

# Left-orderability and cyclic branched coverings

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We provide an alternative proof of a sufficient condition for the fundamental group of the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover of  $S^3$  along a prime knot  $K$  to be left-orderable, which is originally due to Boyer, Gordon and Watson. As an application of this sufficient condition, we show that for any  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knot, with  $p \equiv 3 \pmod{4}$ , there are only finitely many cyclic branched covers whose fundamental groups are not left-orderable. This answers a question posed by Dąbkowski, Przytycki and Togha.

57M05; 57M12, 57M27

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background and results

A group  $G$  is called *left-orderable* if there exists a strict total ordering  $<$  on the set of group elements, such that given any two elements  $a$  and  $b$  in  $G$ , if  $a < b$  then  $ca < cb$  for any  $c \in G$ .

It is known that any connected, compact, orientable 3–manifold with a positive first Betti number has a left-orderable fundamental group; see Boyer, Rolfsen and Wiest [4, Theorem 1.1] and Howie and Short [12]. In contrast, for a rational homology sphere, the left-orderability of its fundamental group is a nontrivial property, which is closely related to the co-oriented taut foliations on the manifold; see Calegari and Dunfield [5]. Moreover, Boyer, Gordon and Watson [3] conjectured that an irreducible rational homology 3–sphere  $M$  is an  $L$ –space (see Ozsváth and Szabó [19]) if and only if its fundamental group  $\pi_1(M)$  is not left-orderable.

Let  $X_K$  be the complementary space obtained by removing an open tubular neighborhood of the knot  $K$  from the three sphere  $S^3$  and  $X_K^{(n)}$  be the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover of  $S^3$  branched over the knot  $K$ . The first Betti number  $b_1(X_K^{(n)})$  equals zero if and only if no root of the Alexander polynomial  $\Delta_K(t)$  is an  $n^{\text{th}}$  root of unity. Hence, most of the cyclic branched covers along a knot are rational homology spheres. In particular, this is the case if  $n$  is a prime power.

For this class of rational homology spheres, the L-space conjecture [3] has been verified in the following cases, where they are all L-spaces and have non-left-orderable fundamental groups:

- The twofold branched cover of any nonsplit alternating link; see Boyer, Gordon and Watson [3], Greene [10], Ito [13] and Ozsváth and Szabó [20].
- The  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover of a  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knot with  $p/q = 2m + \frac{1}{2k}$ ,  $mk > 0$  and  $n$  arbitrary; see Dąbkowski and Przytycki [7], and Peters [21].
- The  $3^{\text{rd}}$  and  $4^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover of a  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knot with

$$p/q = n_1 + \frac{1}{1 + \frac{1}{n_2}},$$

where  $n_1, n_2$  are positive odd integers (ie  $p/q = 2m + \frac{1}{2k}$ ,  $mk < 0$ ); see Dąbkowski and Przytycki [7], Gordon and Lidman [9], Peters [21] and Teragaito [25].

The motivation of this paper is a question posed in [7]: Given a two-bridge knot  $K$ , is  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  always non-left-orderable if  $b_1(X_K^{(n)}) = 0$ ? We answer this question negatively. In fact, we prove that for  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knots with  $p \equiv 3 \pmod{4}$ , there are only finitely many cyclic branched covers that have non-left-orderable fundamental groups. At the end, we will present the knot  $5_2$  as an example and show that the fundamental group  $\pi_1(X_{5_2}^{(n)})$  is left-orderable if  $n \geq 9$ . Shortly after this article was posted on the arXiv, Tran [26] computed an upper bound (depending on the knot) on the order  $n$  so that the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover has a non-left-orderable fundamental group for a large class of two-bridge knots.

A similar question for hyperbolic knots was also posed in [7] and was first answered by Clay, Lidman and Watson [6, Proposition 23]. They showed that the twofold branched cover of  $S^3$  along the Conway knot, which is a nonalternating hyperbolic knot listed as 11n34 in the standard knot tables, has a left-orderable fundamental group, and so do all even order cyclic branched covers.

## 1.2 Plan of the paper

Section 2 is devoted to proving Lemma 2.1, essential to our proof of Theorem 3.1.

**Lemma 2.1** *Given a knot  $K$  in  $S^3$ , denote by  $Z$  a meridional element in the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$ . Suppose that there exists a group homomorphism  $\rho$  from  $\pi_1(X_K)$  to a group  $G$  and  $\rho(Z^n)$  is in the center of  $G$ . Then  $\rho$  induces a group homomorphism from  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  to  $G$ . In particular, if  $\rho$  is nonabelian, then the induced homomorphism is nontrivial.*

We finish the proof of Theorem 3.1 in Section 3.

