Vortex and Meissner phases of strongly interacting bosons on a two-leg ladder


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We establish the phase diagram of the strongly interacting Bose-Hubbard model defined on a two-leg ladder geometry in the presence of a homogeneous flux. Our work is motivated by a recent experiment [M. Atala et al., Nat. Phys. 10, 588 (2014)], which studied the same system, in the complementary regime of weak interactions. Based on extensive density matrix renormalization group simulations and a bosonization analysis, we fully explore the parameter space spanned by filling, interleg tunneling, and flux. As a main result, we demonstrate the existence of gapless and gapped Meissner and vortex phases, with the gapped states emerging in Mott-insulating regimes. We calculate experimentally accessible observables such as chiral currents and vortex patterns.

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Introduction. The quantum states of interacting electrons in the presence of spin-orbit coupling and magnetic fields are attracting significant attention in condensed matter physics because of their connection to quantum Hall physics [1], topological insulators [2–4], and the emergence of unusual excitations in low dimensions [5,6]. Recent progress with quantum gas experiments has led to the realization of artificial gauge fields [7], both in the continuum [8–10] and for bosons in optical lattices [11–14], paving the way for future experiments on the interplay of interactions, dimensionality, and gauge fields in a systematic manner. This has motivated theoretical research into the physics of strongly interacting particles in the presence of Abelian and non-Abelian gauge fields and various questions such as the quantum Hall effect with bosons [15–22], unusual quantum magnetism [23–26], and the emergence of topologically protected phases [27–29] have been addressed.

Given the complicated interplay between interactions, gauge fields, and dimensionality, one often has to resort to mean-field approaches to build up intuition for the emergent phases, which should be complemented by reliable analytical and numerical results. In one dimension, both bosonization [30] and numerical techniques such as the density matrix renormalization group (DMRG) method [31–33] provide powerful tools to characterize the emergent quantum phases. Here we consider interacting bosons on a two-leg ladder in the presence of a homogeneous magnetic flux (see Fig. 1 for a sketch of the model and definitions of parameters). Such a system has been realized in a recent experiment with bosons in optical lattices [34], yet in the weakly interacting regime of high densities per site. The density matrix renormalization group simulations and a bosonization analysis, we fully explore the parameter space spanned by filling, interleg tunneling, and flux. As a main result, we demonstrate the existence of gapless and gapped Meissner and vortex phases, with the gapped states emerging in Mott-insulating regimes. We calculate experimentally accessible observables such as chiral currents and vortex patterns.

Hamiltonian and observables. The Hamiltonian is given by (see Fig. 1)

\[ H = \sum_{\ell=1,2} \sum_{r=1}^L \left[ -J_{\ell,r+1} a_{\ell,r}^\dagger a_{\ell,r} + H.c. + \frac{U}{2} n_{\ell,r}(n_{\ell,r} - 1) \right] \]

\[ - J_\phi \sum_{r=1}^L (e^{-ir\phi} a_{1,r}^\dagger a_{2,r} + H.c.) \]

on a ladder with \( L \) rungs where \( a_{\ell,r}^\dagger \) creates a boson on site \( \ell = 1, 2 \) of the \( r \)th rung. Energy is measured in units of \( J \). We define the filling as \( n = N/(2L) \), where \( N \) is the total number of bosons.

On the one hand, the Hamiltonian (1) can be viewed as a minimal model for describing the edge states of a two-dimensional interacting Bose system pierced by a flux. On the other hand, the Hamiltonian (1) can be viewed as a minimal model for describing the edge states of a two-dimensional interacting Bose system pierced by a flux. On the

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FIG. 1. (Color online) Sketch of the model, Eq. (1): bosons on a two-leg ladder, with \( J \) and \( J_\phi \), the hopping matrix elements along the legs and rungs, respectively, with \( \phi \) the magnetic flux per plaquette, and \( U \) the on-site interaction strength.
of hard-core bosons (HCBs), i.e., suppress boundary effects, since in DMRG simulations we establish at weak interactions [34,37,44]. The M-SF phase penetrates into the V-SF phase at intermediate values of \( J_r/J \). The vicinity of \( \phi = \pi \) is special because at \( n = 0.25 \), a gapped charge-density-wave (CDW) phase emerges at \( J_r \gtrsim 1.3J \). Once this happens, the M-SF phase touches this phase, splitting the V-SF into two lobes. Eventually, both the V-MI and the upper lobe of the V-SF phase disappear for large \( J_r \gtrsim 1.7J \). For \( J_r \gtrsim 1.5J \), we find a jump in density at \( \phi = \pi \), from \( n > 0.25 \) to the gapped \( n = 0.5 \) state, which for \( J_r/J \rightarrow \infty \) extends down to \( n = 0.25 \).

