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# Spin-wave dynamics for the high-magnetic-field phases of the frustrated $\text{CuFeO}_2$ antiferromagnet: Predictions for inelastic neutron scattering

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We evaluate the spin-wave spectra for the high-field phases of the frustrated triangular lattice antiferromagnet with a focus on the observed high-magnetic field phases of  $\text{CuFeO}_2$ . After determining the appropriate magnetic ground state using a combination of Monte-Carlo simulations and variational methods for a two-dimensional triangular lattice, we evaluate the spin excitation frequencies and intensities using a rotational Holstein-Primakoff expansion for both the collinear and non-collinear states. These predictions should help experimentalists to identify the magnetic ground states of  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  and other triangular-lattice antiferromagnets using inelastic neutron scattering.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Motivated by magnetically-induced electric polarization, a great deal of research has recently been devoted to understanding the possible ferroelectric/magnetic coupling mechanisms in “improper” multiferroics<sup>1–5</sup>. The competing interactions in these materials produce a wide range of collinear (CL) and non-collinear (NC) magnetic structures<sup>5–10</sup>. The ability to transverse those phases through doping or application of a magnetic field has provided an essential tool to understand these materials.

$\text{CuFeO}_2$  is a frustrated antiferromagnet that contains stacked triangular lattices<sup>11</sup>. Below about 7 T, the magnetic ground state of pure  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  is a CL 4-sublattice (SL) ( $\uparrow\uparrow\downarrow\downarrow$ ) phase. Above 7 T, it exhibits multiferroic behavior and is characterized by a complex non-collinear (CNC) state<sup>12</sup>. The CNC phase is also produced by Al or Ga doping, which decreases the easy-axis anisotropy<sup>13,14</sup> perpendicular to the hexagonal planes. Characterization of the CNC phase in Ga-doped  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  shows that the magnetic structure is a distorted spiral with alternating small and large turn angles fluctuating between ( $19^\circ$ - $25^\circ$ ) and ( $130^\circ$ - $140^\circ$ )<sup>15,16</sup>. While both the 4-SL and CNC phases of  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  have been extensively investigated, the high-field phases are not well understood.

At about 13 T, the CNC phase transforms into a 5-SL phase<sup>17</sup>, which does not exhibit multiferroic behavior possibly because it is commensurate. The 5-SL phase is stable up to about 20 T, above which a canted 3-SL phase becomes the ground state. At 34 T, the 3-SL phase smoothly transforms into a conical-type phase. A different conical phase appears at about 50 T<sup>18–20</sup>. Finally, all spins become aligned and the CL-1 (ferromagnetic) phase is reached at 70 T<sup>22</sup>.

For materials like  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  and  $\text{CuCrO}_2$ , the spin configurations in each hexagonal plane are stacked in an antiferromagnetic ( $\text{CuFeO}_2$ )<sup>11</sup> or ferromagnetic ( $\text{CuCrO}_2$ )<sup>21</sup> manner from one layer to the next. Because the interlayer interactions are not magnetically frustrated, the impor-

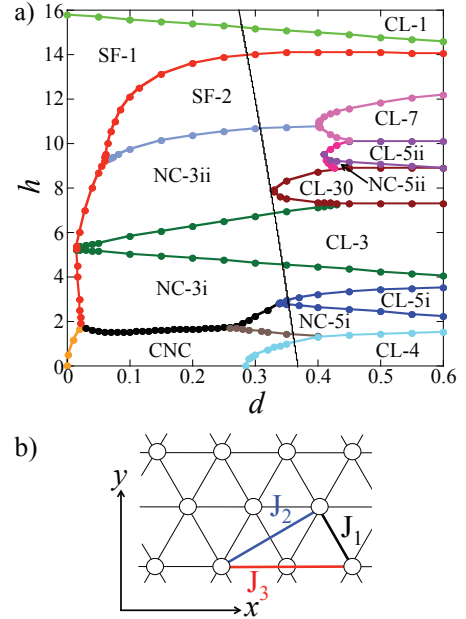


FIG. 1: (Color Online) (a) The magnetic phase diagram for the frustrated triangular lattice with  $J_2/|J_1| = 0.4$  and  $J_3/|J_1| = 0.75$  as determined by Ref. [23]. The black line indicates the proposed trajectory for  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  with increased field and is given by  $h = 36.59 - 2.15d - 255.64d^2$ . (b) The 2-D interactions considered for the frustrated triangular lattice consisting of  $J_1$ ,  $J_2$ , and  $J_3$ .

tant behavior of these materials can be predicted based on a two-dimensional triangular-lattice antiferromagnet. An added advantage of  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  is that the large  $S = 5/2$   $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  spins can be treated classically with a small error.

