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THE ORIGIN OF THE 6.4 keV LINE EMISSION AND H2 IONIZATION IN THE DIFFUSE MOLECULAR GAS OF THE GALACTIC CENTER REGION

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ABSTRACT

We investigate the origin of the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission recently detected by Suzaku and the source of H2 ionization in the diffuse molecular gas of the Galactic center (GC) region. We show that Fe atoms and H2 molecules in the diffuse interstellar medium of the GC are not ionized by the same particles. The Fe atoms are most likely ionized by X-ray photons emitted by Sgr A* during a previous period of flaring activity of the supermassive black hole. The measured longitudinal distance distribution of the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission is best explained if the past activity of Sgr A* lasted at least several hundred years and released a mean 2–100 keV luminosity \( \geq 10^{38} \text{erg s}^{-1} \). The H2 molecules of the diffuse gas cannot be ionized by photons from Sgr A*, because soft photons are strongly absorbed in the interstellar gas around the central black hole. The molecular hydrogen in the GC region is most likely ionized by low-energy cosmic rays, probably protons rather than electrons, whose contribution into the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission is negligible.

Key words: cosmic rays – Galaxy: center – ISM: clouds – line: formation – X-rays: ISM

1. INTRODUCTION

The central molecular zone (CMZ) has long been known as a thin layer of about 300 \( \times \) 50 pc in size, containing a total of 2.4 \( \times \) 10\(^7\) \( M_\odot \) of dense \( (n \approx 10^4 \text{ cm}^{-3}) \), high filling factor \((f > 0.1)\) molecular material orbiting the Galactic center (GC) (see the review of Ferrière et al. 2007; Ferrière 2012). This canonical picture was drastically changed after the discovery of H\(^2\) absorption lines generated by ionization of H\(^2\) molecules. Observations by McCall et al. (2002) and Oka et al. (2005) showed that H\(^2\) is mainly generated in diffuse \((n \approx 10^2 \text{ cm}^{-3})\) clouds, where the ratio of H\(^2\) to molecular hydrogen abundance is 10 times higher than in dense clouds. This diffuse gas has a high filling factor \((f_v \approx 0.3)\), an unusually high temperature \((T_H \approx 250 \text{ K})\), and a high and almost uniform ionization rate \((\zeta_2 \approx (1–3) \times 10^{-15} \text{ s}^{-1})\) throughout the CMZ (see Geballe 2012, and references therein). The source of this gas ionization is still debated.

Neutral Fe K\(\alpha\) line emission at 6.4 keV is observed from several dense GC molecular clouds. Detections of time variability of the X-ray emission from Sgr B2 (see, e.g., Inui et al. 2009; Nobukawa et al. 2011) and from several clouds within 15\(\prime\) of the east of Sgr A* (Muno et al. 2007; Ponti et al. 2010), strongly suggest that the Fe K\(\alpha\) line emission from these regions is a fluorescence radiation excited by a past X-ray flare from the supermassive black hole. In this model, the variability of the line flux results from the propagation of an X-ray light front emitted by Sgr A* more than \(\approx 100\) yr ago.

The neutral Fe K\(\alpha\) line can also be generated by charged particles (see Dogiel et al. 1998; Valinia et al. 2000), and observations do not exclude that the 6.4 keV electron emission from some of GC clouds is produced by cosmic-ray (CR) electrons or protons and nuclei (see, e.g., Fukukawa et al. 2009; Capelli et al. 2011; Tatischeff et al. 2012; Yusef-Zadeh et al. 2002, 2013; Dogiel et al. 2009a, 2011).

In addition to the bright X-ray emission from dense clouds, Uchiyama et al. (2013) recently found with Suzaku diffuse emission at 6.4 keV from an extended region of the GC region, with a scale length in longitude of \(\ell \approx 0.6\) and an extent in latitude of \(b \approx 0^\circ 2–0^\circ 4\). Based on this emission and the H\(^2\) contribution to the observed diffuse emission at 6.4 keV, we investigate in this paper if the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission and the H\(^2\) contribution from the diffuse gas in the GC might be different from that of the dense clouds. However, Heard & Warwick (2013) recently suggested that unresolved stellar sources may make an important contribution to the observed diffuse emission at 6.4 keV.