**Theorem 3.1** *Given any prime knot  $K$  in  $S^3$ , denote by  $Z$  a meridional element of  $\pi_1(X_K)$ . If there exists a nonabelian representation  $\pi_1(X_K)$  to  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  such that  $Z^n$  is sent to  $\pm I$  then the fundamental group  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  is left-orderable.*

This result was first observed by Boyer, Gordon and Watson:

**Theorem** [3, Theorem 6] *Let  $K$  be a prime knot in the 3–sphere and suppose that the fundamental group of its twofold branched cyclic cover is not left-orderable. If  $\rho : \pi_1(S^3 \setminus K) \rightarrow Homeo_+(S^1)$  is a homomorphism such that  $\rho(\mu^2) = 1$  for some meridional class  $\mu$  in  $\pi_1(S^3 \setminus K)$ , then the image of  $\rho$  is either trivial or isomorphic to  $\mathbb{Z}_2$ .*

Here we make two remarks to compare Theorem 3.1 with [3, Theorem 6].

- The proof of [3, Theorem 6] naturally extends to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover for arbitrary  $n$ . Since  $PSL(2, \mathbb{R})$  is a subgroup of  $Homeo_+(S^1)$ , the group of orientation preserving homeomorphisms of  $S^1$ , Theorem 3.1 is contained in [3, Theorem 6] in this sense.
- On the other hand, if we replace the central extension

$$0 \longrightarrow \mathbb{Z} \longrightarrow \widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R}) \longrightarrow SL(2, \mathbb{R}) \longrightarrow 1$$

that we use in the proof of Theorem 3.1 by the extension [8]

$$0 \longrightarrow \mathbb{Z} \longrightarrow \widetilde{Homeo}_+(S^1) \longrightarrow Homeo_+(S^1) \longrightarrow 1,$$

we can achieve a proof of [3, Theorem 6].

Finally, in Section 4, we prove our main result in this paper.

**Theorem 4.3** *A  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knot  $K$  with  $p \equiv 3 \pmod{4}$  has only finitely many cyclic branched covers whose fundamental groups are not left-orderable.*

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## 2 The fundamental groups of cyclic branched covers

Given a Seifert surface  $F$ , one can present the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$  as an HNN extension of  $\pi_1(S^3 \setminus F)$  over the surface group  $\pi_1(F)$ , (the usual definition of the HNN extension requires  $F$  to be incompressible, but we do not need it here). We then apply the Reidemeister–Schreier method to the presentation of  $\pi_1(X_K)$  and obtain a presentation of  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$ , from which Lemma 2.1 follows.

More precisely, let  $F$  be a Seifert surface of an oriented knot  $K$ . It has a regular neighborhood that is homeomorphic to  $F \times [-1, 1]$ , where the positive direction is chosen so that the induced orientation on the boundary  $\partial F$  is the same as the chosen orientation on the knot  $K$ .

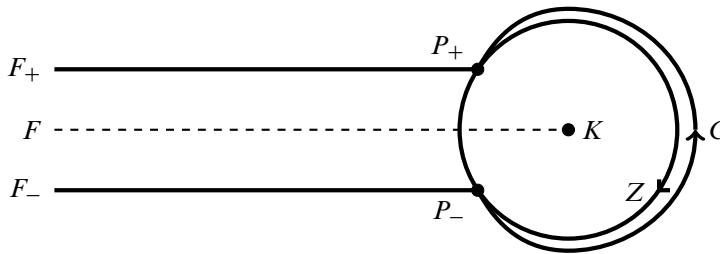


Figure 1: A cross-sectional view of a collar neighborhood of  $F$  in the knot complement  $X_K$ , where  $F_{\pm}$  represent  $F \times \pm 1$ , respectively. In addition, the point  $P_+$  (resp.  $P_-$ ) is the intersection point of the meridian  $Z$  and  $F_+$  (resp.  $F_-$ ).

Suppose that the free groups  $\pi_1(F_-, P_-)$  and  $\pi_1(F_+, P_+)$  are generated by the elements  $\{a_i^-\}_{i=1, \dots, 2g}$  and  $\{a_i^+\}_{i=1, \dots, 2g}$  respectively, where  $g$  is the genus of the Seifert surface  $F$ .

We denote by  $\alpha_i^-$  the image of  $a_i^-$  under the inclusion map

$$\pi_1(F_-, P_-) \longrightarrow \pi_1(S^3 - F, P_-)$$

and denote by  $\alpha_i^+$  the image of  $a_i^+$  in  $\pi_1(S^3 - F, P_-)$  under the composition map

$$\pi_1(F_+, P_+) \longrightarrow \pi_1(S^3 - F, P_+) \longrightarrow \pi_1(S^3 - F, P_-),$$

where the second map from  $\pi_1(S^3 - F, P_+)$  to  $\pi_1(S^3 - F, P_-)$  is the isomorphism induced by the arc  $C$  connecting  $P_-$  to  $P_+$  as depicted in Figure 1. By the van Kampen theorem, we have

$$(1) \quad \pi_1(X_K, P_-) = \pi_1(S^3 - F, P_-) * \langle Z \rangle / \langle\langle Z \alpha_i^+ Z^{-1} = \alpha_i^-, i = 1, \dots, 2g \rangle\rangle.$$