Effective field theory. The nature of the phase transitions can be elucidated using bosonization. If we fix \( J_r \neq 0 \) and change the flux at half-filling, there is a commensurate-incommensurate (C-IC) quantum phase transition [30] from a gapped (\( \phi < \phi^c \)) to a gapless (\( \phi > \phi^c \)) behavior of the relative phase fluctuations of the two-leg system, whereas the total density mode is always gapped for strong interactions [47]. Away from these critical points, our results are in qualitative agreement with recent DMRG studies [13,38–40].

Let us start by giving an account of our main results, which can be inferred from considering the limit of hard-core bosons (HCBs), i.e., \( U/J = \infty \). Figure 2 shows the phase diagram for this case as a function of \( n \) and \( \phi \) for \( J_r/J = 1 \) and 1.5. These results are based on a combination of a field-theory analysis and DMRG simulations for current correlation functions, the von Neumann entropy, excitation gaps, and the equation of state \( n = n(\mu) \), where \( \mu \) is the chemical potential.

In Fig. 2 we identify mainly four types of phases. At half-filling \( (n = 0.5) \), there is a Mott insulator (MI) with a mass gap for any value of \( \phi \) and \( J_r \neq 0 \). At small values of \( \phi \), we find a Meissner phase (M-MI) while at large \( \phi \), a gapless vortex state exists (V-MI). This confirms the prediction of a Mott gap for HCBs at \( n = 0.5 \) and \( J_r \neq 0 \) [35,36] and the emergence of the Meissner currents and a vortex phase for \( \phi \neq 0 \) [41]. At finite values of \( U/J < \infty \), there will be a MI-SF transition, with critical interaction strength depending on \( J_r/J \) [47]. At \( n < 0.5 \), there are superfluid phases which can again be divided into a Meissner superfluid (M-SF) and a vortex superfluid (V-SF). The terms Meissner and vortex state are justified by the existence of characteristic current patterns. Examples for \( n = 0.5 \) are shown in Figs. 3(a1) and 3(a2) (V-MI) and Fig. 3(a3) (M-MI) (current patterns in the M-SF and V-SF phases are qualitatively similar to the ones in the M-MI and V-MI, respectively; see Supplemental Material, Figs. S4(a)–4(c) [47]). The Meissner phases have vanishing rung currents \( (j^r \neq 0) \) but a finite chiral current \( j_c \), while in the vortex phase, \( (j_c \neq 0) \) on finite systems, with various possible vortex patterns. The M-SF phase has one gapless mode (central charge \( c = 1 \)), while the V-SF has \( c = 2 \). We expect M-SF and V-SF to be adiabatically connected to the corresponding phases established at weak interactions [34,37,44].
from \( n = 0.5 \), the total density mode becomes immediately gapless [36] and there is a C-IC transition in the relative degrees of freedom from a gapped to a gapless behavior as a function of flux [37]. This picture is confirmed by DMRG results for the von Neumann entropy (see Supplemental Material, Figs. S3 and S7 [47]) and consistent with the transitions shown in Fig. 2.

The emergence of a two-component Luttinger liquid (LL) at large values of \( \phi \) becomes transparent in the low-density limit where it is connected with the development of a double-minimum structure in the single-particle dispersion \( \epsilon_k \) for \( \phi > \phi_c(J) \) [42,44]. Note that the physics at low densities is very similar to that of frustrated chains in high magnetic fields below saturation (see [54–56], and references therein). For bosons and in the limit of vanishing density, once the single-particle dispersion becomes stabilized. To show this, we solve the low-energy scattering problem of two bosons and extract the relevant scattering lengths. There are two important scattering processes at low energy: either the two bosons belong to the same minimum of \( \epsilon_k \) or they belong to different minima (interspecies scattering). In one dimension, the scattering length is related to the scattering phase shift via

\[
\epsilon_k = \frac{\pi}{2} \ln \frac{a_{i,j}}{K},
\]

where \( K \) is the relative momentum of the two bosons and \( i, j = 1, 2 \) distinguish bosons belonging to the minimum in \( \epsilon_k \) at \( k < 0 \) or \( k > 0 \), respectively. The scattering length is related to the amplitude of the contact potential of the two-component Bose gas \( U_{i,j}(x - x') = g_{i,j} \delta(x - x') \) with \( g_{i,j} = -2/(\alpha_{i,j} m) \). By comparing the scattering lengths \( a_{i,j} \) to each other we find that in strong coupling \( a_{1,1} > a_{1,2} \), such that once the double-minimum structure appears in \( \epsilon_k \), the \( c = 2 \) LL is energetically preferred for \( n \to 0 \), consistently with the mean-field argument of [44] and with the DMRG results shown in Fig. 2.

