in the range of \(3M_\odot \lesssim M_{\rm BH} \lesssim 30M_\odot\) and \(30 \lesssim \dot{m} \lesssim 100\), which indicates a stellar-mass black hole with extremely high accretion rates.

As mentioned in the first section, the radiation characteristic of ULSs challenges the classic accretion theory. Both simulations (e.g., Ohshima & Mineshige 2011; Sadowski & Narayan 2015) and analytic studies (e.g., Gu 2012, 2015) showed that outflows are significant in super-Eddington accretion flows. Another possible mechanism for ULSs is the optically thick outflow model, which was first introduced by King & Pounds (2003) and was developed and applied to M101 X-1 by Shen et al. (2015). Recently, Soria & Kong (2016) and Urquhart & Soria (2015) investigated such an issue in more detail based on the observational data from Chandra and XMM-Newton. It is interesting that, despite the completely different models, the analytic results are similar between the outflow model and ours. For instance, Equations ((24)–(25)) of Soria & Kong (2016) also imply that the total luminosity is roughly independent of \(\dot{m}\), and is proportional to the black hole mass. As a consequence, their blue solid lines in the right two panels of Figure 9 (Soria & Kong 2016), which correspond to fixed black hole masses, are nearly horizontal, as shown in our Figure 3 (blue dashed lines).

For a more detailed comparison, we find that the required mass accretion rate in our model is significantly less than that in the outflow model. For example, for the source M101 X-1, their Figure 9 (Soria & Kong 2016) indicates \(\dot{m} \gtrsim 1000\), whereas in our model the accretion rate is probably in the range of \(30 \lesssim \dot{m} \lesssim 100\), as shown in Figure 3. In addition, we would stress that the essential difference from the outflow model is that an optically thick wind is not necessary in our model. For a given pair of the observational \(L_{\rm bol} \approx 1.7L_{\rm Edd}\) may be used to estimate the black hole mass in ULSs. Although the inclination angle may have influence on the apparent luminosity, the variation should not be essential due to the limited range of the angle. Moreover, such a relation indicates a saturated bolometric luminosity for ULSs, or even more general, for super-Eddington accretion in different scale. In this scenario, for super-massive black holes in active galactic nuclei, if mass supply is sufficient, a similar supersoft state may be found. If this is the case, such a system may be regarded as another type of “Standard Candle” and will have potential application to the study of cosmology.

We point out that there exists uncertainty for the value of \(\lambda\) in Equation (1). In the present work, we adopt \(\lambda = 10\) according to previous works on the black hole spin measurement. From a theoretical point of view, Watarai et al. (2000) implies \(\lambda \sim 2.4\) due to their result \(R_t \approx R_{\text{in}}\) for \(\dot{m} = 1.25\) (note that a different definition of \(\dot{m}\) was adopted, thus their \(\dot{m} = 20\) is equivalent to our \(\dot{m} = 1.25\)). Since their analyses are based on a Taylor Expansion of the vertical component of the gravitational force, which is probably magnified particularly for geometrically thick disks (Gu & Lu 2007; Gu 2012), the geometrical thickness may be underestimated and therefore the real value of \(R_t\) may be larger. Actually, Gu (2012) investigated this issue in spherical coordinates in order to avoid the approximation of gravity, and found that the disk can be geometrically thick at \(10R_g\) for \(\dot{m} = 0.6\), which corresponds to \(\lambda \approx 17\) from Equation (1). Considering that the Newtonian potential was adopted in Gu (2012) and therefore the viscous heating rate has been enlarged, \(\lambda\) should be less than 17. With regard to the theoretical range \(2.4 < \lambda < 17\), it may be a reasonable assumption for \(\lambda = 10\). Nevertheless, the variation of \(\lambda\) by a small factor will have only a slight quantitative influence on the present results.

Our model is based on the stellar-mass black hole system. For ULXs, however, we should mention the other two possibilities. One possibility is neutron star X-ray binaries such as M82 X-2 (Bachetti et al. 2014). The other one may be IMBH systems, particularly for those sources with extremely high luminosity \(L \gtrsim 10^{37}\) erg s\(^{-1}\), such as ESO 434–49 HLX-1 (Farrell et al. 2009).

As discussed in Section 2, the relation \(L_{\rm bol} \approx 1.7L_{\text{Edd}}\) may be used to estimate the black hole mass in ULSs. Although the inclination angle may have influence on the apparent luminosity, the variation should not be essential due to the limited range of the angle. Moreover, such a relation indicates a saturated bolometric luminosity for ULSs, or, even more general, for super-Eddington accretion in different scale. In this scenario, for super-massive black holes in active galactic nuclei, if mass supply is sufficient, a similar supersoft state may be found. If this is the case, such a system may be regarded as another type of “Standard Candle” and will have potential application to the study of cosmology.

The authors thank Shan-Shan Weng for beneficial discussions and the referee for constructive comments that improved this Letter. This work was supported by the National Basic Research Program of China (973 Program) under grants 2014CB845800 and 2014CB845705, the National Natural Science Foundation of China under grants 11573023, 11333004, 11373031, 11133005, 11573051, 11425313, and 11222328, the CAS/SAFEA International Partnership Program for Creative Research Teams, and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities under grant 20720140532.

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