If the complement of the Seifert surface  $F$  in  $S^3$  is also a handlebody, which is always the case when  $F$  is constructed through Seifert’s algorithm, then the group  $\pi_1(S^3 - F, P_-)$  is also free and we assume that

$$\pi_1(S^3 - F, P_-) = \langle x_1, \dots, x_{2g} \rangle.$$

In this case, from (1), we obtain Lin’s presentation for the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K, P_-)$  [16, Lemma 2.1] as

$$(2) \quad \pi_1(X, P_-) = \langle x_1, x_2, \dots, x_{2g-1}, x_{2g}, Z : Z\alpha_i^+Z^{-1} = \alpha_i^-, i = 1, \dots, 2g \rangle,$$

where  $\alpha_i^\pm$  are words in  $x_i$  as described above.

Let  $\tilde{X}_K^{(n)}$  be the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic cover of the knot complement  $X_K$ . Its fundamental group

$$\pi_1(\tilde{X}_K^{(n)}) \cong \text{Ker}(\pi_1(X_K) \longrightarrow \mathbb{Z}_n)$$

is an index- $n$  subgroup of the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$ . Choose  $\{Z^i\}_{i=0, \dots, n-1}$  to be the representative from each coset. By applying the Reidemeister–Schreier method [17] to the presentation (2), we obtain a presentation of the group  $\pi_1(\tilde{X}_K^{(n)})$  with generators

$$Z^n \quad \text{and} \quad Z^k x_1 Z^{-k}, \dots, Z^k x_{2g} Z^{-k} \quad \text{for } k = 0, \dots, n - 1$$

and relations

$$(3) \quad Z^{k+1}\alpha_i^+Z^{-(k+1)} = Z^k\alpha_i^-Z^{-k} \quad \text{for } k = 0, \dots, n - 2 \text{ and } i = 1, \dots, 2g,$$

$$(4) \quad Z^n \cdot \alpha_i^+ \cdot Z^{-n} = Z^{n-1}\alpha_i^-Z^{-(n-1)} \quad \text{for } i = 1, \dots, 2g.$$

In the presentation above,  $Z^k x_i Z^{-k}$  and  $Z^n$  should be viewed as abstract symbols rather than products of  $Z$  and  $x_i$ . Thus, words  $Z^k\alpha_i^+Z^{-k}$  as in (3) are products of the generators  $Z^k x_i Z^{-k}$  and the word  $Z^n \cdot \alpha_i^+ \cdot Z^{-n}$  in (4) is the product of  $Z^{\pm n}$  and  $x_i$ . The notation is chosen to emphasize the fact that the isomorphism between the presented group and the subgroup  $\text{Ker}(\pi_1(X_K) \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_n)$  is given by sending the abstract symbol  $Z^k x_i Z^{-k}$  in the presentation to the element  $Z^k x_i Z^{-k}$  of the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$  for  $k = 0, \dots, n - 1$  and  $i = 1, \dots, 2g$ .

Intuitively, this presentation can be understood as follows. The  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic cover  $\tilde{X}_K^{(n)}$  can be constructed by gluing  $n$  copies of  $S^3 - F \times (-1, 1)$  together. We denote each copy by  $Y_k$ . Let  $F_k$  be the Seifert surface associated with  $Y_k$  and  $F_k^\pm$  be  $F_k \times \pm 1$  on  $\partial Y_k$  for  $k = 0, \dots, n - 1$ . Then  $Z^k x_i Z^{-k}$  are generator loops in  $Y_k$  and each relation  $Z^{k+1}\alpha_i^+Z^{-(k+1)} = Z^k\alpha_i^-Z^{-k}$  in (3) is due to the isomorphism between  $\pi_1(F_k^-)$  and  $\pi_1(F_{k+1}^+)$ . In addition, the relation (4) is from the identification between  $F_0^+$  and  $F_{n-1}^-$ .

Now let's look at the fundamental group of the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover  $X_K^{(n)}$ . From the construction of  $X_K^{(n)}$ , we have the isomorphism

$$\pi_1(X_K^{(n)}) \cong \text{Ker}(\pi_1(X_K) \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_n) / \langle\langle Z^n \rangle\rangle.$$

Therefore the group  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  inherits the presentation with generators

$$Z^k x_1 Z^{-k}, \dots, Z^k x_{2g} Z^{-k} \quad \text{for } k = 0, \dots, n-1$$

and relations

$$(5) \quad Z^{k+1} \alpha_i^+ Z^{-(k+1)} = Z^k \alpha_i^- Z^{-k} \quad \text{for } k = 0, \dots, n-2 \text{ and } i = 1, \dots, 2g,$$

$$(6) \quad \alpha_i^+ = Z^{n-1} \alpha_i^- Z^{-(n-1)} \quad \text{for } i = 1, \dots, 2g.$$

