The Magic Square Constraint: A Universal Stability Criterion Based on Symmetry-Matching Mismatch Degree

Chang, Lien-Hsing
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1476-6341
Independent Researcher

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Abstract

This work introduces a novel theoretical framework that unifies quantum stability across scales. By analogizing stable quantum states to *odd-order magic squares*—which are complete, self-consistent, and possess a unique central symmetry—and transient, unstable states to *even-order magic squares*—which are incomplete and lack such central coherence—we define the **Symmetry-Matching Mismatch Degree (SMMD)** as a quantitative stability criterion. The SMMD measures the deviation of a system's symmetry eigenvalue from the ideal value demanded by its environmental potential. The framework is demonstrated through three paradigmatic cases from distinct physical regimes: (1) the formation of the hydrogen molecule (quantum chemistry), where the bonding state is shown to be a global odd-parity ("odd-order") configuration; (2) the stability contrast between deuterium and tritium (nuclear physics), where the overall nucleon number parity determines the SMMD and thus the decay pathway; and (3) the adaptive process of quantum error correction (quantum information), where the correction cycle is reinterpreted as a continuous minimization of local SMMD. The theory suggests that stability is not merely an energetic minimum but a manifestation of deep symmetry alignment between a system and its environment.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Mathematical Intuition: Magic Squares and Completeness

Magic squares have fascinated mathematicians for millennia. An *odd-order* magic square (e.g., 3×3, 5×5) possesses a unique property: its center cell is defined and participates in all symmetric sums, giving the square a sense of *internal completeness* and *balance*. In contrast, an *even-order* magic square (e.g., 4×4), while possible, lacks a single central cell and often requires more artificial constructions to achieve equal sums. This ancient mathematical distinction—odd as complete, even as incomplete—serves as the foundational metaphor for our theory.

1.2 Physical Observations of Parity and Stability

Physics is replete with parity-driven stability rules:

- In nuclear physics, *even-even* nuclei (even proton Z, even neutron N) are overwhelmingly more stable than their odd-odd counterparts (9).
- In molecular physics, the hydrogen molecule binds in a singlet (spatially even) state, while the triplet (spatially odd) state is repulsive (10).
- In condensed matter, electron pairing (Cooper pairs) underpins superconductivity—a manifestation of even-electron collective states (1).

These phenomena, while well-described by existing theories, lack a single *unifying conceptual language* that expresses *why* parity and stability are so intimately linked across scales.

1.3 Theoretical Gap and Proposal

We propose that this gap is not merely linguistic but conceptual. Existing theories explain *how* systems become stable (e.g., exchange integrals in H_2, pairing gaps in superconductors) but do not offer a *unified quantitative criterion* for stability that is independent of the specific interaction.

We introduce the **Symmetry-Matching Mismatch Degree (SMMD)**. This quantity measures, in a single scalar, the degree to which a quantum state's symmetry properties align with the symmetry "demanded" by its environmental potential. When the alignment is perfect (SMMD ≈ 0), we have an *odd-order magic square state*: stable, self-consistent, and energetically minimal. When misalignment is large (SMMD $\gg 0$), we have an *even-order magic square state*: transient, unstable, and driven toward symmetry-matching via dynamical evolution.

2 Theoretical Framework: Symmetry-Matching Mismatch Degree (SMMD)

2.1 Definition

Consider a quantum system described by Hamiltonian $\hat{H}$. Let $\hat{P}$ be a unitary operator representing a discrete symmetry of $\hat{H}$ (e.g., parity $\hat{\imath}$, particle number parity $\hat{N}_p$, or a stabilizer operator $\hat{S}$ in quantum error correction). For a given state $|\psi\rangle$, the expectation value $\langle\psi|\hat{P}|\psi\rangle$ yields a real number in the range $[-1, 1]$ (or more generally, within the eigenvalue spectrum of $\hat{P}$).

Let λ_{ideal} be the eigenvalue of $\hat{P}$ that *minimizes the energy* of the system under its environmental constraints. This λ_{ideal} is not arbitrary; it is dictated by the fundamental physics of the interaction. For example:

- For a diatomic molecule with inversion symmetry, the ground state is always even under parity, so $\lambda_{\text{ideal}} = +1$.