2. H2 IONIZATION AND 6.4 keV LINE EMISSION FROM COSMIC RAYS

The ratio of the number of 6.4 keV photons and H2 ionization produced by CRs of type \(i\) (electrons or protons) propagating in diffuse molecular gas can be estimated from

\[
X_{6.4,i} \approx \frac{n_{\text{Fe}} f_{\text{FeK}} E_{\text{FeK}}}{n_{\text{H2}}} \int_{0}^{E_{\text{FeK}}} \frac{N_i(E) \eta_{\text{Fe}}(E) v_i(E) dE}{\int_{0}^{E_{\text{FeK}}} N_i(E) \eta_{\text{H2}}(E) v_i(E) dE},
\]

where \(N_i(E)\) is the differential equilibrium number of CRs of type \(i\) propagating in the diffuse gas, \(v_i(E)\) is the velocity of 6.4 keV photons and \(I(H_2) = 15.6 \text{ eV}\) are the ionization potentials of the K shell of Fe and of H\(_2\), respectively, \(n_{\text{Fe}}\) is the Fe abundance, \(f_{\text{FeK}} = n(H_2)/(2n(H_2) + n(H))\) is the fractional density of H\(_2\) molecules relative to the total number of H atoms, \(N_i(E)\) is the differential equilibrium number of CRs of type \(i\).
these particles, $E_{\text{max}}$ is their maximum kinetic energy, $\sigma_{\text{ioni}}^{i} (E)$ is the cross section for producing the 6.4 keV line by interaction of fast electrons (thin line) and protons (thick line) with Fe atoms. Dashed lines: H$_2$ ionization cross sections for impact of electrons (thin line) and protons (thick line).

Figure 1. Cross sections involved in the calculation of the 6.4 keV photon yield per H$_2$ ionization in the CR model. Solid lines: cross sections for producing the 6.4 keV line by interaction of fast electrons (thin line) and protons (thick line) with Fe atoms. Dashed lines: H$_2$ ionization cross sections for impact of electrons (thin line) and protons (thick line).

The propagated CR spectrum $N_i (E)$ could be calculated in the framework of a given model for the source of these particles. Here instead, for the sake of generality, we use a simple power law in kinetic energy, $N_i (E) \propto E^{-\alpha}$, allowing the spectral index $\alpha$ to take any value within a reasonable range. Calculated values of $X_{6.4,i}$ are shown in Figure 2 as a function of $s$.

Also shown in this figure is the 6.4 keV photon yield per H$_2$ ionization deduced from observations. The latter is estimated by assuming that the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission is emitted from a thick disk centered on Sgr A*, with volume $V = \pi R^2 h$ and solid angle at the observer position $\Omega = 2 Rh/D^2$ (R and h are the disk radius and height perpendicular to the Galactic plane, respectively, and $D$ is the distance to the GC):

$$X_{6.4} = \frac{4 \pi D^2 I_{6.4} \Omega}{V \langle n_{\text{H}_2} \rangle \zeta_2}.$$  

Here, $I_{6.4} = (7.3 \pm 0.7)$ photons cm$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$ sr$^{-1}$ is the measured intensity of the diffuse Fe K$\alpha$ line emission near Sgr A* (Uchiyama et al. 2013), $\zeta_2 \approx (1-3) \times 10^{-15}$ s$^{-1}$ is the estimated ionization rate of the H$_2$ molecule in the diffuse molecular gas (Goto et al. 2008), and $\langle n_{\text{H}_2} \rangle$ is the mean density in the disk of H$_2$ molecules of the diffuse gas ($\langle n_{\text{H}_2} \rangle = f_{\text{v}} n_{\text{H}_2}$, where $f_{\text{v}}$ is the volume filling factor of the diffuse molecular gas and $n_{\text{H}_2}$ is the H$_2$ number density in this gaseous component). We then get

$$X_{6.4} = \frac{8 I_{6.4}}{\langle n_{\text{H}_2} \rangle \zeta_2 R} \approx (0.6-1.9) \times 10^{-6} \times \left( \frac{\langle n_{\text{H}_2} \rangle}{50 \text{ cm}^{-3}} \right) \left( \frac{R}{200 \text{ pc}} \right)^{-1} .$$  

