Formation of the Three-Ring Structure Around Supernova 1987A

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From a magnetohydrodynamic simulation, we reproduce a three-ring structure in the circumstellar space of the supernova (SN) 1987A observed by the Hubble Space Telescope. When a star develops from a red supergiant (RSG) to a blue supergiant (BSG) just before the SN explosion, a wind-wind interaction occurs between the slow stellar wind from the RSG and the subsequent fast stellar wind from the BSG. This process is simulated numerically under an assumption that the density and velocity distributions around the RSG are anisotropic owing to the existence of toroidal magnetic field and coronal holes. The three rings with observed size and position are reproduced by the magnetic pinch effect and amplification of initial density asymmetry through the dynamical interaction.

Recent observations by the Hubble Space Telescope (HST) show many ring-like structures of circumstellar nebulae that are associated with the death of stars, such as the three-ring structure around SN 1987A (Fig. 1). The equatorial ring (ER) of SN 1987A is on the equatorial plane of the star and has a radius of 0.7 light years (ly). The two outer rings (ORs), at latitudes of about 45° in both hemispheres, have radii about twice that of the ER (i.e., 1.4 ly). These three rings are the traces of high-density regions illuminated through the recombination process of atoms ionized by the ultraviolet flash of SN explosion. Here we clarify the formation process of the three-ring structure by computer simulations.

The colliding wind model (1) explains the ring structures of planetary nebulae on the basis of the hydrodynamic interaction between fast and slow stellar winds. When the progenitor of the SN is a RSG, a dense and slow RSG wind steadily expands from the star into the circumstellar space. Just before the SN explosion the RSG evolves into a BSG, and dilute and fast stellar wind from the BSG begins to expand outward into the pre-existing RSG wind, sweeping up the matter around the RSG. This process is called wind-wind interaction (2). When the RSG wind is spherically nonsymmetric, a ring structure is formed from the high-density RSG wind around the equator. In addition, the magnetohydrodynamic (MHD) effect makes the ring structure more distinct (3).

We assume that the star has a dipole magnetic field, and that the ionized stellar wind has anisotropic density and velocity distributions: The stellar wind is fast in the high-latitude coronal hole region and slow in the low-latitude region. These assumptions are introduced by analogy to recent solar wind observations by the inner-heliospheric polar-orbiting spacecraft Ulysses (4). The magnetic field is dragged out and wound up to the toroidal field in the circumstellar space by the radially expanding stellar wind and stellar rotation. To explain the three-ring structure, we treat the wind-wind interaction in a MHD regime with anisotropic RSG and BSG winds.

An important advantage of our simulation is that it adopts a highly accurate scheme for the MHD computation. We use the finite-volume total variation diminishing scheme with a third-order numerical flux based on the monotonic upstream scheme for the conservation law approach (5). Our assumptions are implemented in the MHD simulation by specifying the inner boundary conditions. Here, we set the spherical inner and outer boundaries at \( r = 0.1 \) and 1.5 ly. The primary boundary conditions for the RSG wind are given as density \( \rho = 3000 \times m_p \) g/cm\(^3\) (where \( m_p \) is proton mass), temperature \( T = 5 \times 10^5 \) K, radial velocity \( V_r = 10 \) km/s, and toroidal magnetic field \( B_\theta = B_0 \) \( \cos \theta \) with \( B_0 = 37 \) nT (where \( \theta \) indicates the latitude). In addition, the polarity change is given for \( B_\phi \) across the equatorial plane with a neutral sheet width of 3.0°. Inside the neutral sheet, density is increased to balance with the magnetic pressure. Assuming a coronal hole at latitudes higher than 55.7°, the primary boundary conditions are modified there to give high-speed hot plasma, increasing \( V_r \) by a factor of 4.0 and increasing \( T \) by a factor of

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Fig. 1. The three-ring structure in the circumstellar space of the SN 1987A observed by the HST. The ER is on the equatorial plane, and the two ORs are near 45° latitudes. The original picture is rotated 90° for easy comparison with Fig. 2. (Space Telescope Science Institute image, also available at http://oposite.stsci.edu/pubinfo/jpeg/SN1987A_Rings.jpg)
The density distribution shown here is generated by the redistribution of RSG plasma in the course of the wind-wind interaction. The high-speed flow induced by the BSG wind sweeps up the RSG plasma in the circumstellar space in front of the contact surface. Then this surface of dense RSG plasma is inflated like a balloon (Fig. 2, C and D). At this stage, RSG plasma in the polar region is blown off by the fast BSG flow. In the course of the inflation, local concentrations of RSG plasma occur in three latitudinal regions: one at the equator corresponding to the ER, and two at the northern and southern mid-latitudes corresponding to the ORs. Near the equator, $B_\phi$ originally distributed in the RSG wind and swept up in front of the contact surface exerts a magnetic pinch effect to accelerate the ER formation.

In the ORs, the magnetic intensity and plasma density become greater than those of the surrounding region because both components are compressed simultaneously under the frozen-in condition. Hence, the ORs are confined not by the surrounding magnetic pressure but by the thermal pressure built up by the fast BSG wind so as to surround the ORs. The BSG wind is decelerated more severely around high-density ring areas (Fig. 2C). This deceleration in turn generates high-pressure walls around the ORs and spurs the ring formation. Finally, the fast wind blows off RSG plasma in the crevices of the rings and makes the three rings stand out more (Fig. 2, E and F). At the final stage (Fig. 2F), the ratio of the OR radius to the ER radius is 2, which is just the same as the HST observations (6), and the density ratio of the ER to the OR is about 3, which coincides well with the observational value of 2 to 4 (7). The density contrast between the ORs and the surrounding plasma is 30 on the front side and 3 on the back side. The radial velocity of the ORs is 57.5 km/s, which is faster than the observed value of 26 km/s (8).

The final shape of the ring structure depends on the parameters of the RSG and BSG; hence, it may be possible to study the configuration of stars in the final stage of their lives by finding simulation parameters that generate the rings actually observed. Our simulation suggests that the structures of the RSG and BSG exhibit many similarities to those of the Sun. The formation process of the ORs indicates that both the RSG and BSG should have magnetic fields resembling that of the Sun. The intensity of the magnetic pressure in the RSG wind should be of the same order of magnitude as that of the thermal pressure. Moreover, the RSG and BSG should also have high-speed polar streams resembling that of the Sun. To obtain a steady state of RSG wind, it is necessary to integrate the MHD equation under a steady condition for 36,000 years. Our results suggest an RSG wind that has been blowing fairly steadily for a long period before the BSG phase, in contrast to the solar wind, which is always undergoing long- and short-period variations.

References and Notes
9. We thank S. Shibata for discussions.

28 December 2001; accepted 8 March 2002