- For a nucleus governed by the short-range, spin-isospin independent nuclear force, the most stable configuration (lowest energy) occurs when both proton and neutron numbers are even, corresponding to even total nucleon number parity, thus $\lambda_{\text{ideal}} = +1$ for the operator $\hat{P} = (-1)^{\hat{A}}$ (parity of total nucleon number).

- For a logical qubit in the surface code, the ideal stabilizer measurement outcome is $+1$, indicating no error, so $\lambda_{\text{ideal}} = +1$ for each stabilizer $\hat{S}_z$.

We define the **Symmetry-Matching Mismatch Degree** as:

$$\boxed{\mathcal{D}_P(|\psi\rangle) = \left| \langle\psi| \hat{P} |\psi\rangle - \lambda_{\text{ideal}} \right|} \tag{1}$$

2.2 Physical Interpretation

- $\mathcal{D}_P \approx 0$: The system is in a state of **high symmetry alignment**. Its quantum numbers match the environment's "preference." Such states are stable, long-lived, and typically correspond to ground states or topologically protected states. We call these **"odd-order magic square" states**.

- $\mathcal{D}_P \gg 0$: The system is in a state of **symmetry misalignment**. It is energetically penalized and will tend to evolve (via radiation, decay, or coherent control) toward a state of lower $\mathcal{D}_P$. We call these **"even-order magic square" states**.

2.3 Generality

The operator $\hat{P}$ and the ideal eigenvalue λ_{ideal} are *system-specific*, but the *definition* of $\mathcal{D}_P$ is universal. This framework can be extended to:

- Continuous symmetries (e.g., angular momentum), where λ_{ideal} becomes a target quantum number.

- Multiple, competing symmetries, where the system must find a compromise that minimizes a weighted sum of SMMDs.

- Local SMMDs, defined on subsystems, which drive local dynamics.

3 Case Study I: Hydrogen Molecule Formation — From Atomic to Molecular Symmetry

3.1 System and Symmetry Operator

We consider two hydrogen atoms approaching each other. The full Hamiltonian $\hat{H}_{H_2}$ is inversion-symmetric about the molecular midpoint. The relevant symmetry operator is the **parity operator** $\hat{\imath}$, which inverts all electronic coordinates through the molecular center.

For the isolated hydrogen atom (spherically symmetric), each 1s orbital is even under atomic inversion. However, the *molecular* inversion symmetry is a new, global constraint. The environment (the two-proton potential) "demands" that the global electronic wavefunction be an eigenstate of $\hat{\imath}$. The ground state of any inversion-symmetric diatomic molecule is known to have **even parity** ($\lambda_{\text{ideal}} = +1$) (7).

3.2 Wavefunctions and SMMD Calculation

We adopt the Heitler-London valence bond wavefunctions (6):

$$\psi_+ = N_+[\phi_{1s}(r_{A1})\phi_{1s}(r_{B2}) + \phi_{1s}(r_{A2})\phi_{1s}(r_{B1})] \otimes \chi_{\text{singlet}} \quad \text{(even parity)} \tag{2}$$
$$\psi_- = N_-[\phi_{1s}(r_{A1})\phi_{1s}(r_{B2}) - \phi_{1s}(r_{A2})\phi_{1s}(r_{B1})] \otimes \chi_{\text{triplet}} \quad \text{(odd parity)} \tag{3}$$

where $\phi_{1s}(r) = e^{-r}/\sqrt{\pi}$ and χ are the spin functions.

Applying the inversion operator $\hat{i}$ exchanges nuclei A and B, thus swapping electron coordinates. One finds:

$$\hat{i}\psi_+ = +\psi_+, \quad \hat{i}\psi_- = -\psi_- \tag{4}$$

Therefore:

$$\langle\psi_+|\,\hat{i}\,|\psi_+\rangle = +1, \quad \langle\psi_-|\,\hat{i}\,|\psi_-\rangle = -1 \tag{5}$$

The SMMD for each state, with $\lambda_{\text{ideal}} = +1$, is:

$$\mathcal{D}_i(\psi_+) = |+1-(+1)| = 0, \quad \mathcal{D}_i(\psi_-) = |-1-(+1)| = 2 \tag{6}$$

3.3 Energy Calculation and Interpretation

The energy expectation values for ψ_+ and ψ_- are well-known (10):

$$E_+ = \frac{H_{11}+H_{12}}{1+S^2} \tag{7}$$
$$E_- = \frac{H_{11}-H_{12}}{1-S^2} \tag{8}$$

where $S = \langle\phi_{1s}(r_{A1})|\phi_{1s}(r_{B1})\rangle$ is the overlap integral, H_{11} is the Coulomb integral, and H_{12} is the exchange integral. Numerical evaluation (Fig. 1) shows that E_+ has a deep minimum at $R \approx 1.64a_0$ with binding energy ≈ 3.14 eV, while E_- is purely repulsive.

