Field-induced Tomonaga-Luttinger liquid phase of a two-leg spin-1/2 ladder with strong leg interactions

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We study the magnetic-field-induced quantum phase transition from a gapped quantum phase that has no magnetic long-range order into a gapless phase in the spin-1/2 ladder compound bis(2,3-dimethylpyridinium) tetrabromocuprate (DIMPY). At temperatures below about 1 K, the specific heat in the gapless phase attains an asymptotic linear temperature dependence, characteristic of a Tomonaga-Luttinger liquid. Inelastic neutron scattering and the specific heat measurements in both phases are in good agreement with theoretical calculations, demonstrating that DIMPY is the first model material for an S = 1/2 two-leg spin ladder in the strong-leg regime.

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Gapped ground states comprising singlet pairs of spins are the prevalent nonmagnetic quantum disordered states in a variety of antiferromagnetic Heisenberg models [3–8]. Among those models, two-leg spin-1/2 ladders with antiferromagnetic rung and leg exchanges, $J_{\text{rung}}$ and $J_{\text{leg}}$, are the simplest whose ground states are yet non-trivial. These states give way to a Tomonaga-Luttinger liquid (TLL)—a critical state with fractional $S=1/2$ spinon excitations—at a magnetic-field-driven quantum critical point (QCP) [4].

Although the quantum phase transition at such a QCP has been extensively investigated theoretically [3–8], there have been few experimental studies because of the scarcity of real systems with right energy scales. (C$_5$H$_{12}$N)$_2$CuCl$_4$, which was originally thought to be a ladder material [9], later turned out to be a frustrated three-dimensional antiferromagnet [10]. In IPA-CuCl$_3$ [11, 12], long range magnetic order—also known as a Bose-Einstein condensation of magnons [11, 12]—due to interladder interactions dominates the magnetic-field region above the QCP. Thus far, the only detailed report of a TLL in a two-leg spin-1/2 ladder has concerned (C$_5$H$_{12}$N)$_2$CuBr$_4$, a strong-rung material with $J_{\text{leg}}/J_{\text{rung}} \approx 0.25$ [14, 15]. For deeper understanding of ladders, development of new materials with a wide range of $J_{\text{leg}}/J_{\text{rung}}$ will be crucial. Of special interest are materials in the strong-leg regime, $J_{\text{leg}}/J_{\text{rung}} > 1$, since quantum fluctuations are more prominent in this regime and as a result the singlets will be less localized, a state reminiscent of the resonating valence bond liquid [12, 13].

In this Letter, we investigate a magnetic-field-induced quantum phase transition in (C$_5$H$_{10}$N)$_2$CuBr$_4$, DIMPY for short, a new material in which the CuBr$_4^{2-}$ radicals form two-leg spin ladders along the crystallographic a axis [18]. Our inelastic neutron scattering (INS) demonstrates that this compound is a spin-gapped quantum magnet with excellent one-dimensionality. Our specific-heat measurements reveal the presence of a TLL phase above the critical field $H_c = 3.0(3)$ T, with no long-range order at least down to 150 mK. With the aid of perturbative continuous unitary transformations (PCUT) and state-of-the-art density-matrix renormalization-group (DMRG) calculations, we determine the strengths of the rung and leg exchanges from the INS results in the gapped phase and the specific-heat results in the TLL phase with remarkable consistency, confirming that DIMPY is an ideal $S=1/2$ spin-ladder system in the strong-leg regime.

Single crystals of deuterated DIMPY were grown according to the method described in Ref. [18]. Prompt-gamma neutron activation analysis measurements showed that 67% of hydrogen sites are occupied by deuterium. The zero field INS experiment was performed on SPINS at NIST with a single crystal of a 3.5 g mass and a 0.5° mosaic spread. The measurements were made in the $(h,k,0)$ and $(h,0,l)$ reciprocal-lattice planes with a standard helium cryostat. The high-field INS experiment was performed on RITA II at SINQ, PSI. The sample consisted of two single crystals with a total mass of 2 g coaligned within 0.6°. The sample was oriented...
FIG. 1: (color online). Dispersion measured by INS in DIMPY at \( T = 1.5 \) K as a function of \( h, k, \) and \( l \). Lines in (a) and (b) indicate the gap energy. Lines in (c) are from PCUT calculations for an AFH two-leg spin ladder for different values of \( x = J_{\text{leg}}/J_{\text{rung}} \).

with the \((h,0,l)\) plane horizontal and was cooled in a 13.5 T vertical-field cryomagnet. The data rate was increased by employing a multi-blade crystal analyzer and a position sensitive detector [19]. A Be (or BeO) filter was placed after the sample to remove high-order contamination, selecting a final neutron energy of 5.0 (or 3.7) meV.

