Magnon-mediated thermal conductivity in the dimerized spin-gap compound BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$

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(Received 15 May 2008; published 16 July 2008)

We have measured the thermal conductivity ($\kappa$) of the quasi-one-dimensional spin-gap compound BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$ with heat flow parallel and perpendicular to the chain axis. Distinctive differences in the magnitude and temperature dependence between these directions have been observed. A weak but non-negligible contribution to $\kappa$ along the chain has been identified, attributed to the magnon heat transport. An analysis using a simple kinetic approach has been employed to rationalize this contribution. We also estimated the temperature-dependent mean-free path for the magnon scattering. The result implies that the magnon-phonon scattering is a major process for the magnon-assisted $\kappa$ at intermediate temperatures.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevB.78.012406 PACS number: 75.40.Gb, 68.65.-k

While there have been a significant body of work concentrating on the magnetic nature of low dimensional quantum spin systems, the studies of heat transport in these materials are not ubiquitous. Among the limited number of reports the focus for the transport property is to explore the additional contribution from the spins to the total thermal conductivity, providing complementary information on the magnetic excitations. In general, such the spin-mediated thermal conductivity ($\kappa_m$) is rather small as compared to the lattice thermal conductivity ($\kappa_l$) driven by the phonons. This renders certain difficulties on the determination of $\kappa_m$ in most of the spin chain systems. However, exceptions have been found in the spin ladder compounds (Sr, Ca, La)$_2$Cu$_2$O$_{4+}$, where $\kappa_m$ exhibits a huge anomalous high peak along the ladder direction with a magnitude as large as about 100 W/m K. Such a feature has been attributed to the conservation of heat current, leading to ballistic energy propagation in the thermal transport.

In this Brief Report, we report on the measurement of the thermal conductivity of the spin-gap compound BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$ at temperatures between 8 and 350 K. BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$ crystallizes in a tetragonal structure with the space group $I-42d$. Within this structure, the Cu$^{2+}$ ions are bridged by oxygen ions, forming the CuO$_4$ square plaquettes along the crystallographic $c$ direction. The one-dimensional (1D) characteristic in the $c$ direction is responsible for the formation of a spin gap in this material. In earlier studies, the spin gap has been interpreted by means of the alternating chain model, based on the analyses of magnetic susceptibility and heat-capacity data. Within the alternating chain scenario, one interaction $J_1$=260 K is along the Cu-O-V-O-Cu path in the $c$ axis and another $J_2$=52 K is along the Cu-O-Cu path which is almost perpendicular to the chain direction. The rather small ratio of $J_2/J_1 \approx 0.2$ has been argued to be the origin of the observed spin gap. On the other hand, according to the crystal structure of BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$, the spin chain is allowed to be described as an arrangement of the spin dimers. Each dimer consists of two CuO$_4$ square plaquettes and the weak interdimer interactions are considered to be responsible for the observed large spin gap. Such a picture has been proposed to be more realistic for the understanding of spin-gap nature in BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$, according to the nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) results. A very recent theoretical study using first-principles calculations to obtain the effective Cu-Cu hopping integrals indicated a predominant exchange interaction between the next-nearest-neighbor (NNN) Cu ions, supporting the validity of the nearly isolated dimer model for the origin of the spin gap in BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$.

The raw material was synthesized by a standard solid-state reaction technique using high-purity reagents of Ba$_2$CO$_3$ (4N), CuO (4N), and V$_2$O$_5$ (4N) in the molar ratio 1:2:1. Single crystal BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$ was grown by a spontaneous nucleation method, described elsewhere. The orientations of the crystal surfaces were confirmed using x-ray Laue back-scattering analysis. Typical size of the single crystal is about $2 \times 2 \times 6$ mm$^3$ with the long dimension parallel to the $c$ axis. Thermal conductivity measurements were carried out in a closed-cycle refrigerator, using a direct heat-pulse technique. The sample was cut to a rectangular parallelepiped shape with one end of the sample glued (with thermal epoxy) to a copper block that served as a heat sink, while a calibrated chip resistor as a heat source glued to the other end. The heat current was applied to the directions parallel and perpendicular to the $c$ axis. The temperature difference was detected by using an $E$-type differential thermocouple with junctions thermally attached to two well-separated positions along the sample. The temperature difference was controlled to be less than 1 K to minimize the heat loss through radiation, and the sample space is maintained in a good vacuum (approximately $10^{-4}$ torr) during measurements. All experiments were performed during warming with a rate slower than 20 K/h. The uncertainty of our thermal-conductivity measurements is less than 10%, mainly arising from the error on the determination of the geometrical factor of the specimen.

