Dispersive spin excitations in highly overdoped cuprates revealed by resonant inelastic x-ray scattering

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Using resonant inelastic x-ray scattering (RIXS) at the Cu L-absorption edge, we have observed intense, dispersive spin excitations in highly overdoped Tl2Ba2CuO6+δ (superconducting Tc = 6 K), a model compound whose normal-state charge transport and thermodynamic properties have been shown to exhibit canonical Fermi-liquid behavior. Complementary RIXS experiments on slightly overdoped Tl2Ba2CuO6+δ (Tc = 89 K) and on Y1−x,CaxBa2Cu3O6+δ compounds spanning a wide range of doping levels indicate that these excitations exhibit energies and energy-integrated spectral weights closely similar to those of antiferromagnetic magnons in undoped cuprates, indicating the persistence of substantial antiferromagnetic spin correlations over a wide doping range. The surprising coexistence of such correlations with Fermi-liquid-like charge excitations in highly overdoped cuprates poses a challenge to current theoretical models of correlated-electron metals.

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High-temperature superconductivity arises when the CuO2 planes of layered copper-oxide compounds are doped with mobile charge carriers. When the number of mobile carriers per Cu atom, p, vanishes, the CuO2 planes are antiferromagnetically ordered and exhibit conventional spin wave excitations with a total bandwidth of ~300 meV. For hole doping p ≳ 0.05, the antiferromagnetic long-range order disappears, and the low-temperature ground state becomes superconducting. Inelastic neutron scattering (INS) experiments have demonstrated that dispersive spin excitations akin to antiferromagnetic spin waves persist in the superconducting state, although their low-energy spectral weight is progressively reduced with increasing p. According to current theories, these “paramagnon” excitations act as a key driving force for Cooper pairing.1 Up to now, however, the INS studies have been largely limited to underdoped (0.05 ≲ p ≲ 0.15)2–4 and lightly overdoped (0.15 ≲ p ≲ 0.2) cuprates,5–7 where the spectral features attributable to paramagnons remain relatively sharp and intense. In the highly overdoped regime (p ≳ 0.2), where the superconducting transition temperature Tc and the superconducting energy gap are sharply reduced and eventually vanish,5–16 INS experiments have thus far only been reported for a single cuprate family, La2−xSrxCuO4 (La-214).11,12 They show progressive weakening of the spin excitations with energies E ≲ 100 meV, continuing the trend already identified in the underdoped regime, but also indicate that excitations at higher E are less affected by doping. Since La-214 exhibits incommensurate magnetic order (“stripes”) near optimal doping, and its Tc is limited to ~40 K, it is unclear whether these findings are generic for the cuprate superconductors. Recent resonant inelastic x-ray scattering (RIXS) experiments13,14 allowed the detection of dispersive high-energy (E ≳ 100 meV) spin excitations in optimally doped cuprates with maximal Tc ~ 90 K, as well as in iron-based superconductors.15 Although these high-energy paramagnons are strongly broadened by scattering from mobile carriers and are thus difficult to detect by INS, their energies and integrated spectral weights turned out to be surprisingly similar to those of magnons in antiferromagnetically ordered compounds with p = 0. We have now used the methodology established in these experiments to explore the highly overdoped regime of the cuprate phase diagram.

Most of our current knowledge about highly overdoped cuprates derives from transport and thermodynamic experiments, which have revealed characteristics matching those of ordinary Fermi liquids. In particular, the electrical resistivity essentially depends quadratically on temperature,16,17 the thermal conductivity satisfies the Wiedemann-Franz law,18 and the uniform magnetic susceptibility is dominated by a temperature independent, Pauli-like term.19 In highly overdoped Tl2Ba2CuO6+δ (Tl-2201), a compound that features a single, isolated CuO2 plane per formula unit and very low intrinsic disorder, additional photoemission,20 angle-dependent magnetoresistance,21 and quantum oscillation22 experiments have uncovered well-defined Landau quasiparticles with a Fermi surface that agrees quantitatively with the predictions of density functional theory. Based on these findings, one commonly assumes that the spin excitations in highly overdoped cuprates resemble those of weakly correlated metals, which exhibit a featureless continuum of incoherent electronic spin-flip excitations extending up to the Fermi energy, rather than the dispersive paramagnon excitations found in the cuprates at lower doping levels.