Figure 1: Energy curves for H_2. The even-parity state ψ_+ ($\mathcal{D} = 0$) is bonding; the odd-parity state ψ_- ($\mathcal{D} = 2$) is antibonding.

Interpretation via the Magic Square Constraint: The two isolated hydrogen atoms are themselves "odd-order magic squares"—each is a complete, symmetry-matched system ($\mathcal{D}_i \approx 0$ for each atom under its own spherical symmetry). As they approach, the environment changes: the relevant symmetry is now *molecular inversion*. The system must choose a global symmetry state. The even-parity combination ($\mathcal{D}_i = 0$) is the "odd-order" configuration: complete, stable, and energetically favored. The odd-parity combination ($\mathcal{D}_i = 2$) is the "even-order" configuration: incomplete (the wavefunction has a node between nuclei, reducing electron density), unstable, and repulsive.

Thus, chemical bonding is not merely an energetic accident but a *symmetry-matching phase transition*: the system spontaneously selects the global symmetry that minimizes $\mathcal{D}_i$, achieving a new, collective "odd-order magic square" state.

4 Case Study II: Nuclear Stability — Deuterium, Tritium, and the Power of Total Parity

4.1 System and Symmetry Operator

Atomic nuclei are governed primarily by the strong nuclear force, which is, to a good approximation, *charge-independent* and *spin-independent* in its dominant component (2). This means that protons and neutrons are treated as two states of the same particle (the nucleon), and the nuclear potential favors spatial symmetry.

A powerful empirical rule is the **even-even rule**: nuclei with even proton number Z and even neutron number N are overwhelmingly more stable than odd-odd nuclei. This is traditionally explained by pairing forces. We propose a complementary, symmetry-based interpretation.

Define the operator:

$$\hat{P}_A = (-1)^{\hat{A}}, \quad \hat{A} = \hat{Z} + \hat{N} \tag{9}$$

which measures the *parity of the total number of nucleons*.

The nuclear environment (the strong force, plus the Pauli exclusion principle acting on identical fermions in the same potential) "prefers" states with **even total nucleon number**. Why? Because only with even A can *all* nucleons be paired in time-reversed orbits, maximizing spatial overlap and thus the attractive short-range force. Therefore, we set:

$$\lambda_{\text{ideal}} = +1 \quad \text{(even total nucleon number parity)} \tag{10}$$

4.2 Deuterium (^{2}H): The Stable "Even-Order" Anomaly

Deuterium consists of one proton and one neutron: $Z = 1$ (odd), $N = 1$ (odd), $A = 2$ (even).

- Naive application of the even-even rule would suggest instability, yet deuterium is bound (~ 2.2 MeV).
- Our framework resolves this: $\hat{P}_A \left|{}^2\text{H}\right\rangle = (-1)^2 \left|{}^2\text{H}\right\rangle = +1 \left|{}^2\text{H}\right\rangle$.
- Therefore, $\mathcal{D}_{P_A}({}^2\text{H}) = |+1 - (+1)| = 0$.

Conclusion: Deuterium is stable not because it is "odd-odd" but because its *total* nucleon number parity is even. It achieves the ideal symmetry alignment at the *global* level, even though its constituents are individually unpaired. It is a perfect "odd-order magic square" when considered as a whole system.

4.3 Tritium (^{3}H) and Helium-3 (^{3}He): Misalignment and Decay

Tritium: $Z = 1$ (odd), $N = 2$ (even), $A = 3$ (odd).

- $\hat{P}_A \left|{}^3\text{H}\right\rangle = (-1)^3 \left|{}^3\text{H}\right\rangle = -1 \left|{}^3\text{H}\right\rangle$.
- Thus, $\mathcal{D}_{P_A}({}^3\text{H}) = |-1 - (+1)| = 2$.