Recently, the magnetic phase diagram of  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  was predicted using a combination of variational and Monte-Carlo computational methods<sup>23</sup> on a two-dimensional lattice. As a function of magnetic field and anisotropy,

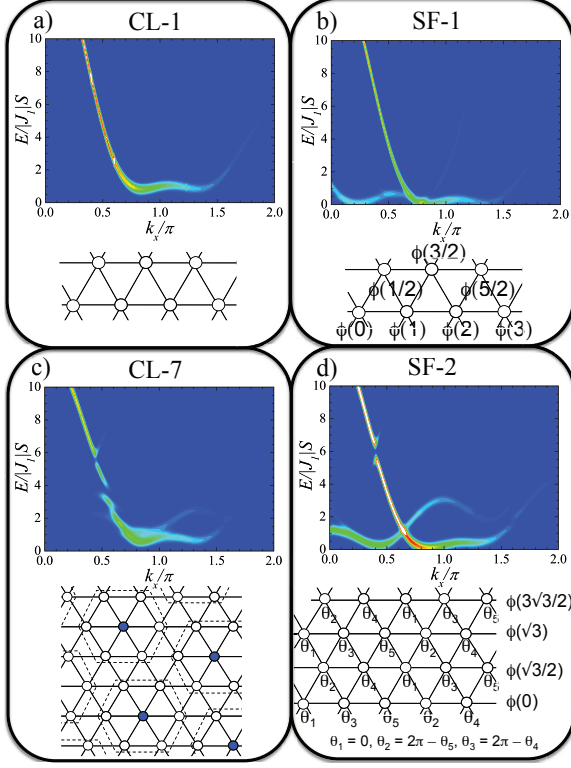


FIG. 2: (Color Online) The simulated spin-wave spectra along  $\mathbf{k} = (k_x, 0)$  and spin configuration for the (a) CL-1 ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 16.0$ ), (b) SF-1 ( $d = 0.290$  and  $h = 14.467$ ), (c) CL-7 ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 11.0$ ), and (d) SF-2 ( $d = 0.30$  and  $h = 12.9$ ) phases<sup>35</sup>.

the phase diagram was predicted to contain 14 possible phases (shown in Fig. 1(a)). The black line in Fig. 1(a) denotes the predicted trajectory for  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  with increasing magnetic field, where anisotropy is assumed to decrease with magnetic field, as indicated experimentally<sup>18,19</sup>.

In this report, we use a rotational Holstein-Primakoff expansion to evaluate the spin dynamics of the CL and NC spin structures for the high-field phases of the frustrated triangular lattice. In these calculations, we use the general interaction parameters determined for  $\text{CuFeO}_2$ . When possible, we follow along the predicted trajectory for  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  to help explain the dynamical evolution of the spin-wave spectra for that material. Our goal and motivation is to provide experimentalists with a general idea of how the spin-wave frequencies and intensities evolve with magnetic field when investigating either  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  or other frustrated triangular lattice materials.

## II. 2-D FRUSTRATED TRIANGULAR LATTICE

The frustrated triangular lattice provides multiple interlayer super-exchange pathways (Fig. 1(b))<sup>11,23,24</sup>. Including both an external magnetic field and anisotropy,

the Heisenberg Hamiltonian for a triangular lattice can be written as

$$H = -\frac{1}{2} \sum_{i \neq j} J_{ij} \mathbf{S}_i \cdot \mathbf{S}_j - D \sum_i \mathbf{S}_i^2 - 2\mu_B H \sum_i \mathbf{S}_{iz}, \quad (1)$$

where  $\mathbf{S}_i$  is the local moment on site  $i$ ,  $D$  is the anisotropy energy,  $H$  is the external magnetic field, and the exchange coupling  $J_{ij}$  between sites  $i$  and  $j$  is antiferromagnetic when  $J_{ij} < 0$ . For convenience, we define  $d = D/|J_1|$  and  $h = 2\mu_B H/|J_1|S$  with all energies in units of  $J_1$ . Since all energies are in the units of  $J_1 S$ , the INS spectra provided may be mapped on to other materials for a general understanding and identification of the phase dynamics. For convenience, we set the lattice constant to 1.