**Lemma 2.1** *Given a knot  $K$  in  $S^3$ , denote by  $Z$  a meridional element in the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$ . Suppose that there exists a group homomorphism  $\rho$  from  $\pi_1(X_K)$  to a group  $G$  and  $\rho(Z^n)$  is in the center of  $G$ . Then  $\rho$  induces a group homomorphism from  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  to  $G$ . In particular, if  $\rho$  is nonabelian, then the induced homomorphism is nontrivial.*

**Proof** Let  $\rho|_{\text{ker}}$  be the restriction of  $\rho$  to the subgroup  $\text{Ker}(\pi_1(X_K) \rightarrow \mathbb{Z}_n)$ . We are going to show that the assignment

$$Z^k x_i Z^{-k} \mapsto \rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^k x_i Z^{-k}) \quad \text{for } i = 1, \dots, 2g \text{ and } k = 0, \dots, n-1$$

also defines a homomorphism from  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  to  $G$ .

First of all, the relations in (3) which are the same as the relations in (5) automatically hold. It follows from (4) that

$$\rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^n) \cdot \rho|_{\text{ker}}(\alpha_i^+) \cdot \rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^{-n}) = \rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^{n-1} \alpha_i^- Z^{-(n-1)}).$$

Since by assumption  $\rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^n) = \rho(Z^n)$  is in the center of  $G$ , we have

$$\rho|_{\text{ker}}(\alpha_i^+) = \rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^n) \cdot \rho|_{\text{ker}}(\alpha_i^+) \cdot \rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^{-n}) = \rho|_{\text{ker}}(Z^{n-1} \alpha_i^- Z^{-(n-1)}).$$

That is, the relations in (6) hold as well.

In addition, if  $\rho$  is a nonabelian homomorphism, then as the commutator subgroup  $[\pi_1(X_K), \pi_1(X_K)]$  is the normal subgroup generated by  $\{x_1, \dots, x_{2g}\}$ , we have that  $\rho(x_i)$  is not equal to the identity in  $G$  for some  $i$ . Therefore, the induced homomorphism from  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  to  $G$  is nontrivial. □

### 3 The left-orderability of the fundamental group $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$

We finish the proof of Theorem 3.1 in this section.

**Theorem 3.1** *Given any prime knot  $K$  in  $S^3$ , denote by  $Z$  a meridional element of  $\pi_1(X_K)$ . If there exists a nonabelian representation  $\pi_1(X_K)$  to  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  such that  $Z^n$  is sent to  $\pm I$  then the fundamental group  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$  is left-orderable.*

We will make use of the following criterion due to Boyer, Rolfsen and Wiest.

**Theorem 3.2** [4] *Let  $M$  be a compact, orientable, irreducible 3–manifold. Then  $\pi_1(M)$  is left-orderable, if there exists a nontrivial homomorphism from  $\pi_1(M)$  to a left-orderable group.*

Note that the group  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  itself is not left-orderable, but its universal covering group, denoted by  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$ , is left-orderable [1]. Let  $E$  be the covering map from  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$  to  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ . Since  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$  and  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  are both connected, we have

$$\mathcal{Z}(\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})) = E^{-1}(\mathcal{Z}(SL(2, \mathbb{R}))),$$

where  $\mathcal{Z}(\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R}))$  and  $\mathcal{Z}(SL(2, \mathbb{R}))$  are the centers of the Lie groups  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$  and  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  respectively [11, page 336]. Therefore,  $\mathcal{Z}(\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})) = E^{-1}(\{\pm I\})$ .

**Lemma 3.3** *Given any knot  $K$  in  $S^3$ , let  $Z$  be a meridional element in the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$ . Suppose that there exists a nonabelian  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  representation of  $\pi_1(X_K)$  such that  $Z^n$  is sent to  $\pm I$ . Then this representation induces a nontrivial  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$  representation of the fundamental group of the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$ .*

**Proof** The kernel of the covering map  $\text{Ker}(E)$  is isomorphic to  $\pi_1(SL(2, \mathbb{R})) \cong \mathbb{Z}$  and we have the central extension

$$0 \longrightarrow \mathbb{Z} \longrightarrow \widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R}) \longrightarrow SL(2, \mathbb{R}) \longrightarrow I.$$

Suppose that  $\rho$  is a representation of  $\pi_1(X_K)$  into  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ . Then the pullback

$$\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R}) \times_{SL(2, \mathbb{R})} \pi_1(X_K) = \{(M, x) \in \widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R}) \times \pi_1(X_K) : E(M) = \rho(x)\},$$

is a central extension of  $\pi_1(X)$  by  $\mathbb{Z}$ . On the other hand,

$$H^2(\pi_1(X_K), \mathbb{Z}) \cong H^2(X_K, \mathbb{Z}) = 0,$$

so every central extension of  $\pi_1(X_k)$  by  $\mathbb{Z}$  splits. Hence,  $\rho$  can be lifted to a representation into  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$ . That is, the composition of a splitting map with the projection from  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R}) \times_{SL(2, \mathbb{R})} \pi_1(X_K)$  to  $\widetilde{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$  is a lifting of  $\rho$  [27].