Figure 2. 6.4 keV photon yield per H$_2$ ionization in diffuse molecular gas. Theoretical values obtained from Equation (1) are compared with the range deduced from X-ray and H$^*_2$ observations, assuming $\langle n_{\text{H}_2} \rangle = 50$ cm$^{-3}$ and $R = 200$ pc (Equation (3)). We used for the calculations $\eta_{\text{Fe}} = 6.9 \times 10^{-5}$, which is twice the solar abundance (Asplund et al. 2009), and $f_{\text{v}} = 0.5$, i.e., $n(H) \gg n(H)$. We see in Figure 2 that the theoretical photon yield is almost constant for low values of $s$, which reflects the constancy of the cross section ratio $\sigma_{\text{ioni}}^{\text{Fe}}/\sigma_{\text{ioni}}^{\text{H}_2}$ at relativistic energies (Figure 1). The calculated photon yield amounts to $\lesssim 10\%$ of the measured value at low $s$ and rapidly declines for $s \gtrsim 0.75$.

Yusef-Zadeh et al. (2013) estimated that a population of LECR electrons responsible for the ionization of the diffuse H$_2$ gas would contribute to $\lesssim 10\%$ of the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission detected by Suzaku, which is consistent with the maximum contribution we expect for a hard electron spectrum (see Figure 2). These authors also suggested that the remaining 90% of the X-ray emission is produced by interactions of electrons with a denser ($n \sim 10^3$ cm$^{-3}$) molecular gas. But this would imply the existence of a massive ($\sim 10^7 M_\odot$) molecular gas component with a high ionization rate ($\zeta_2 \gtrsim 10^{-14}$ s$^{-1}$), which should have been detected with H$^*_2$ observations (see, e.g., Geballe 2012). Independent of the exact density of the diffuse molecular gas, the comparison of the cross sections $\sigma_{\text{Fe}}^{\text{ioni}}$ and $\sigma_{\text{H}_2}^{\text{ioni}}$ (Figure 1) shows that the bulk of the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission is not produced by CRs.

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE DIFFUSE 6.4 keV LINE EMISSION: PAST FLARING ACTIVITY OF SGR A*

Unlike the 6.4 keV line emission from dense clouds, the X-ray fluorescence emission from the diffuse gas is predicted to be almost constant for several hundred years, which is the time needed for a photon to cross the CMZ (see Chernyshov et al. 2012). We use here for the gaseous disk radius $R = 200$ pc.

The expected flux in the 6.4 keV line depends on two parameters of the flare from Sgr A*: its luminosity $L_X$ and...
duration $\Delta t$. The flare duration estimated from observations ranges from ~10 yr (see Yu et al. 2011) to 500 yr (Ryu et al. 2013). The flare probably ended at $T \sim 70$–150 yr ago (see, e.g., Ponti et al. 2010; Ryu et al. 2013). The required luminosity $L_X$ in a given energy range $E_{\min} - E_{\max}$ can be estimated for each value of $\Delta t$ from the observed intensity of diffuse 6.4 keV line emission.

