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Plaquette order in the SU(6) Heisenberg model on the honeycomb lattice

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We revisit the SU(6) Heisenberg model on the honeycomb lattice, which has been predicted to be a chiral spin liquid by mean-field theory [G. Szirmai et al., Phys. Rev. A 84, 011611(R) (2011)]. Using exact diagonalizations of finite clusters, infinite projected entangled pair state simulations, and variational Monte Carlo simulations based on Gutzwiller projected wave functions, we provide strong evidence that the model with one particle per site and nearest-neighbor exchange actually develops plaquette order. This is further confirmed by the investigation of the model with a ring-exchange term, which shows that there is a transition between the plaquette state and the chiral state at a finite value of the ring-exchange term.

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With the recent progress towards achieving SU(N) symmetry with ultracold fermionic atoms [1–10], the investigation of the effective SU(N) Heisenberg model on various one-dimensional (1D) and two-dimensional (2D) lattices has become a very active field of research. Several remarkable ground state properties have been reported, including long-range color order [11], algebraic correlations [12], translational symmetry breaking valence-bond solid states in which groups of N atoms form local singlets on plaquettes [13,14], and chiral ground states, suggested by Hermele et al. [15,16] for Mott insulators on a square lattice with several particles per site. Interestingly, a mean-field calculation even predicted a chiral spin liquid in the SU(6) Heisenberg model on the honeycomb lattice with only one particle per site [17,18]. However, the rather natural plaquette state in which six SU(6) spins form singlets on nonadjacent hexagons was found to lie very close in energy. So this result calls for further investigation with methods that go beyond mean-field theory.

In this Rapid Communication, we have addressed this problem with state-of-the-art numerical methods: variational Monte Carlo (VMC) simulations based on Gutzwiller projected wave functions, exact diagonalizations (ED), and infinite projected entangled pair state simulations (iPEPS). VMC confirmed that the two phases are very close in energy, with the plaquette state being just slightly lower in energy. Only after turning to exact diagonalizations and iPEPS could we find compelling evidence that the ground state indeed has plaquette order. The chiral state is not far in parameter space, however, and it does not take a large ring-exchange term to stabilize it, as demonstrated by ED and VMC.

The SU(6) Heisenberg model is defined by the Hamiltonian

\[ \mathcal{H} = \sum_{(i,j)} P_{ij}, \]

where the operator \( P_{ij} = \sum_{\alpha, \beta} |\alpha_i\beta_j\rangle\langle\beta_i\alpha_j| \) exchanges the \( N = 6 \) colors \( \alpha \) and \( \beta \) of the atoms on neighboring sites \( i,j \) of a honeycomb lattice.
first three levels $\Gamma B_2, K A_2(2\times)$ (plus the symmetry related level $\Gamma E_1$ particular to $N_s = 18$) are in agreement with the expectations for a plaquette state, [14] these states are very close to many other excited states (including nonsinglets). So the spectrum does not provide enough evidence for either of the competing states.

To go further, we have used a newly developed method [22] that allows one to take advantage of the full SU($N$) symmetry, hence to work directly in the irreducible representations of SU($N$). For the singlet and the smallest values of the Casimir operator, this leads to Hilbert spaces of much smaller dimension than the standard approach. The spectrum is shown in Fig. 2(b). Interestingly enough, on 24 sites, the spectrum consists of three low-lying states reasonably well separated from the rest of the spectrum, the first indication that the ground state might have plaquette order. The spin-spin and dimer-dimer correlations decay quite fast, consistent with some kind of spin liquid, and the dimer-dimer correlations are consistent with a plaquette phase on the honeycomb lattice [see, for instance, the discussion of the SU(3) case in Ref. [14]].

As an additional test, we have determined the spatial quantum numbers of the first excited doublet by applying one of the two elementary translations of the lattice. The corresponding eigenstates belong to the two $K$ points in the Brillouin zone. The correlations in these states are very similar to those in the ground state, which suggests that these three states could correspond to the degenerate ground state of the thermodynamic limit split by finite-size effects. To demonstrate that this is the case, we have constructed the symmetric sum of these states, which corresponds to the finite-size approximation of a broken-symmetry state (a simple task since the numerical wave functions are real and not complex). In that state, the strong bonds correspond to a covering of the lattice with hexagons [see the inset of Fig. 2(b)], with a difference between strong and weak bond energies of 0.25, in good agreement with the extrapolated iPEPS estimate [see Fig. 4(c) below].

However, one should not forget that we have access to only one cluster with the appropriate number of low-lying states, and that the gap to the next levels is comparable to the gap between the ground state and the first pair of low-lying states. So, below, we turn to the results obtained with iPEPS.