Now assume that the representation  $\rho$  of the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$  satisfies the property  $\rho(Z^n) = \pm I$ . We denote by  $\tilde{\rho}$  a lifting of  $\rho$ . Since  $\rho(Z^n) = \pm I$ , we see that  $\tilde{\rho}(Z^n)$  is inside  $E^{-1}(\pm I)$ , which is equal to  $\mathcal{Z}(\widetilde{\text{SL}}(2, \mathbb{R}))$ , the center of  $\widetilde{\text{SL}}(2, \mathbb{R})$ .

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 & & \widetilde{\text{SL}}(2, \mathbb{R}) \\
 & \nearrow \tilde{\rho} & \downarrow E \\
 \pi_1(X_K) & \xrightarrow{\rho} & \text{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})
 \end{array}$$

In addition, if  $\rho$  is a nonabelian representation, then  $\tilde{\rho}$  is nonabelian. By Lemma 2.1, the representation  $\tilde{\rho}$  induces a nontrivial  $\widetilde{\text{SL}}(2, \mathbb{R})$  representation of  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$ .  $\square$

**Proof of Theorem 3.1** Let  $\rho$  be a nonabelian  $\text{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})$ -representation of the knot group  $\pi_1(X_K)$ , with  $\rho(Z^n) = \pm I$ . By Lemma 3.3, this representation induces a nontrivial  $\widetilde{\text{SL}}(2, \mathbb{R})$ -representation of the group  $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$ .

The group  $\widetilde{\text{SL}}(2, \mathbb{R})$  can be embedded inside the group of order-preserving homeomorphisms of  $\mathbb{R}$ , so it is left-orderable [1]. Moreover, the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover  $X_K^{(n)}$  is irreducible if  $K$  is a prime knot [22]. Thus, Theorem 3.1 follows from Theorem 3.2.  $\square$

### 4 Application to $(p, q)$ two-bridge knots with $p \equiv 3 \pmod 4$

In this section we apply Theorem 3.1 to  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knots with  $p = 3 \pmod 4$ . We show that given any two-bridge knot of this type, the fundamental group of the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cyclic branched cover is left-orderable if  $n$  is sufficiently large.

Let  $K$  be a  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knot. From the Schubert normal form [14, page 21], the knot group has a presentation of the form

$$\pi_1(X_K) = \langle x, y : wx = yw \rangle,$$

where  $w = (x^{\epsilon_1} y^{\epsilon_2}) \dots (x^{\epsilon_{p-2}} y^{\epsilon_{p-1}})$  and  $\epsilon_i = \pm 1$ .

Let  $\rho : \pi_1(X_K) \rightarrow \text{SL}(2, \mathbb{C})$  be a nonabelian representation of the knot group into  $\text{SL}(2, \mathbb{C})$ . Up to conjugation, we can assume that

$$(7) \quad \rho(x) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 1 \\ 0 & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix}, \quad \rho(y) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 0 \\ s & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix}.$$

Hence  $\rho(w) = \rho(x)^{\epsilon_1} \rho(y)^{\epsilon_2} \dots \rho(x)^{\epsilon_{p-2}} \rho(y)^{\epsilon_{p-1}}$  is a matrix with entries in  $\mathbb{Z}[m^{\pm 1}, s]$ ; we write

$$\rho(w) = \begin{pmatrix} w_{11} & w_{12} \\ w_{21} & w_{22} \end{pmatrix}, \quad w_{ij} \in \mathbb{Z}[m^{\pm 1}, s].$$



From the group relation  $wx = yw$ , we have

$$\begin{pmatrix} w_{11} & w_{12} \\ w_{21} & w_{22} \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} m & 1 \\ 0 & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} m & 0 \\ s & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} w_{11} & w_{12} \\ w_{21} & w_{22} \end{pmatrix}.$$

This is equivalent to

$$(8) \quad \begin{pmatrix} 0 & w_{11} + (m^{-1} - m)w_{12} \\ (m - m^{-1})w_{21} - sw_{11} & w_{21} - sw_{12} \end{pmatrix} = 0,$$

so  $s$  and  $m$  must satisfy the equation

$$w_{11} + (m^{-1} - m)w_{12} = 0.$$

The above equation is also a sufficient condition for  $\rho$  to define a representation:

**Proposition 4.1** [24, Theorem 1] *The assignment of  $x$  and  $y$  as in (7) defines a nonabelian  $SL(2, \mathbb{C})$  representation of the knot group*

$$\pi_1(X_K) = \langle x, y : wx = yw \rangle$$

if and only if

$$(9) \quad \varphi(m, s) \triangleq w_{11} + (m^{-1} - m)w_{12} = 0.$$

We need to make use of several properties of Riley’s polynomial  $\varphi(m, s)$ . All of these properties are either proven or claimed in Riley’s paper [24]. For readers’ convenience, we organize them and provide a proof in the following lemma.

