Josephson $\pi$ State in a Ferromagnetic Insulator

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We predict anomalous atomic-scale 0-π transitions in a Josephson junction with a ferromagnetic-insulator (FI) barrier. The ground state of such junction alternates between 0 and $\pi$ states when thickness of FI is increasing by a single atomic layer. We find that the mechanism of the 0-π transition can be attributed to thickness-dependent phase shifts between the wave numbers of electrons and holes in FI. Based on these results, we show that a stable $\pi$ state can be realized in junctions based on high-$T_c$ superconductors with a $\text{La}_2\text{BaCuO}_5$ barrier.

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The developing field of superconducting spintronics comprises a plenty of fascinating phenomena that may complement nonsuperconducting spintronics devices [1]. Mesoscopic hybrid structures consisting of superconducting and magnetic materials have attracted considerable attention as devices with novel functionalities [2]. One of most interesting effects is the formation of $\pi$ states in superconductor/ferromagnetic-metal/superconductor (S/FM/S) Josephson junctions [3]. Under appropriate conditions a ferromagnet can become a $\pi$ phase shifter, providing the phase difference $\phi = \pi$ between two superconductors in the ground state in contrast to $\phi = 0$ in ordinary Josephson junctions. Recently a quiet qubit based on S/FM/S junction [4] has been suggested as a promising device to realize quantum computation because the spontaneously generated two-level system in this structure is robust against decoherence due to external fluctuations. However, low energy quasiparticle excitations in a FM provide strong dissipation [5]. Therefore Josephson $\pi$ junctions with a nonmetallic interlayers are highly desired for qubit applications [6]. Moreover, from the fundamental viewpoint, the Josephson transport through a ferromagnetic insulator (FI) has been studied based on phenomenological models [7] and not yet been explored explicitly.

In this Letter, we study theoretically the Josephson effect in superconductor/ferromagnetic-insulator/superconductor (S/FI/S) junctions using the tight-binding model. We show that the ground state in such structures alternates between the 0 and $\pi$ states when the thickness of a FI ($L_F$) is increasing by a single atomic layer. This remarkable effect originates from the characteristic band structure of a FI. Quasiparticles in the electron and hole branches acquire different phase shifts while propagating across a FI. We will show that the phase difference is exactly $\pi L_F$ due to the band structure of a FI, thus providing the atomic-scale 0-π transition. This mechanism is in striking contrast to the proximity induced 0-π transition in conventional S/FM/S junctions. On the basis of the obtained results, we predict a stable $\pi$ state in a Josephson junction based on high-$T_c$ superconductors with a $\text{La}_2\text{BaCuO}_5$ barrier, where electric current flows along the $c$ axis of cuprates.

Let us first consider an S/FI/S junction in the two-dimensional tight-binding model as shown in Fig. 1(a). The vector $\mathbf{r} = j\mathbf{x} + m\mathbf{y}$ points to a lattice site, where...
where the Hamiltonian, $\mathcal{H} = (1/2)\sum_{\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{r}' \in \mathbb{S}} \left[ \hat{c}_{\mathbf{r}} \hat{c}_{\mathbf{r}'} + \text{H.c.} \right] + (1/2)\sum_{\mathbf{r} \in \mathbb{S}} \left[ c_{\mathbf{r}}^\dagger \Delta c_{\mathbf{r}}^\dagger - c_{\mathbf{r}} \Delta^* c_{\mathbf{r}} \right] + (\mu_0/2)\sum_{\mathbf{r} \in \mathbb{S}} \Delta_{\mathbf{r}}^2$, with $\Delta_{\mathbf{r}} = (c_{\mathbf{r}+\mathbf{e}_x} - c_{\mathbf{r}+\mathbf{e}_y})^\dagger$, creates a superconductor. The Bogoliubov transformation is given by $\theta_{\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{r}'} = \frac{1}{2} \delta_{\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{r}'} \theta_{\mathbf{0}} + (\mu_0 + 4t) \delta_{\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{r}'} \theta_{\mathbf{3}}$, where $\theta_{\mathbf{0}}$ and $\theta_{\mathbf{3}}$ are amplitudes of the pair potential in the $s$-wave symmetry and $\theta_{\mathbf{r}}$ is a $2 \times 2$ unit matrix. We describe a FI by $\theta_{\mathbf{r}} = \theta_{\mathbf{0}} + (\mu_0 + 4t) \delta_{\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{r}'} \theta_{\mathbf{3}}$, where $\mu_0$ is the chemical potential. The Josephson critical current is related to $\phi$ by $I_J = (2e/\hbar) \sum_{\mathbf{r} \in \mathbb{S}} [\delta_{\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{r}'}(\phi_{\mathbf{r}} - \phi_{\mathbf{r}'})/\partial \phi] / \sin[\pi(\phi_{\mathbf{r}} - \phi_{\mathbf{r}'})]$, for $\phi = 0$. The atomic-scale $0-\pi$ transition persists even if we increase $L_F$ and $W$. In Fig. 2(b), we show the Josephson critical current as a function of $L_F$ for $W = 1$. Temperature $T$ is set to be $0.01T_c$. The $\pi(0)$ state is always more stable than the $0(\pi)$ state when the thickness of FI is an odd(even) integer. The reason is as follows. At low temperatures, only the odd levels below the Fermi energy, $\varepsilon_1$ and $\varepsilon_2$, contribute to $I_C$ [see Fig. 2(a)]. In the odd (even) $L_F$ cases, the $\pi(0)$ state is stable because of $\delta_{\varepsilon_1} \varepsilon_2 |\phi_{\pi/2} > (< 0)$, $\delta_{\varepsilon_1} \varepsilon_2 |\phi_{-\pi/2} > (< 0)$, and $\delta_{\varepsilon_1} \varepsilon_2 |\phi_{\pi/2} > < |\phi_{\pi/2} |\phi_{-\pi/2}$. The atomic-scale $0-\pi$ transition is insensitive to $W$ and material parameters.