Large \( J_j/J \) limit. Another interesting limit amenable to an analytical treatment is the case of strong rung tunneling \( J_j/J \to \infty \). In that regime we introduce a pseudospin-1/2 operator \( \hat{S}_r \) on each rung \( r \) associated with the states \((|1,0\rangle, + e^{i\phi} |0,1\rangle)/\sqrt{2} \to | \uparrow \rangle \) and \(|0,0\rangle, r \to | \downarrow \rangle \). The effective spin-1/2 model for the special case of \( \phi = \pi \) and to first order in \( J^2/J_s \) is [47]

\[
H_{1/2} = \frac{J^2}{2[J_s]} \sum_r \left( 2 \hat{S}_r^{\dagger} \hat{S}_{r+1}^{\dagger} - \left[ \hat{S}_r^{\dagger} \left( \frac{1}{2} - \hat{S}_{r+1}^{\dagger} \right) \hat{S}_{r+2} + \text{H.c.} \right] \right).
\]

In this basis, \( n = 0.5 \) corresponds to the fully polarized state \( \prod_r | \uparrow \rangle \) and the vacuum of bosons \( n = 0 \) corresponds to \( \prod_r | \downarrow \rangle \), while \( n = 0.25 \) implies a vanishing magnetization \( \langle \hat{S}_r^z \rangle \). The classical Néel state \(| \uparrow \uparrow \uparrow \downarrow \ldots \rangle \) is an eigenstate of the effective model, Eq. (4), and for quarter-filling it becomes the ground state due to the dominant Ising interaction. Hence, in the vicinity of \( \phi = \pi \), the ground state of bosons for \( J_s/J >> 1 \) at quarter-filling \( (n = 0.25) \) is a doubly degenerate CDW state, which breaks translational invariance. Away from \( \phi \sim \pi \), the effective model undergoes a Kosterlitz-Thouless transition at some \( \phi_{\text{CDW}}^c \leq \phi \leq \pi \) into a gapless XY phase \((\phi < \phi_{\text{CDW}}^c)\), the latter being characterized by \( c = 1 \). The existence of a fully gapped CDW state at \( n = 0.25 \) for strong \( J_s/J \) in the vicinity of \( \phi = \pi \) and of a direct transition from the fully gapped state to a \( c = 1 \) phase with decreasing \( \phi \) explains the tendency of the M-SF to pierce the V-SF (see Fig. 2).

The effective spin-\( 1/2 \) model, Eq. (4), further unveils the presence of a metamagnetic behavior just below the saturation magnetization, corresponding to a jump in the density of bosons from \( n = 0.25 \) to \( n = 0.5 \) at \( J_s/J \to \infty \). Due to the absence of spin-inversion symmetry in Eq. (4) there is no such jump from \( n = 0.25 \) to \( n = 0 \). For \( J_s/J < \infty \), this metamagnetic behavior survives with a jump between some \( n \to 0.25 \) to \( n = 0 \), which explains the numerical data shown in Supplemental Material Figs. S1 and S2 [47].

Dependence of currents on \( \phi \) and \( J_s \). Figure 3(b) shows the chiral current as a function of \( \phi \) and \( J_s/J \) for HCBs at \( n = 0.5 \). The chiral current takes a maximum at the transition from the V-MI phase to the M-MI phase. Using field theory, we derive an expression for the chiral current, in the regime \( J_s \ll J \) and for small \( \phi \):

\[
\hat{j}_c \sim \frac{J_s^2(J_s) + O(J_s^4)}{J_s U(J_s + U)} \sin(\phi).
\]

where \( K_0 \) is the LL parameter for the Bose-Hubbard model of decoupled chains (\( J_s = 0 \)), and ranges from \( K_0 = \infty \) for \( U = 0 \), to \( K_0 = 1 \) for HCBs. The \( j_c \propto J^2 \) behavior is a generic result, valid for any repulsion \( U \) and filling [47]. Equation (5) implies that \( j_c \) increases the fastest with \( J \), at small \( \phi \) values of \( \phi \). In particular, for HCBs, we obtain \( j_c \sim (J_s/\phi)^2 \).