**Lemma 4.2** (cf [24]) *The polynomial  $\varphi(m, s)$  in  $\mathbb{Z}[m^{\pm 1}, s]$  satisfies the following:*

- (1) *As a polynomial in  $s$  with coefficients in  $\mathbb{Z}[m^{\pm 1}]$ ,  $\varphi(m, s)$  has  $s$ -degree equal to  $(p - 1)/2$ , with the leading coefficient  $\pm 1$ .*
- (2)  *$\varphi(1, 0) \neq 0$ .*
- (3)  *$\varphi(m, s)$  does not have repeated factors.*
- (4)  *$\varphi(m, s) = \varphi(m^{-1}, s)$  and thus  $\varphi(m, s) = f(m + m^{-1}, s)$ , where  $f$  is a two-variable polynomial with coefficients in  $\mathbb{Z}$ .*

**Proof** (1) Since we assign

$$\rho(x) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 1 \\ 0 & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix}, \quad \rho(y) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 0 \\ s & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix},$$

a direct computation gives

$$\begin{aligned} \rho(xy) &= \begin{pmatrix} m^2 + s & m^{-1} \\ m^{-1}s & m^{-2} \end{pmatrix}, & \rho(x^{-1}y) &= \begin{pmatrix} 1-s & -m^{-1} \\ ms & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \\ \rho(xy^{-1}) &= \begin{pmatrix} 1-s & m \\ -m^{-1}s & 1 \end{pmatrix}, & \rho(x^{-1}y^{-1}) &= \begin{pmatrix} m^{-2} + s & -m \\ -ms & m^2 \end{pmatrix}. \end{aligned}$$

Say a matrix  $A$  in  $M_2(\mathbb{Z}[m^{\pm 1}, s])$  has  $s$ -degree equal to  $n$  if

$$A = \begin{pmatrix} \pm s^n + f_{11}(m, s) & f_{12}(m, s) \\ f_{21}(m, s) & f_{22}(m, s) \end{pmatrix},$$

where the  $s$ -degrees of  $f_{11}$ ,  $f_{12}$  and  $f_{22}$  are strictly less than  $n$  and the  $s$ -degree of  $f_{21}$  is less than or equal to  $n$ . Hence the matrices  $\rho(xy)$ ,  $\rho(x^{-1}y)$ ,  $\rho(xy^{-1})$  and  $\rho(x^{-1}y^{-1})$  all have  $s$ -degrees equal to 1. Moreover, the product of an  $s$ -degree  $n$  matrix and an  $s$ -degree  $m$  matrix is an  $s$ -degree  $m + n$  matrix. Since

$$w = (x^{\epsilon_1}y^{\epsilon_2}) \cdots (x^{\epsilon_{p-2}}y^{\epsilon_{p-1}}), \quad \epsilon_i = \pm 1,$$

the matrix

$$\rho(w) = \begin{pmatrix} w_{11} & w_{12} \\ w_{21} & w_{22} \end{pmatrix}$$

is a product of  $(p - 1)/2$   $s$ -degree 1 matrices. Therefore the matrix  $\rho(w)$  has  $s$ -degree equal to  $(p - 1)/2$ . That is, the entry  $w_{11}$  has  $\pm s^{(p-1)/2}$  as the leading term and the  $s$ -degree of  $w_{12}$  is strictly less than  $(p - 1)/2$ . As a result,  $\varphi(m, s) = w_{11} + (m^{-1} - m)w_{12}$  has leading term equal to  $\pm s^{(p-1)/2}$ .

(2) Since  $m = 1$  and  $s = 0$ , we have

$$\rho(x) = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad \rho(y) = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

This assignment can not define a representation of the knot group

$$\pi_1(X_K) = \langle x, y : wx = yw \rangle,$$

because the matrices  $\rho(x) = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  and  $\rho(y) = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}$  are not conjugate to each other. Therefore  $\varphi(1, 0) \neq 0$  by Proposition 4.1.

(3) Let  $\Delta_K(t)$  be the Alexander polynomial of the knot  $K$ . It is shown in [18, Proposition 1.1, Theorem 1.2] that any knot group has  $(|\Delta_K(-1)| - 1)/2$  irreducible  $SL(2, \mathbb{C})$  metabelian representations up to conjugation (see also [2; 16]) and that these metabelian representations send meridional elements to matrices of eigenvalues  $\pm i$ . For a  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knot,  $p$  equals  $|\Delta_K(-1)|$ . This implies that the degree- $(p - 1)/2$

polynomial equation  $\varphi(i, s) = 0$  has  $(p - 1)/2$  distinguished roots. Therefore  $\varphi(i, s)$  does not have repeated factors and neither does  $\varphi(m, s)$ .