Temperature dependence of the thermal conductivity parallel and perpendicular to the $c$ axis, denoted as $\kappa_{//}(T)$ and $\kappa_{\perp}(T)$, were displaced in Fig. 1. For each orientation, $\kappa$...
FIG. 1. (Color online) Temperature dependence of thermal conductivity of BaCu₂V₂O₈ along and perpendicular to the chain direction. The dashed box denotes a region in which the magnon-mediated thermal conductivity becomes significant. The solid curve shown in the inset is a fit to the calculated phonon thermal conductivity.

shows a maximum between 20 and 30 K which is a typical feature for the reduction of thermal scattering at lower temperatures. The maximum takes place at the temperature where the phonon mean-free path is approximately equal to the crystal site distance. After passing through the maximum, \( \kappa_\ell(T) \) drops with increasing temperature, tending to vary with \( 1/T \) for \( \kappa_\ell(T) \) exhibits a distinct shoulderlike feature at higher temperatures, as highlighted by the dashed box. It denotes a region in which the spin-mediated thermal conductivity becomes significant, and a further discussion concerning this part will be given in later sections. Similar observations have been reported for the spin chain materials and also have been attributed to additional heat conduction channel mediated by the spins.\(^4\)\(^-\)\(^7\)\(^9\) However, such a feature was not observed in \( \kappa_\ell(T) \) due to weak interactions in the perpendicular direction. Since the singlet-triplet (magnon) excitation of dimerized states is the elementary excitation in BaCu₂V₂O₈, we hereafter associate this additional contribution of \( \kappa \) with the magnon thermal conductivity \( \kappa_m \).

Due to the fact that BaCu₂V₂O₈ is an insulator, the observed \( \kappa \) mainly arises from the lattice thermal conductivity. Here \( \kappa_L \) was modeled using the Debye approximation\(^{16,17} \)

\[
\kappa_L = \frac{k_B}{2\pi^2\nu} \left( \frac{k_B T}{\hbar} \right)^3 \int_0^{\theta_D/T} \frac{x^4 e^{x^3}}{(e^x - 1)^2} \tau_p dx, \tag{1}
\]

where \( x = \hbar \omega/k_B T \) is dimensionless, \( \omega \) is the phonon frequency, \( \hbar \) is the reduced Planck constant, \( k_B \) is the Boltzmann constant, \( \theta_D \) is the Debye temperature, \( \nu \) is the average phonon velocity, and \( 1/\tau_p \) is the phonon-scattering relaxation rate. Here \( 1/\tau_p \) is the combination of three scattering mechanisms and can be expressed as

\[
1/\tau_p = \frac{\nu}{L} + A \omega^4 + B \omega^2 T e^{-\theta_D/3T}, \tag{2}
\]

where the grain size \( L \) and the coefficients \( A \) and \( B \) are fitting parameters. The terms in Eq. (2) represent the scattering rates for the grain-boundary, point-defect, and phonon Umklapp scattering, respectively. In general, the grain-boundary scattering is a dominant mechanism for the low-temperature \( \kappa_L \), while the Umklapp procedure is important at high temperatures. The point-defect scattering, on the other hand, has a strong influence on the appearance of the shape and position of the phonon peak occurring in the intermediate temperature regime. Taking \( \theta_D = 390 \) K given from the specific-heat measurement,\(^11\) the experimental data for \( \kappa_\ell(T) \) can be fitted very well as \( T < 70 \) K. The fitting curve is drawn as a solid line in the inset of Fig. 1.

