

HOT AND DIFFUSE CLOUDS NEAR THE GALACTIC CENTER PROBED BY METASTABLE H_3^+

TAKESHI OKA, *Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics and Department of Chemistry, University of Chicago*; THOMAS R. GEBALLE, *Gemini Observatory, Hilo, Hawaii*; MIWA GOTO, *Max Planck Institute for Astronomy, Heidelberg, Germany*; TOMONORI USUDA, *Subaru Telescope, National Astronomical Observatory of Japan, Hilo, Hawaii*; BENJAMIN J. McCALL, *Department of Chemistry and Department of Astronomy, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*.

We have observed a vast amount of high temperature ($T \sim 250$ K) and low density ($n \sim 100 \text{ cm}^{-3}$) gas with a large velocity dispersion in the Central Molecular Zone (CMZ) of the Galactic center. We used H_3^+ which is a sensitive probe of low density molecular gas. The observed large column density of H_3^+ in the (3, 3) metastable rotational level gives evidence for high temperature, and absence in the (2, 2) level indicates low density. This remarkable non-thermal rotational distribution is caused by metastability of the (3, 3) level and the fast (2, 2) \rightarrow (1, 1) spontaneous emission (27 days)^a.

The strongest absorption component observed toward the bright infrared source GCS 3-2 is at velocity of $\sim -100 \text{ km s}^{-1}$, indicating that about a half of the hot and diffuse gas is associated with the 180 pc Expanding Molecular Ring. The other half with lower velocities of -50 km s^{-1} and $\sim 0 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ is closer to the Galactic center. The large H_3^+ column density indicates high ionization rate on the order of 10^{-14} s^{-1} in the CMZ if the C/H ratio is indeed as high as reported. With the hot X-rays and high magnetohydrodynamic activities, such a high value may be reasonable.

The non-thermal rotational distribution of H_3^+ has also been observed toward 7 other infrared sources within 30 pc of the Galactic center indicating that the hot and diffuse gas is ubiquitous in the CMZ. The spectrum toward GC IRS 3 near Sgr A* shows presence of the hot and diffuse gas in the “50 km s^{-1} cloud”, the complex of giant molecular clouds which plays a central role in the discussion of Sgr A* and its environment.

Of the observed total H_3^+ column density toward GCS 3-2 of $4.3 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-2}$, approximately $3.1 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ is inferred to be in the CMZ while $1.2 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ is in the intervening spiral arms. Almost all of H_3^+ in the CMZ is in diffuse clouds. This suggests that the previously reported volume filling factor ($f \geq 0.1$) of dense clouds is an overestimate by at least an order of magnitude.

^aT. Oka and E. Epp, *ApJ*, 613, 349 (2004)