This large SMMD signals a severe symmetry mismatch. The system is in an "even-order magic square" state—it *wants* to change to achieve even A.

Tritium decays via β^-:

$$^3\text{H} \rightarrow^3 \text{He} + e^- + \bar{\nu}_e \tag{11}$$

^{3}He: $Z = 2$ (even), $N = 1$ (odd), $A = 3$ (odd).

At first glance, ^{3}He still has odd A and thus $\mathcal{D}_{P_A} = 2$. Yet ^{3}He is stable. Why?

This reveals a crucial layer: **competing symmetries**. The strong force demands even A, but the electromagnetic force demands low Z (minimizing Coulomb repulsion). ^{3}H and ^{3}He are a compromise:

- ^{3}H has $Z = 1$ (low Coulomb energy) but $A = 3$ (strong-force SMMD=2).
- ^{3}He has $Z = 2$ (higher Coulomb energy) but still $A = 3$ (strong-force SMMD=2).

The decay is a *symmetry trade-off*. The system cannot achieve $\mathcal{D} = 0$ for both symmetries simultaneously. It chooses the path that minimizes the *total* free energy, which in this case favors the ^{3}He configuration due to the strong force's slightly better overlap in the $T = 1/2$ isospin state.

This is the essence of our framework: Stability is not binary but a matter of *degree* and *multiple constraints*. Nuclei are constantly navigating a landscape of competing symmetry demands, and their stability (or decay) reflects the nearest available local minimum in this SMMD landscape.

5 Case Study III: Quantum Error Correction — Adaptive Minimization of SMMD

5.1 System and Symmetry Operator

The surface code (8; 5) is a leading architecture for fault-tolerant quantum computing. A logical qubit is defined on a lattice of physical qubits, with its state protected by a set of *stabilizer* operators $\{\hat{S}_i\}$. For the standard surface code with Z-basis encoding, the relevant stabilizers are plaquette operators measuring $Z \otimes Z \otimes Z \otimes Z$ around each square.

In the ideal, error-free case, the logical state $|\psi_L\rangle$ is a $+1$ eigenstate of *every* stabilizer:

$$\hat{S}_i |\psi_L\rangle = +1 |\psi_L\rangle, \quad \forall i \tag{12}$$

Thus, for each stabilizer, $\lambda_{\text{ideal}} = +1$.

5.2 Error as Local Symmetry Misalignment

A physical error (e.g., a bit-flip X on a data qubit) anti-commutes with the adjacent Z-stabilizers, flipping their measurement outcomes to -1. For a stabilizer $\hat{S}_i$ affected by an error:

$$\langle\psi_L| \hat{S}_i |\psi_L\rangle = -1 \tag{13}$$

The local SMMD for that stabilizer becomes:

$$\mathcal{D}_{S_i} = |-1 - (+1)| = 2 \tag{14}$$

This is the "even-order magic square" signature at the local level. The system now contains a defect—a region of symmetry misalignment.

5.3 Error Correction as Adaptive SMMD Minimization

The quantum error correction cycle is precisely a *closed-loop control system* designed to detect and eliminate these local SMMD spikes:

1. **Measurement (Sensing):** All stabilizers are measured. The measurement outcomes form a *syndrome*. A stabilizer with outcome -1 indicates $\mathcal{D}_{S_i} = 2$.
2. **Decoding (Localization):** A classical decoder processes the syndrome to identify the most probable error location—i.e., the spatial distribution of high SMMD.
3. **Correction (Actuation):** A feedback operation (e.g., a Pauli X gate) is applied to the inferred error location. This operation is specifically chosen to *flip the sign* of the affected stabilizers, restoring their expectation values to $+1$ and thus resetting $\mathcal{D}_{S_i} = 0$.

5.4 Unified Interpretation

In our framework, a quantum computer is a *dynamical system under active symmetry control.* The environment (decoherence, control imprecision) constantly attempts to create local "even-order magic squares" (SMMD spikes). The error correction protocol is a *negative feedback loop* that continuously measures the local SMMD field and applies local symmetry operations to restore $\mathcal{D} \approx 0$ everywhere.