We report a RIXS study of the model system Tl-2201 that challenges this commonly held view of the highly overdoped cuprates. Specifically, RIXS data on a Tl-2201 crystal with
$T_c = 6$ K (corresponding to hole content $p = 0.27$ according to Tallon’s empirical formula$^{23}$), which is squarely in the “Fermi-liquid” regime of the phase diagram, reveal intense spin excitations with a dispersion relation closely similar to antiferromagnetic spin waves. This implies that short-range antiferromagnetic spin correlations are surprisingly robust even in cuprates (and possibly other correlated-electron metals) with well-documented, canonical Fermi-liquid behavior at low energies.

The RIXS measurements were performed at the ADRESS beamline$^{26}$ of the Swiss Light Source (Paul Scherrer Institute, Switzerland) using the high-resolution superadvanced x-ray emission spectrometer (SAXES spectrometer).$^{25}$ To obtain the resonant conditions required for the observation of magnons, the energy of the incident x rays was tuned to the maximum of the $L_3$-absorption peak of the planar Cu atoms ($\sim 931.5$ eV). Since the absorption edge of Cu atoms on chain sites in the Y-123 structure is at a different energy, these atoms do not contribute to the spectra reported there. The total energy resolution was about 130 meV, and the position of the elastic (zero energy loss) line was determined by measuring a nonresonant spectrum of polycrystalline graphite for each value of the momentum transfer, $Q$. The spectra presented here were recorded at $T = 15$ K for total durations of 30–120 min. Scattering of photons at the Cu $L_3$ edge is restricted to a maximum $Q = 0.855 \, \text{Å}^{-1}$, which covers about 85% of the first Brillouin zone (BZ) along the [100] direction. Momentum transfers are given in reciprocal lattice units (r.l.u.), that is, in units of the reciprocal lattice vectors $a^* = 2\pi/a$, $b^* = 2\pi/b$, and $c^* = 2\pi/c$, where $a$, $b$, $c$ are the dimensions of the tetragonal (orthorhombic) units cells of Tl-2201 (Y-123). Because of the quasi-two-dimensional (2D) electronic structure, we mostly refer to the projection of $Q$ parallel to the CuO$_2$ layers, $Q_\parallel$.

Tl-2201 single crystals of typical size $0.5 \times 0.5 \times 0.03$ mm$^3$ were grown by an encapsulated copper-rich self-flux technique and annealed under controlled oxygen partial pressures to yield the desired doping levels.$^{26}$ The experiments were performed on a lightly ($p = 0.17$, $T_c = 89$ K) and a heavily ($p = 0.27$, $T_c = 6$ K) overdoped crystal. Y-123 crystals of typical size $2 \times 2 \times 0.1$ mm$^3$ were grown by a top-seeded solution growth method.$^{27}$ We report RIXS data on an overdoped Y$_{0.85}$Ca$_{0.15}$Ba$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{6.6}$ single crystal ($p = 0.19$, $T_c = 75$ K), and on an antiferromagnetically ordered YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{6.1}$ crystal ($p \sim 0$). For comparison, we also show data on a YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{6.5}$ sample reported previously.$^{13}$

Figure 1 shows representative RIXS spectra of Y-123 and Tl-2201 crystals spanning a wide range of doping levels. The spectra were taken for $Q_\parallel = (0,4,0)$, close to the X point, ($0.5,0$), at the BZ boundary, with the polarization of the incident photon either in the scattering plane (σ scattering geometry) or perpendicular to it (π geometry). In the energy range $\sim 1$–3 eV, we observe intense interband transitions (Fig. 1, left panel), which are known as dd transitions because the initial and final states are of Cu d-orbital character. The shapes of the dd excitation spectra and their polarization dependence reflect the local environment of Cu, and are hence quite different in the Tl-2201 and Y-123 families.$^{13,28,29}$ A detailed assignment of these features can be made with the help of quantum chemistry calculations,$^{30}$ which will be reported elsewhere.

Here we focus on the low-energy features in the spectra (right panel of Fig. 1), which are independent of the chemistry and lattice symmetry of the two different compound families. The spectrum of YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{6.1}$ shows a resolution-limited single-magnon peak whose energy ($E \sim 260$ meV) matches the one previously determined by INS and RIXS experiments on the 123 family.$^{13,31}$ Since these data were obtained close to the X point, single spin-flip excitations are only visible in the π channel (see the inset of Fig. 1 and Refs. 13, 29, 32, and 33).