### Table I. VMC energies of Gutzwiller projected wave functions for the competing $0\pi\pi$ (plaquette) and the $2\pi/3$ flux configurations for different system sizes, compared to the mean-field (MF) and iPEPS ($D = 36$) results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$N_s$</th>
<th>24</th>
<th>24 opt</th>
<th>72</th>
<th>72 opt</th>
<th>288</th>
<th>MF [17]</th>
<th>iPEPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plaquette</td>
<td>$-1.039$</td>
<td>$-1.057$</td>
<td>$-1.0079$</td>
<td>$-1.0123$</td>
<td>$-1.0082$</td>
<td>$-1.010$</td>
<td>$-1.031$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\frac{2\pi}{3}$ chiral</td>
<td>$-1.0064$</td>
<td>$-1.0104$</td>
<td>$-1.0077$</td>
<td>$-1.0087$</td>
<td>$-1.0077$</td>
<td>$-1.025$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
iPEPS. An iPEPS is a variational tensor network ansatz to represent a 2D wave function in the thermodynamic limit [23–25]. The ansatz on the honeycomb lattice consists of a unit cell of rank-4 tensors which is periodically repeated on the infinite lattice, for each tensor one physical index carries the local Hilbert space of lattice site, and three auxiliary indices connect to the nearest-neighbor tensors. The accuracy of the ansatz can be systematically controlled by the bond dimension $D$ of the auxiliary indices. For the experts we note that the contraction of the tensor network is performed using a variant [26,27] of the corner-transfer matrix method [28,29], and the optimization is done by an imaginary time evolution using a combined simple and (fast) full update [30,31]. To increase the efficiency of the simulations we make use of Abelian symmetries [32,33]. A similar approach has been used in previous calculations of SU($N$) Heisenberg models (see, e.g., Refs. [12,14]). For an introduction to iPEPS we refer to Refs. [30,31].

We have used a six-site unit cell which is compatible with both plaquette and uniform (possibly chiral) states. As initial states we started either from completely random tensors or from a plaquette state made of SU(6) singlets on hexagons. In the former case, using bond dimensions up to $D = 24$, a new competing state appears, in which each site in the unit cell exhibits a different dominant color. For $D \leq 24$ this color-ordered state has a lower variational energy than the plaquette state, consistent with plaquette long-range order. The local moment of the plaquette state is much more strongly suppressed with increasing $D$, and vanishes in the large $D$ limit, consistent with a singlet without color order.

Figure 4(c) shows the difference in energy between the highest and lowest bond energy in the unit cell which measures the magnitude of the plaquette order. For the color-ordered state with increasing $D$ but tends to a finite value in the infinite $D$ limit. The local moment of the plaquette state is much more strongly suppressed with increasing $D$, and vanishes in the large $D$ limit, consistent with a singlet without color order.

In Fig. 4(b) we present the results for the color-order parameter of the two competing states, given by the local moment

$$m = \sum_{\alpha,\beta} \left( S_\alpha^\beta - \frac{\delta_{\alpha\beta}}{6} \right)^2,$$

averaged over all sites in the unit cell, where $S_\alpha^\beta = \langle \alpha | \langle \beta |$ are the SU(6) spin operators and $\alpha, \beta$ run over all local basis states. For the color-ordered state $m$ is large for low $D$. It decreases
it is strongly suppressed with increasing $D$ and vanishes for large $D$, in contrast to the plaquette state which exhibits a large difference in bond energy, where the strong bonds form hexagonal plaquettes.

**Ring-exchange term.** Since the energy difference between the plaquette and chiral phases found by VMC is very small, it is tempting to speculate that the chiral phase might be stabilized by a ring-exchange term around the hexagons. We have thus considered

$$\mathcal{H} = \cos \theta \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} P_{ij} + \sin \theta \sum_{\text{plaquettes}} i(P_{ij} - P_{ij}^{-1}),$$

where the sum in the second term runs over all hexagonal plaquettes, and the operators $P_{ij}$ and $P_{ij}^{-1}$ permute the configuration on a hexagon clockwise and anticlockwise (also called ring-exchange terms). The new term directly couples to the scalar chirality on the hexagons, breaks time-reversal invariance, and is a bona fide SU(6) generalization of an SU(2) Hamiltonian on the kagome lattice which has been shown to give rise to an extended SU(2) chiral spin liquid phase [34,35]. Alternatively it can be viewed as a drastically truncated version of a parent Hamiltonian for a SU($N$) chiral spin liquid [36].