This interpretation is not merely metaphorical. It suggests:

- New decoding strategies that explicitly target the minimization of a global SMMD cost function.
- A physical understanding of the error threshold: it is the point at which the rate of SMMD introduction exceeds the rate at which the feedback loop can restore $\mathcal{D} = 0$.
- A bridge to statistical mechanics: the syndrome distribution is the equilibrium distribution of SMMD defects under competing thermal and control dynamics (4).

6 Discussion and Outlook

6.1 The Unifying Thread

The three cases presented—spanning atomic, nuclear, and quantum information physics—are traditionally treated with vastly different formalisms: quantum chemistry, nuclear shell model, and stabilizer formalism. Yet, when viewed through the lens of the **Symmetry-Matching Mismatch Degree**, a common structure emerges:

System	**Symmetry Operator** $\hat{P}$	λ_{ideal}	**SMMD=0 State**
H_2 molecule	Parity $\hat{i}$	$+1$	Bonding state
Nucleus	Total nucleon parity $(-1)^{\hat{A}}$	$+1$	Even-A nucleus
Surface code	Stabilizer $\hat{S}_z$	$+1$	Error-free logical state

In each case:

1. The environment imposes a *preferred symmetry eigenvalue* λ_{ideal}.

2. The system's state is characterized by its actual symmetry eigenvalue.
3. The mismatch $\mathcal{D}$ quantifies instability and drives evolution.
4. Achieving $\mathcal{D} = 0$ corresponds to forming a stable, "odd-order magic square" configuration.

6.2 Predictions and Testable Hypotheses

Our framework generates specific, testable predictions:

1. **Exotic molecules:** We predict that certain metastable molecular configurations with nominally "wrong" global parity can be stabilized if placed in a symmetry-breaking external field that effectively redefines λ_{ideal}. This is experimentally accessible with ultracold molecules in optical lattices (3).
2. **Nuclear isomers:** Our theory suggests that long-lived nuclear isomers may correspond to states with $\mathcal{D} = 0$ under *one* symmetry (e.g., angular momentum) but $\mathcal{D} > 0$ under another (e.g., parity). The decay of such isomers is suppressed not by energy alone but by the need to simultaneously minimize multiple SMMDs. This offers a new classification scheme for isomers.
3. **Quantum error correction:** If our interpretation is correct, then optimizing error correction is equivalent to optimizing the controller's ability to minimize a global SMMD cost function. This suggests that machine learning decoders trained to directly minimize $\mathcal{D}$ (rather than match error patterns) may outperform existing methods.

6.3 Limitations and Open Questions

We acknowledge several open questions that define our future research agenda:

- **What determines λ_{ideal} from first principles?** Currently, we infer it from empirical knowledge of the ground state. A complete theory should derive λ_{ideal} directly from the Hamiltonian and its environment.
- **How do multiple, non-commuting symmetries compete?** In systems where λ_{ideal} for different operators are incompatible, the system must find a compromise. This is an unexplored territory we call *multi-symmetry optimization*.
- **Can SMMD be extended to continuous phase transitions?** Near criticality, symmetry is not broken or preserved but fluctuates. Does a generalized SMMD (perhaps defined via correlation functions) serve as an order parameter?

7 Conclusion

We have introduced the **Symmetry-Matching Mismatch Degree** (SMMD)—a quantitative, system-independent criterion for quantum stability. By framing stable states as "odd-order magic squares" and unstable, transient states as "even-order magic squares," we have provided a unifying conceptual and mathematical language that connects phenomena across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

We demonstrated the framework's power through three detailed case studies:

- **Hydrogen molecule:** Bonding arises from achieving $\mathcal{D} = 0$ under molecular inversion symmetry.
- **Deuterium vs. Tritium:** Stability is determined by total nucleon parity, not individual nucleon parity; decay is a symmetry-driven search for lower $\mathcal{D}$.
- **Quantum error correction:** The entire cycle is reinterpreted as adaptive, real-time minimization of local SMMD spikes.

This work is not presented as a replacement for existing theories but as a *supplement*—a new lens that reveals the deep structural similarities between seemingly disparate stability phenomena. We believe this lens can guide both theoretical exploration and experimental design across the physical sciences.

The ancient magic square, a symbol of mathematical harmony, has found a new voice in the quantum world. Its odd-order completeness now speaks the language of symmetry, stability, and the universal drive of physical systems toward order.

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