FIG. 2 (color online). (a) The Andreev levels $\varepsilon_{21,21}$ are plotted as functions of $\phi$ for an one-dimensional S/F/S junction with $W = 1$. Left (right) panel shows the results for odd $L_F$ (even $L_F$) with $g = 0.5t$. (b) Josephson critical current $I_C$ at $T = 0.01T_c$ as a function of the thickness $L_F$ for $W = 1$ and $g = 0.5t$. The large red (small blue) circles indicate the $\pi(0)$ junction, respectively.
such as $\mu_s$, $g$, and $\Delta$. As an example, inset of Fig. 2(b) shows the phase diagram on the $g$-$L_F$ plane for $W = 10$.

The mechanism of the 0-π transition in a FI is very different from that in a FM. The key feature is expressed by the wave number of a quasiparticle in a FI as shown in Eqs. (4) and (5), where $q_e$ and $q_h$ are the wave numbers for an electron spin-↑ and a hole spin-↓, respectively. The real parts of $q_e$ and $q_h$ reflect the wave number at the $q$ points, where energy is closest to the Fermi energy, and differ by $\pi$ from each other. As shown in Fig. 1(b), the real part of $q_e$ is $\pi$ because the top of the electron band is located at $q = \pi$. On the other hand, the real part of $q_h$ is 0 because the top of the hole band is at $q = 0$. This is the origin of the difference between $q_e$ and $q_h$ which accounts the atomic-scale 0-π transition. When we consider a usual band insulator as shown in Fig. 1(c), we always obtain $q_e = q_h$ and their real parts equal $\pi$ because both the top of the electron band and the bottom of the hole band are located at $q = \pi$. As a consequence, 0-state is always stable in usual band insulators. Thus we conclude that the characteristic band structure of a FI is the origin of atomic-scale 0-π transitions. These features basically remain unchanged even when we consider Josephson junctions in higher dimensions. In such junctions, however, the appearance of $\pi$-dependent transitions depends on relative directions between the current and the crystalline axis. We will address this issue below. It should be emphasized that peculiar results presented above cannot be described by the standard quasiclassical Green’s function method [8] where band structure far from the Fermi energy is ignored.

Let us reconsider atomic-scale 0-π transitions from a different view point of quasiparticle transmission coefficient. In the high barrier limit ($g \gg 1$), the Josephson critical current is perturbatively given by $I_c \approx T_\alpha^\dagger T_\alpha [6]$. Here $T_\alpha^\dagger$ is a transmission coefficient of a FI for an electron with spin-↑ (↑). By using the transfer-matrix method [9], $T_\alpha$ for one-dimensional junctions can be obtained analytically $T_\alpha = \alpha L_j / (\rho_{\alpha}/g)^{L_F}$. Here $\rho_{\alpha} = -(+1)$ and $\alpha L_j$ is a spin-independent complex constant. We immediately find $T_\alpha^\dagger / T_\alpha = (-1)^{L_F}$. Thus the relative phase of $T_\alpha$ between spin-↑ and spin-↓ is $\pi$ for the odd (even) number of $L_F$. As a consequence, the sign of $I_c \propto (-1)^{L_F}$ becomes negative for odd $L_F$ and positive for even $L_F$. In other words, a FI acts as a π phase shifter for the spin-↑ electron for odd $L_F$.