As Koyama et al. (2009) and Terrier et al. (2010) showed, the differential spectrum of primary X-ray photons emitted by Sgr A* can be described by a power law in the 2–100 keV energy range:

$$n_{ph}(E_X, r = 0) \propto E_X^{-\alpha}. \quad (4)$$

The distribution of primary photons in the disk as a function of energy $E_X$ and radius $r$ is then given by

$$n_{ph}(E_X, r) = \frac{Q_0}{4\pi cr^2 E_X^\alpha} \exp(-[n_H]_s \sigma_{ph}(E_X)r/f_H) \times \theta(r - cT) \theta(cT + c\Delta t - r), \quad (5)$$

where $\theta(x)$ is the Heaviside function, $\sigma_{ph}$ is the photoelectric absorption cross section per H atom (Balucinska-Church & McCammon 1992), $c$ is the speed of light, and $Q_0$ is a normalization constant derived from the estimated luminosity of Sgr A* in the energy range $E_{\min} - E_{\max}$ (below we use the range 2–100 keV):

$$L_X = Q_0 \ln (E_{\max}/E_{\min}). \quad (6)$$

A distant observer sees at present the reflection of a light front emitted by Sgr A* at time $t$ in the past as a parabola (see, e.g., Sunyaev & Churazov 1998),

$$z/c = \frac{1}{2t} \left[ t^2 - \left( \frac{x}{c} \right)^2 \right], \quad (7)$$

where the coordinates $x \simeq \ell D$ and $z$ are perpendicular and along the line of sight, respectively. The observable longitudinal distribution of 6.4 keV line emission is then given by

$$I_{6.4}(\ell) = \frac{\eta_{Fe} \langle n_{H_2} \rangle}{4\pi f_H} \int_{E_{Fe}(K)}^{E_{\max}} \sigma_X^{Fe}(E_X) \times \left( \int_{z_1}^{z_2} n_{ph}[E_X, \sqrt{(\ell D)^2 + z^2}] dz \right) dE_X. \quad (8)$$

where $z_1$ and $z_2$ are calculated from Equation (7) for $t = T$ and $t = T + \Delta t$, respectively, and $\sigma_X^{Fe}$ is the cross section for producing the 6.4 keV line by Fe K-shell photoionization (see Tatischeff 2003).

The results obtained for different values of $\Delta t$ and $L_X$ are shown in Figure 3, together with the Suzaku data (Uchiyama et al. 2013). The amount of illuminated diffuse gas depends on the flare duration. For $\Delta t = 10$ yr, the required luminosity of Sgr A* is about $10^{39}$ erg s$^{-1}$. But for $\Delta t \gtrsim 350$ yr most of the disk emits the Fe K$\alpha$ line, whose brightness is then independent of the flare duration. The required X-ray luminosity in this case is about $10^{38}$ erg s$^{-1}$. We see in Figure 3 that the Suzaku data are in better agreement with the assumption of a long flare duration. The possibility of such a long period of activity with some sporadic flux variability is not excluded by observations of the Sgr C region (Ryu et al. 2013). However, Chandra observations of clouds within the central 30 pc reveal they are probably illuminated by two short flares (Clavel et al. 2013).

We also see in Figure 3 that even for $\Delta t = 500$ yr, the model slightly underestimates the measured 6.4 keV line flux at longitudinal distances from Sgr A* of $\sim 1^\circ$. This suggests that the warm and diffuse gas extends beyond the CMZ, which might be already suggested by the measured outward movement of this gas component (see Geballe 2012).

4. THE ORIGIN OF THE H$_2$ IONIZATION IN THE DIFFUSE MOLECULAR GAS: X-RAY PHOTONS VERSUS LECRs

If the flare ended $\sim 100$ yr ago, then soft photons emitted by Sgr A* were absorbed in the dense interstellar medium of the GC. For the hydrogen density $\sim 100$ cm$^{-3}$, photons with
energies $E_X > 1$ keV survive in this region. From the Compton echo, we know the spectral shape of primary photons of $E_X > 1$ keV emitted by Sgr A*: it is presented by Equation (4).