Note that we can also use the fact that  $\varphi(1, s)$  does not have any repeated factors to prove that  $\varphi(m, s)$  has no repeated factors [23, Theorem 3].

(4) Assume that the assignment

$$\rho(x) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 1 \\ 0 & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix}, \quad \rho(y) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 0 \\ s & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix}$$

defines a representation of the knot group

$$\pi_1(X_K) = \langle x, y : wx = yw \rangle.$$

Then

$$\begin{aligned} \rho'(x) &= P \begin{pmatrix} m & 1 \\ 0 & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix} P^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} m^{-1} & 1 \\ 0 & m \end{pmatrix}, \\ \rho'(y) &= P \begin{pmatrix} m & 0 \\ s & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix} P^{-1} = \begin{pmatrix} m^{-1} & 0 \\ s & m \end{pmatrix}, \end{aligned}$$

also defines a representation, where

$$P = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & (m^{-1} - m)/s \\ m - m^{-1} & 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

The matrix  $P$  is well-defined and invertible whenever  $(m, s)$  is not in the finite set

$$S \triangleq \{(m, s) : s = 0, \varphi(m, s) = 0\} \cup \{(m, s) : s = -(m - m^{-1})^2, \varphi(m, s) = 0\}.$$

The set  $S$  is finite because neither  $\varphi(m, 0)$  nor  $\varphi(m, -(m - m^{-1})^2)$  is a zero polynomial. Otherwise,  $(1, 0)$  would be a solution for  $\varphi(m, s)$ , which contradicts part (2).

Denote by  $V(g)$  the solution set of a polynomial  $g$ . As we described above,

$$V(\varphi(m, s)) - S \subset V(\psi(m, s)),$$

where  $\psi(m, s) = \varphi(m^{-1}, s)$ . Points in  $S$  are not isolated, since they are embedded inside the algebraic curve  $V(\varphi(m, s))$ . By continuity, we have

$$V(\varphi(m, s)) \subset V(\psi(m, s)).$$

By part (3), neither of  $\varphi(m, s)$  nor  $\psi(m, s)$  have repeated factors, so the ideal  $\langle \psi(m, s) \rangle$  is contained inside the ideal  $\langle \varphi(m, s) \rangle$  in  $\mathbb{Z}[m^{\pm 1}, s]$ . On the other hand, both  $\varphi(m, s)$  and  $\psi(m, s)$  have the same leading term, which is either  $s^{(p-1)/2}$  or  $-s^{(p-1)/2}$ , so  $\varphi(m, s) = \psi(m, s) = \varphi(m^{-1}, s)$ . □

Now we are ready to prove the main result.

**Theorem 4.3** *A  $(p, q)$  two-bridge knot  $K$  with  $p \equiv 3 \pmod 4$  has only finitely many cyclic branched covers whose fundamental groups are not left-orderable.*

**Proof** We are going to show that for sufficiently large  $n$ , the group

$$\pi_1(X_K) = \langle x, y : wx = yw \rangle$$

has a nonabelian  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ -representation with  $x^n$  sent to  $-I$ .

As before, we set

$$\rho(x) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 1 \\ 0 & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix}, \quad \rho(y) = \begin{pmatrix} m & 0 \\ s & m^{-1} \end{pmatrix}.$$

Let  $m = e^{i\theta}$ . Since  $p = 3 \pmod 4$ , by Lemma 4.2, we have that  $\varphi(e^{i\theta}, s)$  is an odd-degree real polynomial in  $s$ . So for any given  $\theta$ , the equation  $\varphi(e^{i\theta}, s) = 0$  has at least one real solution for  $s$ . We assume that  $s_0$  is a real solution of the equation  $\varphi(1, s) = 0$ . It is known that the polynomial  $\varphi(1, s)$  does not have repeated factors [23, Theorem 3]. Hence  $\varphi_s(e^{i\theta}, s)|_{\theta=0, s=s_0} \neq 0$  and locally there exists a real function  $s(\theta)$  such that  $\varphi(e^{i\theta}, s(\theta)) = 0$  and  $s(0) = s_0$ .