The specific heat measurements were made with relaxation calorimetry at the NHMFL, Tallahassee, on a single crystal of an 8.2 mg mass in fields up to 18 T applied parallel to the \( c \) axis.

Figure 1 summarizes the zero-field dispersion measured at \( T = 1.5 \) K by INS along three high symmetry directions in the reciprocal space [20]. We performed a global fit of all collected data to a dynamic spin correlation function with the approximate spin-gap dispersion \( \epsilon(q) = \sqrt{\Delta^2 + v^2 \sin^2(2\pi(0.5 - h))} \) [21], convolved with instrumental resolution, finding \( \Delta = 0.32(2) \) meV, \( v = 2.36(4) \) meV. The individual data points shown in the figure were obtained by fitting a resolution-corrected lineshape to each constant-\( q \) (or constant-energy) scan. Note that Figs. 1(a) and 1(b) are shown on a much finer scale than Fig. 1(c). Within a scale as small as 20 \( \mu \)eV, dispersion is absent along the \( c \) direction, and only a very weak dispersion, if any, of at most 50 \( \mu \)eV is found along the \( b \) direction [22], indicating that DIMPY is an excellent one-dimensional (1D) system.

We have calculated the dispersion of an \( S=1/2 \) antiferromagnetic Heisenberg (AFH) spin-ladder system, using PCUT [23] around the limit of isolated rungs. The series in \( x = J_{\text{leg}}/J_{\text{rung}} \) is obtained in the thermodynamic limit [24] and is extrapolated in terms of an internal parameter [25] using Padé resummation, yielding reliable results for large \( x \) especially for \( q \) close to the magnetic zone center. The lines in Fig. 1(c) are the dispersion for different values of \( x \), calculated in conjunction with the accurate gap value \( \Delta = 0.32(2) \) meV. Best agreement with the data is obtained for \( x = 2.2(2) \), indicating that DIMPY is in the strong-leg regime.

Figure 2(a) shows the background-subtracted constant-\( q \) scan at the magnetic zone center (0.5,0,0.9) at \( T = 1.5 \) K in different fields. The background was determined at zero field by making energy scans at \( q = (0.35,0,0.9) \) and (0.65,0,0.9), away from the magnetic zone center, with the same instrument configuration and by fitting the results to a Gaussian profile over the

FIG. 2: (color online). (a) Background-subtracted constant- \( q \) scan in DIMPY at the magnetic zone center (0.5,0,0.9) at \( T = 1.5 \) K for magnetic fields \( H = 0, 5, 8, \) and 13.5 T. (b) Background-subtracted constant \( \hbar \omega = 0.7 \) meV scans along the \((h,0,1.7-1.44h)\) direction at \( T = 1.5 \) K and \( H = 0 \) and 5 T. The dotted line is a guide for the eye. In both frames, solid lines are fits to a dynamic spin correlation function with the approximate spin-gap dispersion relation [21], convolved with instrumental resolution, and dashed lines indicate zero.
In the latter region, the data have been plotted as $C/T$ as a function of temperature for (a) $H < H_c$ and (b) $H > H_c$. In the former region, the data have been plotted as $C_m/T$ after subtracting the nuclear-quadrupole contribution (see endnote 23). $v_F$ is extracted from data between 0.3 K and the upper limit of the $T$-linear region, indicated by an arrow. Inset (1): Semilog plot of the $H < H_c$ data against $1/T$. Lines are fits to Eq. 1. Inset (2): Field dependence of the spin gap obtained from the data.

range where no magnetic excitation is present. At zero field, the resolution-limited peak indicates the location of the spin gap. Such a peak is absent at and above 5 T, indicating that the magnetic field drives the system into a gapless critical phase.

To examine the magnetic excitation spectra at zero field and in the gapless phase, constant-energy scans were performed at $T = 1.5$ K for $\hbar \omega = 0.7$ meV as shown in Fig. 2(b), where a constant background term has been subtracted. These measurements were made along the $(h,0.17-1.44h)$ direction to maximize the structure factor. The $q$-resolution-limited peaks at zero field are from one-particle excitations. The low-energy feature in the gapless phase, at 5 T, is clearly much broader than the experimental resolution, suggesting that it arises from a two-spinon continuum, not from one-particle excitations.