In the following, we will discuss the properties of that model of Eq. (3) explicitly breaks the time-reversal symmetry.

This interpretation is further supported by the comparison with VMC on 24 sites. To access the low energy spectrum and not just the ground state, we have constructed a large family of Gutzwiller projected states by changing the boundary conditions (BCs) of the fermionic wave functions [37], considering up to 30 different BCs for the $2\pi/3$ flux states, and up to 90 for the $0\pi$ flux states (30 for each translation breaking state), and we have diagonalized the overlap matrix and the Hamiltonian in this variational subspace [38,39]. The results are summarized in Fig. 5. For the chiral state, this partition construction leads to six (and only six) significant eigenvalues of the overlap matrix, which themselves lead to six low-lying states very close in energy [40]. There is not such a clear cutoff for the plaquette states, and the three low-lying states are not so well split from the other states. Although the variational plaquette and chiral states are higher in energy, their overall behavior is qualitatively consistent with ED. In particular, the energy of the plaquette state is minimal at $\theta = 0$, while that of the chiral states is minimal around $\theta = 0.36$, and their energies cross around $\theta = 0.16$.

Similar overlap calculations were carried out for $N_s = 72$ sites, with 30 different BCs for the $2\pi/3$ flux case, and 12 for each translation breaking state (36 in total) for the $0\pi\pi$ flux case. The energy corrections for the $0\pi\pi$ case turn out to be larger (see Table I), again promoting the plaquette-ordered phase over the chiral liquid phase at the Heisenberg point [41].

Interestingly, Gutzwiller projected wave functions turn out to be much better for the chiral phase than for the plaquette phase on 24 sites. In fact, the energy minimum for the $0\pi\pi$ flux states, shown in Fig. 1, occurs for $t_d/t_h \approx 0.85$. Now, for $t_d \leq -t_h/2$, which includes the optimal energy value, the fermionic wave function is gapless at the Fermi energy: the lowest band (the only filled one) touches the empty band above it at the Fermi point (the Fermi surface is confined to a point) [14]. So, by contrast to the plaquette phase of the SU(3) Heisenberg on the honeycomb lattice, which is described by a gapped fermionic wave function [14], the plaquette phase discussed here for SU(6) corresponds to a gapless spectrum before projection, hence possibly also to a gapless spectrum after projection. Since this gapless point is not protected (the spectrum is gapped for $t_d > -t_h/2$), we suspect that this is an artifact, and that adding additional terms in the fermionic Hamiltonian might open a gap and further lower the variational energy of that state. This is supported by the fact that the variational energy of the plaquette phase obtained with VMC is much higher than that obtained by iPEPS for the same phase.

**Discussion.** Altogether, we believe that the numerical results reported in this Rapid Communication provide compelling evidence in favor of a plaquette ground state for the SU(6) Heisenberg model on the honeycomb lattice. We have also shown that there is, however, a chiral phase close by in parameter space. In particular, let us emphasize that the variational energy obtained by iPEPS for the plaquette state is much lower than that of the chiral state obtained by VMC, which, as shown when introducing a ring-exchange term, is very good at describing the chiral phase. This situation is reminiscent of the SU(2) honeycomb model for intermediate values of

![FIG. 5. Comparison of the ED spectrum (black points) of the model of Eq. (3) with the variational energies (continuous lines) based on Gutzwiller projected wave functions for the $0\pi\pi$ plaquette phase and the $2\pi/3$ chiral phase. The inset shows the (ordered) eigenvalues $\lambda_i$ of the overlap matrices of the projected states with different twisted boundary conditions before projection as a function of $j$.](image-url)
the next-nearest-neighbor exchange interaction ($J_2/J_1 \approx 0.3$): Several numerical methods [42–46] found a plaquette-ordered phase, while mean-field [47], variational Monte Carlo [48], and entangled-plaquette variational ansatz [49] approaches could not reproduce these results but reported instead gapped spin liquid/columnar valence bond solid phases in that parameter range.

Even if it led to the wrong conclusion, the mean-field approach should be given credit for identifying the right candidates with very similar energies [17]. This lends further support to the mean-field prediction by Hermele et al. [15,16] of a chiral phase for several particles per site since there does not seem to be competing VBS states too close in energy in that case. Numerical work along the lines of the present Rapid Communication to test this prediction is in progress.

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[41] Note that while the diagonal energies depend on the value of $t_d/t_s$, the spanned subspace of the projected states with different boundary conditions before projection remains the same, thus the optimized energies are independent of small changes of $t_d/t_s$.