Because the ionization rate $\zeta_2$ is expected to be strongly non-uniform, we calculate instead the $H_3^+$ column density, $N(H_3^+)$, which at the longitudinal distance $l$ from Sgr A* has the form

$$N(H_3^+) = \int n_{H_3^+}(r, l) dl.$$  \hspace{1cm} (9)

Here, $l$ is a trajectory of an IR photon through the disk diffuse gas and $n_{H_3^+}(r, l)$ is the $H_3^+$ density in the disk as a function of radius $r$ and time $l$, where the tilde indicates that IR photons crossing the gaseous disk interact with $H_3^+$ ions of different “ages.” Therefore, the geometrical formalism in the calculation of $N(H_3^+)$ (Equation (9)) is similar to that applied for $I_{\text{echo}}(l)$ (Equation (8)).

The process of $H_2$ photoionization leading to $H_3^+$ production is time variable (see, e.g., Goto et al. 2013):

$$\frac{\partial n_{H_3^+}}{\partial t} = \zeta_2(r, t) (n_{H_3}) - \langle \nu_n^\text{rec} \rangle n_n n_{H_3^+},$$  \hspace{1cm} (10)

where $\langle \nu_n^\text{rec} \rangle$ is the rate of $H_3^+$ dissociative recombination and $n_n$ is the density of free electrons. The ionization rate is due to both photoelectric ionization and Compton scattering:

$$\zeta_2(r, t) \simeq \int_{h(H_2)}^{E_{\text{max}}} dE_X \sigma_{XH_3}^\text{ini}(E_X) n_{ph}(E_X, r, t) M_{sec}(E_X)$$
$$+ 2 \int_{E_1}^{E_{\text{max}}} dE_X n_{ph}(E_X, r, t) \int_{h(H_2)}^{E_{\text{max}}} dE_e \sigma_e M_{sec}(E_e),$$  \hspace{1cm} (11)

where $\sigma_{XH_3}^\text{ini}$ is the $H_2$ photoelectric ionization cross section (Yan et al. 2001), $\sigma_e/dE_e$ is the Klein–Nishina differential cross section as a function of the energy of the recoil electron $E_e$, $M_{sec}(E_e) = [E_e - I(H_2)]/W$ with $W \approx 40$ eV (see Dalgarano et al. 1999) being the mean multiplicity of $H_2$ ionization by a secondary electron, $E_1 \approx \sqrt{m_e c^2 I(H_2)}/2$ the minimum energy of an X-ray photon to ionize an $H_2$ molecule by Compton scattering, $E_{\text{max}} = 2E_{\text{max}}^X/(m_e c^2 + 2E_X)$, and $n_{ph}(E_X, r, t)$ is given by Equation (5).

The fraction of free electron can be approximated by the abundance of singly ionized carbon, $C^+$, assuming that nearly all free electrons are the result of $C$ photoionization (see, e.g., Oka 2006). Here, the C abundance is taken to be twice that measured by Sofia et al. (2004) in the Galactic disk, i.e., $n_C = 3.2 \times 10^{-4}$.

The $H_2^+$ recombination rate is given in McCall et al. (2004) as a function of the gas temperature $T_H$ in K:

$$\langle \nu_n^\text{rec} \rangle_{XH_3} = -1.3 \times 10^{-8} + 1.27 \times 10^{-6} T_H^{-0.48}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (12)

For $T_H \sim 250$ K, the rate is $\sim 8 \times 10^{-8}$ cm$^3$ s$^{-1}$ and the characteristic recombination time $t_{\text{rec}} = [n_n \langle \nu_n^\text{rec} \rangle]^{-1} \sim 10$ yr, which is much smaller than the light propagation time across the CMZ.

The solution of Equation (10) takes the form

$$n(H_3^+) = \int_0^t d\tau \exp[\langle \nu_n^\text{rec} \rangle n_n(\tau - t)] \zeta_2(r, \tau) (n_{H_3}).$$  \hspace{1cm} (13)

Absorption of low-energy photons in the dense material surrounding Sgr A* (see Ferrière 2012) can be essential. However, to derive an upper limit on $N(H_3^+)$, we neglect here the photoabsorption in this dense medium and consider only that occurring in the diffuse molecular gas of mean density $(n_{H_2}) = 50$ cm$^{-3}$. $H_3^+$ column densities calculated for $T = 100$ yr and for three values of $(\Delta t, L_X)$ are shown in Figure 4. We see that $N(H_3^+)$ is no more than $4 \times 10^{14}$ cm$^{-2}$, which is less than the observed values, which lie in the range $10^{15}$–$10^{16}$ cm$^{-2}$ (see Goto et al. 2008, 2011). Thus, although flare photons from Sgr A* probably generate most of the 6.4 keV line emission from the GC region, they are mostly likely not the main source of $H_3^+$ ionization in the diffuse gas.