![FIG. 1. (Color online) Left column: Doping dependence of the RIXS response measured in the σ (red) and π (black) scattering geometries for $Q_\parallel = 0.87\Gamma X = (0,4,0)$ r.l.u. Right column: Detailed view of the low-energy part of the data. In each panel, the intensity scale has been normalized to the area of the dd excitation in the π channel. Inset: Intensities for spin-flip (SF) and non-spin-flip (NSF) scattering from in-plane Cu sites with $3d_{\pi,\sigma}$ ground-state symmetry in the π channel relative to σ (Refs. 13, 29, 32, and 33).](image)
is confirmed by fits of the data to a set of Lorentzian profiles, convoluted with the experimental resolution, following Ref. 13. The results yield excellent descriptions of the data (blue lines in Fig. 2).

Figure 3 shows the energies and linewidths of the paramagnon features in the three overdoped compounds extracted from the fits. The dispersion relations of the magnetic excitation in the overdoped samples resemble those of antiferromagnetic magnons in undoped cuprates, and the shapes of the paramagnon peaks are very similar to those in the samples at lower doping levels, although a slight softening and broadening is apparent relative to the underdoped YBa2Cu3O6−δ sample (shown for comparison as an orange line in Fig. 3). Interestingly, we do not observe sizable differences between the data on the lightly and strongly overdoped Tl2Ba2CuO6+δ.

In order to quantitatively compare the doping dependence of the magnetic spectral weights in the Tl-2201 and Y-123 systems with one and two CuO2 layers per formula unit, respectively, we have normalized the RIXS intensity to the energy-integrated spectral weight of the dd excitations, which is proportional to the density of CuO2 layers.

In summary, our data demonstrate that high-energy spin excitations with dispersion relations and energy-integrated spectral weights closely similar to antiferromagnetic magnons persist up to doping levels sufficient to almost entirely suppress superconductivity. They corroborate and extend prior INS and oxygen K-edge RIXS results on La1−δSrδCuO4 (p = 0.22), which revealed magnetic excitations up to $E \sim 160$ meV and bimagnon modes up to $E \sim 450$ meV, respectively. The behavior we have observed is reminiscent of the persistence of high-energy magnons upon heating well into the paramagnetic regime of magnetically ordered insulators such as EuO, which is well understood as a consequence of short-range correlations between local moments. This analogy suggests an interpretation of our cuprate data in terms of short-range correlations between Cu moments. The main result of our study is that these correlations remain surprisingly strong even in highly overdoped Tl-2201, a compound whose charge transport and thermodynamic properties are well described by Fermi-liquid theory.

The development of a unified framework that consistently describes both the fermiology and the spin dynamics of this prototypical overdoped cuprate is an important challenge to theory. Further, our results should motivate and inform research on the spin dynamics of other important correlated-electron metals (such as ruthenium oxides, iron pnictides, and organic metals) that exhibit signatures of Fermi-liquid behavior in quantum oscillation measurements.

We end our discussion with some remarks on the implications of our data for spin-fluctuation mediated Cooper pairing theories. Recent optical spectroscopy experiments indicate...
that the conduction electrons in the cuprates are coupled to bosonic excitations with a spectrum extending up to energies comparable to zone-boundary magnons in insulating cuprates, but they suggested that coupling to high-energy excitations is present even in highly overdoped, nonsuperconducting cuprates where magnonlike excitations were not expected. 37 Our observation of high-energy paramagnons in the highly overdoped regime now resolves this puzzle. The persistence of substantial electron-paramagnon coupling in overdoped cuprates with greatly depressed superconductivity is qualitatively consistent with phenomenological models according to which the highest-energy spin excitations contribute only weakly to Cooper pairing in the $d$-wave channel; those excitations along $\Gamma$-$X$ we are probing by RIXS are actually pair breaking. 1, 13, 38 In these models, the $d$-wave pairing strength comes mostly from lower-energy spin excitations centered around the antiferromagnetic ordering wave vector $Q = (0.5,0.5)$. Close to this wave vector, low-energy ($E \sim 40$–60 meV) spin excitations have indeed been observed by INS in many optimally doped cuprates 2–4 including Tl-2201. 39 INS data on La-214 (Refs. 11 and 12) indicate that these low-energy excitations build up progressively as the optimal doping level is approached from above, in concert with the Cooper pairing correlations. Together with prior studies, our RIXS data are thus beginning to provide a firm experimental basis for a controlled theoretical approach to the high-$T_c$ problem from the overdoped side, where difficulties due to competing spin 40 and charge 41 order are much less severe than in the underdoped regime on which much of the experimental effort has focused in the past. Intense magnetic excitation have recently also been observed by Dean and collaborators in highly doped La-214. 42

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