Consider the one-parameter family of nonabelian representations

$$\rho\{\theta\}(x) = \begin{pmatrix} e^{i\theta} & 1 \\ 0 & e^{-i\theta} \end{pmatrix}, \quad \rho\{\theta\}(y) = \begin{pmatrix} e^{i\theta} & 0 \\ s(\theta) & e^{-i\theta} \end{pmatrix}.$$

As  $\theta \neq 0$ , the representations  $\rho\{\theta\}$  can be diagonalized to the following forms, which we still denote by  $\rho\{\theta\}$ :

$$(10) \quad \rho\{\theta\}(x) = \begin{pmatrix} e^{i\theta} & 0 \\ 0 & e^{-i\theta} \end{pmatrix}, \quad \rho\{\theta\}(y) = \begin{pmatrix} e^{i\theta} - \frac{s(\theta)}{2\sin(\theta)}i & -1 + \frac{s(\theta)}{4\sin^2(\theta)} \\ s(\theta) & e^{-i\theta} + \frac{s(\theta)}{2\sin(\theta)}i \end{pmatrix}.$$

According to [15, page 786], this representation can be conjugated to an  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$ -representation if and only if either

$$(11) \quad s(\theta) < 0 \quad \text{or} \quad s(\theta) > 4\sin^2(\theta).$$

We can verify this by a direction computation. In fact, when  $s < 0$  or  $s > 4\sin^2(\theta)$ , the representation  $\rho\{\theta\}$  is conjugate to an  $SU(1, 1)$ -representation by the matrix

$$\begin{pmatrix} \sqrt{\frac{1}{\sqrt{t}} + t} & t \\ \sqrt{t} & \sqrt{\sqrt{t} + t^2} \end{pmatrix} \quad \text{where } t = \frac{1}{4\sin^2(\theta)} - \frac{1}{s} \text{ is positive,}$$

and  $SU(1, 1)$  is conjugate to  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  via the matrix  $\begin{pmatrix} 1 & -i \\ 1 & i \end{pmatrix}$  in  $GL(2, \mathbb{C})$ .

On the other hand,

$$\lim_{\theta \rightarrow 0} s(\theta) = s_0,$$

where  $s_0$  is not equal to 0 by Lemma 4.2(2). Hence, when  $\theta$  is small enough, either  $s(\theta) < 0$  or  $s(\theta) > 4 \sin^2(\theta)$ . Now let  $\theta = \pi/n$ . For sufficiently large  $n$ , the nonabelian representation  $\rho\{\theta\}$  as in (10) satisfies  $\rho\{\theta\}(x)^n = -I$  and conjugates to an  $SL(2, \mathbb{R})$  representation. Therefore, by Theorem 3.1, the conclusion follows.  $\square$

**Example 4.4** Consider the two bridge knot  $(7, 4)$ , which is listed as  $5_2$  in Rolfsen’s table. The fundamental group  $\pi_1(X_{5_2})$  has a presentation

$$\pi_1(X_{5_2}) = \langle x, y : wx = yw \rangle,$$

where  $w = xyx^{-1}y^{-1}xy$ .

From this presentation, we can compute the polynomial

$$\begin{aligned} \varphi(m, s) = & s^3 + (2(m^2 + m^{-2}) - 3)s^2 \\ & + ((m^4 + m^{-4}) - 3(m^2 + m^{-2}) + 6)s + 2(m^2 + m^{-2}) - 3. \end{aligned}$$

as defined in (9), and

$$\varphi(e^{i\theta}, s) = s^3 + (4 \cos(2\theta) - 3)s^2 + (2 \cos(4\theta) - 6 \cos(2\theta) + 6)s + 4 \cos(2\theta) - 3,$$

which is a real polynomial in  $s$  with degree 3. Hence, we can find a closed formula for  $s(\theta)$  such that  $\varphi(e^{i\theta}, s(\theta)) = 0$ . Figure 2 is the graph of the solution  $s(\theta)$  on the interval  $\theta \in [0, 1]$ .

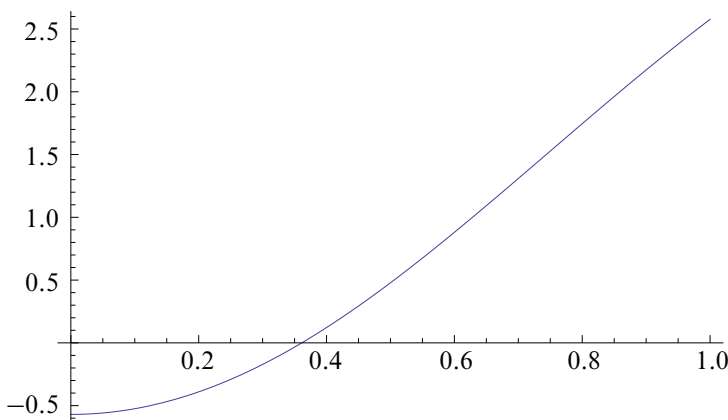


Figure 2

In particular, when  $n = 9$ , we have that  $\frac{\pi}{9} \approx 0.349$  and  $s(\frac{\pi}{9}) \approx -0.03667$ . The group  $\pi_1(X_{5_2}^{(n)})$  is left-orderable when  $n \geq 9$ . For cyclic branched covers  $X_{5_2}^{(n)}$  with  $n < 9$ , the other known cases are  $n = 2, 3$  [7] and  $n = 4$  [9], none of which has a left-orderable fundamental group.

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