For the opposite limit of large \( J_s \gg J \), we use perturbation theory at \( n = 0.5 \) [47] to derive that for \( U/J \gg 1 \):

\[
\hat{j}_c = \frac{J_s^2(4J_s + U)^2}{2J_s U(J_s + U)} \sin(\phi).
\]

Therefore, in the limit of infinitely strong interactions, the chiral current decays to zero in the M-MI phase as \( j_c \propto 1/J \), contrary to the behavior at finite \( U/J \ll \infty \) where the chiral current saturates at large \( J_s \gg J_s \), as \( j_c(\infty) \propto 1/U \) (see the inset in Fig. 4). This latter saturation is known from the \( U = 0 \)
limit [34,42] and is also observed in M-SF phases for $U \neq 0$ (results not shown).

Figure 4 presents a cut of Fig. 3 at $j = \pi/2$, together with finite $U/J$ data. The analytical predictions for the weak- and strong-coupling regimes from Eqs. (5) and (6) agree very well with our DMRG data for $U/J \gg 1$ (dashed lines in Fig. 4). The essential features of the HCB case carry over to finite values of $U/J < \infty$. A finite $U$ suppresses the chiral current compared to $U = 0$, which should be accessible in experiments.

The vortex phases can be further characterized by their current patterns which bear well-defined structures, with varying spatial extension and density as a function of $J_x$ and $\phi$. For the parameters of Fig. 3(a), the sign of the current alternates along the legs, reminiscent of the chiral MI phase discussed in [39,40]. These structures can be quantitatively studied by analyzing the rung currents $\langle j_r \rangle$. Figure 5 shows the vortex density $l_{V^{-1}}$ at $n = 0.5$ as a function of $J_x/J$ for various values of $\phi$, where $l_{V}$ is the typical size of vortices extracted from the Fourier transform of the real-space patterns $\langle j_r \rangle$ over $r \in [-L/4,L/4]$. This can be interpreted as a measure of the order parameter of the transition from the Meissner into the vortex phase [37]. As expected, $l_{V^{-1}}$ decreases to zero as the transition into the M-MI phase is approached, where only longitudinal currents survive. This is consistent with field-theory predictions, which also provide that in the $J_x \ll J \phi$ limit, $l_{V^{-1}} \sim \phi$ [47]. The rung-current correlation function $\langle j_r j_{r'} \rangle$ decays algebraically in all vortex phases (see Supplemental Material, Fig. S5 [47]), unlike in the so-called chiral MI phase [39,40] realized for $U/J < \infty$, $\phi = \pi$, $J_x = J_y$, and $n = 1$, which has long-range rung-current correlations.

Summary. Based on a combined DMRG and field-theoretical study, we obtained the phase diagram of strongly interacting bosons on a two-leg ladder in the presence of a homogeneous flux per plaquette. We demonstrated the existence of both gapless and gapped Meissner and vortex phases, where the gapped Meissner phase emerges in the Mott-insulating regime. The chiral current is suppressed by interactions and for HCBs it decays to zero in the M-MI phase, with increasing $J_x$. These results substantially extend previous studies of related models [39–41] and confirm various predictions from field theory [37,44]. We provided analytical results for the weak- and strong-coupling limit, in very good agreement with numerical data. Our findings will provide guidance for future experimental studies (similar to [34]) of the strongly interacting regime. The interaction strength, density, and the ratio of hopping matrix elements can routinely be tuned in optical lattice experiment [57], and so far, $\phi = \pi/2$ [13,34] and $\phi = \pi$ [14] have been realized. Interesting extensions of our present study include the current patterns in harmonic traps. For this case, our results for $n = n(\mu)$ provide information about the real-space density profiles via the local density approximation. Moreover, there is the possibility to stabilize vortex solids [37], which are so far elusive in the strongly interacting regime at incommensurate fillings. In the strong-coupling limit $U \gg J$, vortex solids are not observed in our numerical data either in the superfluid or in the $n = 0.5$ Mott phase, as opposed to the $n = 1$ Mott phase for moderate values of $U/J$ [39,40], where a vortex solid appears at $\phi = \pi$.

Note added. Very recently, two more experimental studies have investigated fermions [58] and bosons [59] on ladders in optical lattices in the presence of artificial gauge fields.

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