Candidate magnetic states were suggested by Monte-Carlo simulations on a  $60 \times 60$  lattice. The precise ground states and their energies are found using a variational method on a large lattice. For incommensurate solutions, the spin state is expanded in harmonics of the ordering wavevector  $\mathbf{Q} = Q_c \mathbf{x}$  as described in Refs. [23,24]. Based on the provided magnetic ground state, the spin-wave dynamics are evaluated using a Holstein-Primakoff transformation with the spin operators given by  $S_{iz} = S - a_i^\dagger a_i$ ,  $S_{i+} = \sqrt{2S} a_i$ , and  $S_{i-} = \sqrt{2S} a_i^\dagger$  ( $a_i$  and  $a_i^\dagger$  are bosonic destruction and creation operators). The local spin operators are obtained from the laboratory spin operators by applying a rotation matrix<sup>25,26</sup>. Since higher order terms corresponding to spin-wave interactions and quantum fluctuations are unimportant at low temperatures and for small  $1/S$ , they have been ignored in this analysis.

To determine the spin-wave frequencies  $\omega_{\mathbf{q}}$ , the equations-of-motion are solved for the vectors  $\mathbf{v}_{\mathbf{q}} = [a_{\mathbf{q}}^{(1)}, a_{-\mathbf{q}}^{(1)\dagger}, a_{\mathbf{q}}^{(2)}, a_{-\mathbf{q}}^{(2)\dagger}, \dots]$ , which may be written in terms of the  $2N \times 2N$  matrix  $\underline{M}(\mathbf{q})$  as  $id\mathbf{v}_{\mathbf{q}}/dt = -[\underline{H}_2, \mathbf{v}_{\mathbf{q}}] = \underline{M}(\mathbf{q})\mathbf{v}_{\mathbf{q}}$ , where  $N$  is the number of spin sites in the unit cell<sup>25</sup>. The spin-wave frequencies are then determined from the condition  $\text{Det}[\underline{M}(\mathbf{q}) - \omega_{\mathbf{q}}\underline{I}] = 0$ , where all SW frequencies must be real and positive and all SW weights must be positive to assure the local stability of a magnetic phase.

The spin-wave intensities are determined by the coefficients of the spin-spin correlation function:

$$S(\mathbf{q}, \omega) = \sum_{\alpha\beta} (\delta_{\alpha\beta} - q_\alpha q_\beta) S^{\alpha\beta}(\mathbf{q}, \omega), \quad (2)$$

where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are  $x$ ,  $y$ , or  $z$ <sup>27</sup>. A more detailed discussion of this method is contained in Ref. [25]. Notice that inelastic neutron-scattering (INS) measurements only detect components of the spin fluctuations perpendicular<sup>28</sup> to the wavevector  $\mathbf{q}$ .

The total intensity  $I(\mathbf{q}, \omega)$  for an INS scan at constant  $\mathbf{q}$  is given by

$$I(\mathbf{q}, \omega) = S(\mathbf{q}, \omega) F_{\mathbf{q}}^2 \exp(-(\omega - \omega_{\mathbf{q}})^2 / 2\delta^2), \quad (3)$$

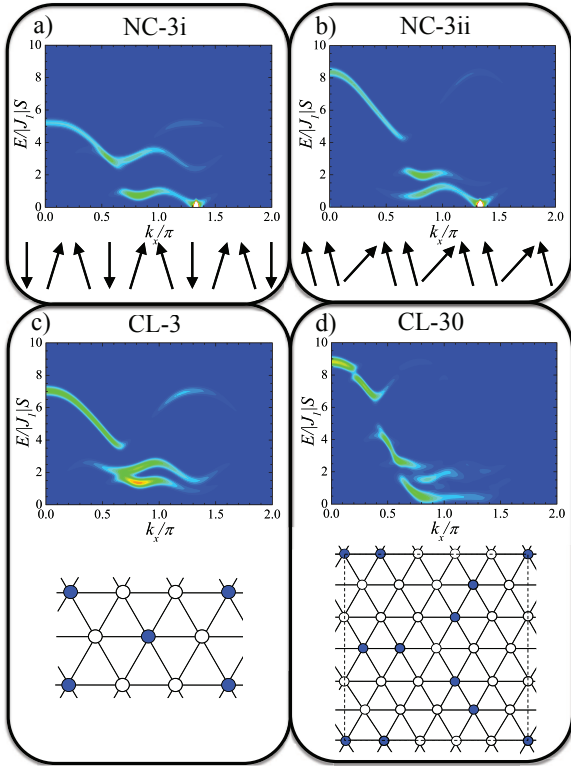


FIG. 3: (Color Online) The simulated spin-wave spectra along  $\mathbf{k} = (k_x, 0)$  and spin configuration for the (a) NC-3i ( $d = 0.355$  and  $h = 3.61$ ), (b) NC-3ii ( $d = 0.333$  and  $h = 7.53$ ), (c) CL-3 ( $d = 0.345$  and  $h = 5.40$ ), and (d) CL-30 ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 7.0$ ) phases<sup>35</sup>.