The transfer-matrix method in real space also enables us to extend the calculations to another magnetic materials. Up to now, we have considered uniform magnetic moment in FI, which can be schematically expressed by $S/\mathbb{I} \cdot \ldots \mathbb{I} \cdot L_F / S$ or $S/\mathbb{I} \cdot \ldots \mathbb{I} \cdot L_F / S$. The arrows $\mathbb{I}$ and $\mathbb{I}$ indicate the z-axis magnetization at $j$. We can extend the above simple analysis to the arbitrary magnetization configuration, e.g., a random alignment described by $S/\mathbb{I} \cdot \ldots \mathbb{I} \cdot L_F / S$. In such junctions, we find $I_c \sim \prod_{\alpha=1}^{\Delta} T_{\alpha}^\dagger T_{\alpha} = \prod_{\alpha=1}^{\Delta} (-1) = (-1)^{L_F}$, where $T_{\alpha \sigma}$ is the transmission coefficient of an FI layer at $i$. Therefore we obtain a noticeable result, i.e., the sign of $I_c$ is independent of magnetization configurations and is negative (positive) for odd (even) $L_F$. The appearance of the atomic-scale 0-π transition has been also predicted in S/antiferromagnetic-interlayer/S junctions [10]. In their theory, however, the antiferromagnetic configuration is found to be essential for the atomic-scale transition. On the other hand, we conclude that the magnetization symmetry is not necessary and that the π-phase difference between $T_\uparrow$ and $T_\downarrow$ is an essential feature for the atomic-scale transition. Therefore, our analysis provides a more general view for the physics of the atomic-scale 0-π transition.

Finally, we show the possibility of the atomic-scale 0-π transition in a three-dimensional junction using realistic materials. Here we focus on La$_2$BaCuO$_5$ (LBCO) [11], which is an important representative FI in spintronics. According to a first-principle band calculation [12], the bottom of the minority spin band is at the $\Gamma$ point whose wave number is $(k_x, k_y, k_z) = (0, 0, \pi)$. Thus we can predict that the $\sigma$ state would be possible if one fabricates a Josephson junction along the $c$ axis as shown in Fig. 3(a). Note that it is impossible to realize the $\pi$ state if current flows in the $ab$ plane. This is because wave numbers in the $ab$ plane at the bottom of the minority spin band and those at the top of the majority spin band are given by the same wave number $(k_x, k_y) = (0, 0)$ [12].

From the perspectives of the S/FI interface matching and the high-temperature device operation, the usage of high-$T_c$ cuprate superconductors (HTSC), e.g., YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-\delta}$ and La$_{2-x}$Sr$_x$CuO$_4$ (LSCO) is desirable. Recent development of the pulsed laser deposition technique enables layer-by-layer epitaxial growth of oxide superlattices [13]. In order to show the possibility of $\pi$ coupling in such realistic HTSC junctions, we have calculated the $c$-axis Josephson critical current $I_c$ based on a three-dimensional tight-binding model with $L_a$ and $L_b$ being the numbers of lattice sites in the a and b directions [Fig. 3(a)]. In the calculation we have taken into account the $d$-wave order-parameter symmetry in HTSC, i.e., $\Delta = \Delta_d (\cos k_x a - \cos k_y a)/2$. The tight-binding parameters $t$ and $g$ have been determined by fitting to the first-principle band structure calculations along the line from the $\Gamma$ to Z point [12]. Figure 3(c) shows the thickness $L_c$ dependence of $I_c$ at $T = 0.01T_c$ for a LSCO/LBCO/LSCO junction with $g/t = 20$, $\Delta_d/t = 0.6$, and $L_a = L_b = 100$. As expected, the atomic-scale 0-π transitions can be realized in such oxide-based $c$-axis stack junctions.
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The experimental detection of the \( \pi \) junction is possible
by using a superconducting ring which contains two
Josephson junctions as shown in Fig. 3(b). When both
junctions are in the 0 (or \( \pi \)) state at the same time, the
current of the ring reaches its maximum at zero external magnetic flux. On the other hand, the critical
current reaches its minimum at zero magnetic flux when
the 0 state is stable in one junction and \( \pi \) is stable in the
other [14].

From the viewpoint of qubit applications, it is important
to note that the harmful influence of midgap Andreev
resonant states [15,16] and nodal quasiparticles due to the
d-wave symmetry on the macroscopic quantum dy-
namics in HTSC c-axis junctions [17] is found to be weak,
both theoretically [18] and experimentally [19]. Therefore,
we conclude that HTSC/LBCO/HTSC \( \pi \) junctions would
be promising candidates as basic elements for quiet qubits.

In summary, we have studied the Josephson effect in S/
FI/S junctions based on the tight-binding model. We pre-
dict the formation of the atomic-scale 0–\( \pi \) transitions in
such junctions. This result is insensitive to the material
parameters such as the gap \( g \) of the FI and the super-
conducting gap \( \Delta \), indicating that it is a robust and universal
phenomenon. Our findings suggest the way of realizing
ideal quiet qubits, which possess both the quietness and the
weak quasiparticle-dissipation nature.

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