To augment the INS results, we measured the specific heat at $T < 2.5$ K, as shown in Fig. 3. The phonon contribution was determined from the zero-field entropy $S = \int (C/T)dT$ and has been subtracted from the data at all fields. The nuclear-spin contribution has also been subtracted through a simultaneous fit to the data for all fields at temperatures below 700 mK.

At zero field and 2 T, exponentially activated behavior is found, as shown in the first inset to Fig. 3(a), providing additional clear evidence for a spin gap below a critical field. The specific heat of a gapped 1D AFH quantum magnet in the low-temperature limit is given by

$$C(T) = \frac{\tilde{n}R}{2\sqrt{2\pi}} \left( \frac{\Delta}{k_B T} \right)^{3/2} \frac{\Delta}{v} e^{-\Delta/k_B T},$$

where $\tilde{n}$ is the number of gapped low-energy modes and $R$ the gas constant. Fitted at $k_B T \ll \Delta$ to this expression, the zero-field data yields $\Delta = 0.32(1)$ meV—excellent agreement with the INS result—and $\tilde{n}/v = 1.26(2)$ [27]. Taking $v = 2.36(4)$ meV from INS, we find $\tilde{n} = 3.0(1)$, which unambiguously indicates the threefold degeneracy expected for a two-leg spin ladder. The field dependence of $\Delta$ is shown in the second inset to Fig. 3(a); a linear fit gives $H_c = 3.0(3)$ T in good agreement with $\Delta/(g \mu_B H) = 2.8(2)$ T, assuming $g = 2.0$.

Above $H_c$, the specific heat shows remarkable behavior. There is no $\lambda$-like peak, indicative of a phase transition, at temperatures down to 150 mK and magnetic fields up to 18 T. Figure 3(b) shows the magnetic specific heat divided by temperature, $C_m/T$, at 5, 8, and 18 T. As temperature decreases, $C_m$ reaches an asymptotic $T$-linear limit, characteristic of TLL, before an upward deviation sets in—probably a precursor of long-range order due to weak interladder interactions [28]. The low-temperature specific heat of TLL is given by conformal field theory as

$$C(T) = \frac{\pi}{3} R \frac{k_B T}{v_F(H)},$$

where $v_F$, the Fermi velocity, is the velocity of the gapless excitations. Using this equation, we extract $v_F = 2.79(8)$, 3.27(11), and 2.89(9) meV respectively from the specific heat at 5, 8, and 18 T.

From these $v_F$ and $\Delta$, we now determine $x = J_{leg}/J_{rung}$ and $J_{rung}$. First, we perform a density-matrix-renormalization-group (DMRG) calculations for $S = 1/2$ AFH two-leg ladders [31], in conjunction with finite-size scaling, and obtain $v_F/J_{leg}$ as a function of $g \mu_B H/J_{leg}$ for fixed $x$ [32] and $\Delta/J_{rung}$ as a function of $x$ [33]. From this $\Delta/J_{rung}$ and $\Delta = 0.32(2)$ meV from the zero-field specific heat and INS, we find $J_{leg}$ — which is $x J_{rung}$ — for each $x$. With these $J_{leg}$, we then normalize the experimental values of $v_F$ and plot them with the theoretical results, as shown for $x = 2$ and 2.5 in Fig. 4. Finally, comparison of experiment and theory in this plot yields $x = 2.3(2)$, for which $\Delta/J_{rung} = 0.409(6)$ and thus $J_{rung} = 0.78(6)$ meV.

To summarize, DIMPY undergoes a quantum phase transition at $H_c = 3.0(3)$ T from a gapped phase to a Tomonaga-Luttinger liquid (TLL). Inelastic neutron
scattering reveals the excellent one-dimensionality of this material and provides a firm value of the spin gap, $\Delta = 0.32(2)$ meV, as does the specific heat. In the TLL phase, the specific heat attains characteristic $T$-linear behavior, yielding the Fermi velocity $v_F$ of the gapless excitations for the first time in any laboratory TLL. We obtain $J_{\text{rung}} = 0.78(6)$ meV from $\Delta$ and $v_F$, and the exchange ratio $x = 2.2(2)$ from the zero-field dispersion and 2.3(2) from $\Delta$ and $v_F$. These are consistent with previous estimates, $J_{\text{rung}} = 0.75$ meV and $x = 1.94$, from magnetic susceptibility measurements. Three independent experiments yielding the exchange constants with consistency and in excellent agreement with theory establish DIMPY unambiguously as the first ideal realization of an $S=1/2$ AFH two-leg ladder in the strong-leg regime, thus opening up a road to investigating the properties of such a ladder in this poorly explored regime.

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