where  $\delta$  is the energy resolution and  $F_{\mathbf{q}}$  is the  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  ionic form factor given the interest in  $\text{CuFeO}_2$ <sup>29,30</sup>. The simulated energy resolution is based on a Gaussian distribution, which is standard for constant  $\mathbf{q}$  scans on a triple-axis spectrometer<sup>28,31</sup>. Other experimental configurations may require more complex resolution functions.

It should be noted that the triangular lattice can produce “twin” branches of the spin state, with propagation wavevectors rotated by  $\pm 60^\circ$  with respect to the main branch. The excitations of the “twin” branches will change the inelastic spectra along the  $k_x$  direction. However, the “twin” branches can be suppressed through the application of uniaxial pressure as shown in Ref. [32]. For clarity, the spin-wave dynamics described in this paper does not include the “twin” contributions.

### III. PREDICTED SPIN DYNAMICS

Figure 1(a) presents the magnetic phase diagram for the frustrated triangular lattice with increasing anisotropy and magnetic field, which was determined using Monte-Carlo and variational techniques in Ref. [23]. The phase diagram contains multiple CL and NC phases (Fig. 1(a)) that are produced by the competition of

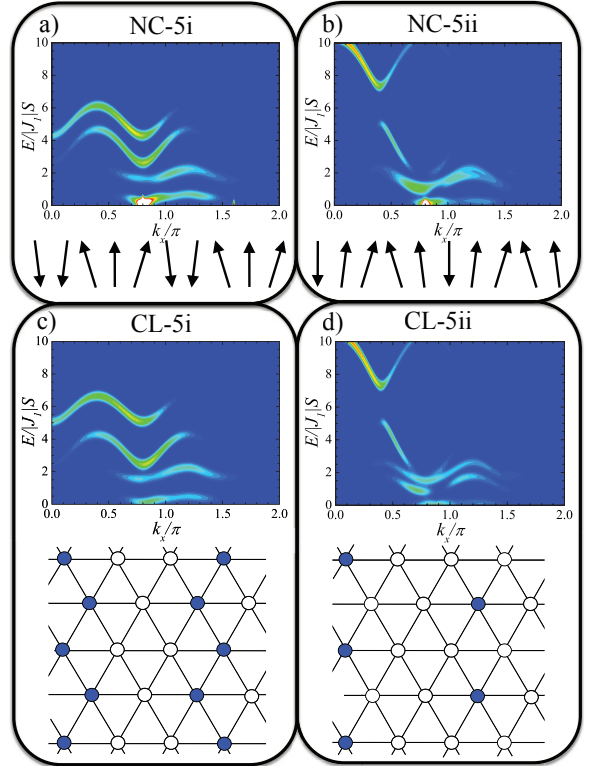


FIG. 4: (Color Online) The simulated spin-wave spectra along  $\mathbf{k} = (k_x, 0)$  and spin configuration for the (a) NC-5i ( $d = 0.303$  and  $h = 2.12$ ), (b) NC-5ii ( $d = 0.45$  and  $h = 9.0$ ), (c) CL-5i ( $d = 0.359$  and  $h = 2.87$ ), and (d) CL-5ii ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 9.0$ ) phases<sup>35</sup>.

the three exchange interactions ( $J_1$ ,  $J_2$ , and  $J_3$ ) as the anisotropy and external magnetic field are varied.

Generally, Fig. 1(a) indicates that the CL states are stabilized with increasing anisotropy. For  $D \gg J_1$ , the spins become Ising-like without any transverse degrees of freedom. For zero field, the phase diagram of an Ising system with different exchange interactions  $J_2$  and  $J_3$  but  $J_1 < 0$  was described evaluated by Takagi and Mekata<sup>33</sup>. As the anisotropy decreases, the incommensurate CNC phase<sup>34</sup> appears at low field. With increasing magnetic field, the CNC phase transforms into multiple NC and spin flop (SF) phases<sup>23</sup>. The SF-1 phase (Fig. 2(b)) is a conical phase with the same canting angle  $\theta$  on every site and with a turn angle  $\phi(x) = Q_1 x$  that varies linearly with  $x$ . The SF-2 phase (Fig. 2(d)) is more complicated with 5 sublattices in the  $x$  direction and a turn angle  $\phi(y) = Q_2 y$  that increases linearly with  $y$ . More details on these phases are provided in Ref. [23].