Ionization of molecular hydrogen can be effectively produced by LECRs. Yusef-Zadeh et al. (2013) suggest that the necessary ionization rate, $\zeta_2 \sim (1–3) \times 10^{-15}$ s$^{-1}$, can be provided by low-energy electrons ($E \gtrsim 100$ keV). These authors estimated the energy distribution of radio-emitting electrons ($E > 1$ GeV) in the GC region assuming for the mean magnetic field strength $B \sim 10^{-5}$ G and then extrapolated the derived electron spectrum to lower energies. However, 100 keV electrons have a short lifetime in the diffuse molecular gas ($\sim 100$ yr), which makes it difficult to explain the measured uniformity of the $H_3^+$ ionization rate, unless low-energy electrons are constantly produced all over the disk. Besides, if the magnetic field strength in the GC amounts to $B \gtrsim 5 \times 10^{-5}$ G as derived by Crocker et al. (2010), then the calculations of Yusef-Zadeh et al. (2013) would give $\zeta_2 \lesssim 10^{-16}$ s$^{-1}$. We also note that the inclusion of Coulomb energy losses in these calculations would flatten the spectrum of radio-emitting electrons at low energies, thus reducing the ionization rate.

For all of these reasons, molecular hydrogen in the diffuse gas is more likely to be ionized by subrelativistic protons. These particles can be generated either by star accretion onto the central black hole (Dogiel et al. 2009b) or by diffusive shock acceleration in supernova remnants (SNRs). The latter supply in the GC region a total kinetic power of $\sim 10^{40}$ erg s$^{-1}$ (see Crocker et al. 2011). In comparison, the proton power needed to explain the $H_3^+$ ionization rate is $W_p \sim \zeta_2 (n_{H_2}) V W \sim 2 \times 10^{39}$ erg s$^{-1}$, such that an efficiency of proton acceleration in SNRs of $\sim 20\%$ could account for the $H_3^+$ line measurements.
5. CONCLUSIONS

We have shown that the diffuse 6.4 keV line radiation from the GC region is most likely produced by the hard X-ray photon emission from Sgr A* that also produces fluorescence X-ray radiation in several dense molecular clouds. The longitudinal intensity distribution of the diffuse Fe Kα line emission thus provides an additional constrain on the past activity of the central black hole. Our results on the past X-ray luminosity of Sgr A* are broadly consistent with that obtained from the 6.4 keV line radiation of dense clouds by Capelli et al. (2012), $L_X(2–10 \text{ keV}) \sim 10^{38} \text{ erg s}^{-1}$ if the flare duration was about 100 yr, and by Ponti et al. (2010), $L_X(2–100 \text{ keV}) \sim 10^{39} \text{ erg s}^{-1}$ if $\Delta t \sim 10 \text{ yr}$. But the measured distribution of the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission strongly suggests that the past activity of Sgr A* lasted at least several hundred years with sporadic flux variabilities as follows from Suzaku observations of the Sgr C molecular cloud complex (Ryu et al. 2013). However, the overall agreement of our results on $L_X$ with that previously obtained from the X-ray emission of dense molecular clouds suggests that most of the large-scale 6.4 keV line emission from the GC region is truly diffuse and not due to a collection of unresolved point sources.

On the other hand, high-energy photons emitted by Sgr A* are not responsible for the ionization of the diffuse molecular gas. The H$_2$ molecules in this gas are very likely ionized by LECRs, probably protons accelerated in SNRs, whose contribution into the diffuse 6.4 keV line emission is negligible.

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