The magnon thermal conductivity here was obtained by subtracting \( \kappa_L \) from the total \( \kappa \). In Fig. 2 we plotted the deduced \( \kappa_m \) with estimated error bars. Below about 90 K, \( \kappa_m \) is not well resolved because of the undistinguished difference between \( \kappa \) and \( \kappa_\ell \) due to experimental uncertainty. We thus only discuss the result of \( \kappa_m \) above this temperature. The \( T \)-dependent \( \kappa_m(T) \) reflects an increase of thermally excited magnons responsible for the heat transport, following an activated behavior. At high temperatures, \( \kappa_m \) tends to saturate with a maximum value of approximately 2 W/K m, which is about 40 times smaller than that found in Sr₃Cu₂O₄\(^{1,2,3,8} \). The small value of \( \kappa_m \) in BaCu₂V₂O₈ could be attributed to the short magnon mean-free path \( l_m \) as we will discuss this part below. To calculate \( l_m \), we employed a simple kinetic expression in a first-order approximation using the resulting \( \kappa_m \). Assuming a momentum-independent mean-free path and triplet excitation within the dimer, one can express \( \kappa_m \) as

\[
\kappa_m = \frac{3N_s m}{\pi \hbar} \left( \frac{k_B}{T} \right)^2 \int_{T_{\text{max}}}^{T_{\Delta \text{dimer}}} \frac{e^{\epsilon/T}}{(e^{\epsilon/T} + 3)^2} \tau_d d\epsilon, \tag{3}
\]

where \( t = \epsilon/k_B \), with \( \epsilon \) representing the excitation energy. Here \( N_s \) is the number of dimer per unit area and \( T_{\text{max}} \) is the maximum band energy in units of \( k_B \). Taking \( T_{\Delta \text{dimer}} \approx 450 \) K from NMR Knight shifts\(^12\) and \( T_{\text{max}} = 10T_{\Delta \text{dimer}} \) in BaCu₂V₂O₈, the temperature dependence of \( l_m \) can be obtained, as illustrated in Fig. 3. Note that the assumption of \( T_{\text{max}} \approx 4500 \) K does not significantly affect the data fitting for temperatures \( T < T_{\text{max}} \).

Because we could not ambiguously determine the values of \( \kappa_m \) for \( T < 70 \) K, a further information about the low-temperature \( l_m \) in BaCu₂V₂O₈ will not be discussed here. On the other hand, we found a strong temperature dependence of \( l_m \) between 70 and 150 K, as indicated by a rapid drop in \( l_m \).
with increasing temperature. Above 150 K, $l_m$ tends to be a constant with a value of about 20 Å. Assuming that the different scattering mechanisms act independently to the mean-free path, the entire temperature variation of $l_m$ can be reasonably reproduced using the following formula:

$$\frac{1}{l_m} = \frac{1}{l^0} + A_m T e^{-T_m/T}.$$  (4)

From such a fitting, shown as a solid curve in Fig. 3, the fitting parameters $l^0 = 1.16 \times 10^{-8}$ m, $A_m = 1.05 \times 10^7$ m$^{-1}$ K$^{-1}$, and $T_m = 210$ K were obtained. Here $l^0$ is the mean distance between magnetic defects in a spin chain which is temperature independent. From the Curie-tail of the magnetic susceptibility, the concentration of the paramagnetic defects arising from isolated Cu$^{2+}$ ions was estimated to be 4.2% per mole. This corresponds to the average defect distance of 90 Å, quite close to the obtained value of $l^0 = 110$ Å and such agreement suggests the validity of our present analyses. The second term in Eq. (4) represents the magnon-phonon scattering process with $A_m$ characterized as the strength of the corresponding interaction and $T_m$ the minimum energy needed for the magnon-phonon umklapp process. It is noted that the obtained $T_m$ is much smaller than $\Delta_{\text{dimer}} = 450$ K but is close to $\theta_d/2 = 195$ K. Such a result indicates that the magnon-magnon scattering is less likely and the magnon-phonon scattering would be a dominant process for the observed $\kappa_m$ in this temperature range.

In summary, we have measured the thermal conductivity of the dimerized spin-gap system BaCu$_2$V$_2$O$_8$. We found a weak but discernible contribution to $\kappa$ along the chain, attributed to the heat transport assisted by the magnons. A simple kinetic approach has been employed to rationalize this contribution. In addition, the temperature dependent mean-free path for the magnon scattering was evaluated and the results indicate the importance of magnon-phonon scattering for the observed $\kappa_m$ at intermediate temperatures.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We are grateful for the support from National Science Council, Taiwan under Grants No. NSC-95-2112-M-006-021-MY3 (C.S.L) and No. NSC-95-2112-M-259-006 (Y.K.K).

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