In order to help experimentalists to identify these phases, we have simulated the INS dispersions along the  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  trajectory given in Fig. 1(a). For comparison, phases not on the trajectory are also considered. Although we use the magnetic form factor for  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ , the dispersion curves were evaluated for general  $S$  and are applicable to any material with stacked triangular lat-

tices.

Generally, the spectra of the NC phases contain gapless Goldstone modes due to rotational invariance about the  $z$  axis. These modes would become gapped if we had also included easy-plane anisotropy, which breaks the rotational invariance by restricting the spins to the  $yz$  plane. By contrast, the easy-axis anisotropy  $D$  and the magnetic field  $H$ , both along the  $z$  axis, produce a spin-wave gap in the CL phases.

Figure 2 shows the INS dispersions along  $\mathbf{k} = (k_x, 0)$  for the high-field ferromagnetic (a) CL-1 ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 16.0$ ), (b) SF-1 ( $d = 0.290$  and  $h = 14.467$ ), (c) CL-7 ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 11.0$ ), and (d) SF-2 ( $d = 0.30$  and  $h = 12.9$ ) phases<sup>35</sup>. Since these phases are close to the field-induced ferromagnetic phase, their excitation spectra are very similar. Therefore, subtle details in the dispersions are important. For the SF phases, two dispersive modes appear. Compared to the CL-1 spectrum, the spectra of the SF and CL-7 phases all show distinct signatures that should help to identify them using INS. While the CL-1 phases presents a smooth continuous dispersion, the CL-7 and SF-2 phases have “breaks” in their dispersions around  $\mathbf{k} = (\pi/2, 0)$  and the SF-1 phase has two modes that mirror each other at  $\mathbf{k} = (4\pi/5, 0)$ .

In Fig. 3, we present the INS dispersions along  $\mathbf{k} = (k_x, 0)$  for the (a) NC-3i ( $d = 0.355$  and  $h = 3.61$ ), (b) NC-3ii ( $d = 0.333$  and  $h = 7.53$ ), (c) CL-3 ( $d = 0.345$  and  $h = 5.40$ ), and (d) CL-30 ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 7.0$ )<sup>35</sup>. While the NC 3-SL spectrum exhibits a Goldstone mode at  $\mathbf{k} = (4\pi/3, 0)$ , the CL-3 and CL-30 spectra are gapped systems.

Figure 4 shows the INS dispersions along  $\mathbf{k} = (k_x, 0)$  for the (a) NC-5i ( $d = 0.303$  and  $h = 2.12$ ), (b) NC-5ii ( $d = 0.45$  and  $h = 9.0$ ), (c) CL-5i ( $d = 0.359$  and  $h = 2.87$ ), and (d) CL-5ii ( $d = 0.5$  and  $h = 9.0$ )<sup>35</sup>. Similar to the 3-SL phases, the NC-5i and NC-5ii spectra have Goldstone modes at  $\mathbf{k} = (4\pi/5, 0)$ , but the spectra of the CL phases are gapped with minima at the same wavevector as the NC Goldstone mode.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Following the predicted trajectory for  $\text{CuFeO}_2$ , distinct changes in the spin-wave dispersions are produced by the competition between the field and anisotropy energies. Once the CL-4 and CNC phases are passed, the system enters the NC-5i phase (Fig. 4(a)), which has a Goldstone mode at  $\mathbf{k} = (4\pi/5, 0)$ . As the field is increased further, this mode becomes slightly gapped in the CL-5i phase (Fig. 4(c)). However, the main signatures of the NC-5i and CL-5i phases remain the same.

The NC-5i phase may be distinguished from the CL-5i phase by the dependence of the gap on field. Since the NC phase has a gapless Goldstone mode but the CL phase does not, INS would observe a decrease in the Goldstone mode intensity as the field is increased. The spin-wave gap that appears in the CL-5i phase will

increase linearly with field. Magnetization and diffraction measurements<sup>13,14</sup> strongly suggest that the NC-5i phase appears above the CNC phase in doped samples: the wavevector  $\mathbf{k} = (4\pi/5, 0)$  of the 5-SL phase remains constant while the magnetization linearly increases with field. INS measurements can be used to confirm the appearance of the NC-5i phase in those materials.

It should be noted that the CL-5i phase also has a local minima at approximately  $\mathbf{k} = (4\pi/3, 0)$ . This provides a precursor to the NC-3i phase (Fig. 3(a)), since the spectral weight shifts to the Goldstone mode of the NC-3i phase at  $\mathbf{k} = (4\pi/3, 0)$ .

As the magnetic field grows larger, the spin-waves becomes gapped again in the CL-3 phase (Fig. 3(c)). While one mode is raised in energy by the magnetic field, a second mode is lowered in energy by the reduced anisotropy. The anisotropy dominates over the magnetic field and restores the Goldstone mode as the system enters the NC-3ii phase (Fig. 3(b)). As the magnetic field increases further, the system becomes gapped again as the system transforms into the SF-2 phase (Fig. 2(d)). This phase then smoothly transforms into the SF-1 phase (Fig. 2(b)). The leftmost mode of the SF-1 phase becomes less intense and disappears as the system enters the CL-1 phase (Fig. 2(a)). In the fully aligned CL-1 phase, the dispersion simply increases with field.

An animation of these modes along the  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  trajectory is provided in the supplementary material<sup>36</sup>. This movie visually depicts the changes in the spin-wave frequencies and intensities just described. Specifically, the movie shows how the intensity of the Goldstone mode in the NC-5i phase changes with increasing field.

Since the modes of each magnetic phase have specific characteristic features, INS is a critical tool to distinguish between those phases. This is particularly evident in the case of the 5SL phases of  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  (NC-5i - Fig. 4(a) and CL-5i - Fig. 4(c)) since both phases have the same wavevector and the magnetization provides only a qualitative distinction between the CL and NC phase. By probing the local degrees of freedom<sup>28</sup>, INS provides a “dynamical fingerprint” of the underlying magnetic structure. Correspondingly, predictions of the spin-wave dynamics are critical for the interpretation of INS spectra and the identification of collinear and non-collinear magnetic phases for magnetic materials.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we predict the spin-wave dynamics for the high-field phases of a frustrated triangular lattice with focus on the parameter space for the multiferroic  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  for comparison to future experiments. This calculations were performed using a rotational Holstein-Primakoff expansion for both the CL and NC phases. Analysis of the spin-wave spectra for these phases shows the constant competition between the magnetic field and the anisotropy energies. It is a goal of this paper



that these predictions can be used to help experimentalists identify the high-field phases for  $\text{CuFeO}_2$  or the phases for other triangular-lattice antiferromagnets like  $\text{CuCrO}_2$ .

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  - <sup>35</sup> The conical SF-1 phase ( $d = 0.29$  and  $h = 14.467$ ) consists of  $\theta = 0.0992\pi$  and  $Q_1 = 0.846\pi$ . The SF-2 phase ( $d = 0.30$  and  $h = 12.9$ ) has turn angles  $\theta_1 = 0.0$ ,  $\theta_2 = 0.13646\pi$ ,  $\theta_3 = 1.7534\pi$ ,  $\theta_4 = 0.2466\pi$ , and  $\theta_5 = 1.8635\pi$  with  $Q_2 = 0.42731\pi$ . The NC-3i phase ( $d = 0.355$  and  $h = 3.6$ ) has turn angles  $\theta_1 = -0.13989\pi$ ,  $\theta_2 = -\pi$ ,  $\theta_3 = 0.13989\pi$ . The NC-3ii phase ( $d = 0.333$  and  $h = 7.53$ ) has turn angles  $\theta_1 = -0.11616\pi$ ,  $\theta_2 = -0.11616\pi$ , and  $\theta_3 = 0.69698\pi$ . The NC-5i ( $d = 0.303$  and  $h = 2.12$ ) consists of turn angles  $\theta_1 = 0.0$ ,  $\theta_2 = 1.8485\pi$ ,  $\theta_3 = 1.0437\pi$ ,  $\theta_4 = 0.95631\pi$ , and  $\theta_5 = 0.15149\pi$ . The NC-5ii ( $d = 0.45$  and  $h = 9.0$ ) has turn angles  $\theta_1 = \pi$ ,  $\theta_2 = 0.0726\pi$ ,  $\theta_3 = 0.02174\pi$ ,  $\theta_4 = 1.9782\pi$ , and  $\theta_5 = 1.9273\pi$ .
  - <sup>36</sup> Supplementary Material can be found at URL [www.needstobeaded](http://www.needstobeaded)