

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^{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^{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^{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^{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^{rd} and 4^{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^{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 ρ from $\pi_1(X_K)$ to a group G and $\rho(Z^n)$ is in the center of G . Then ρ induces a group homomorphism from $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$ to G . In particular, if ρ 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 μ in $\pi_1(S^3 \setminus K)$, then the image of ρ 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^{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 ∂F is the same as the chosen orientation on the knot K .

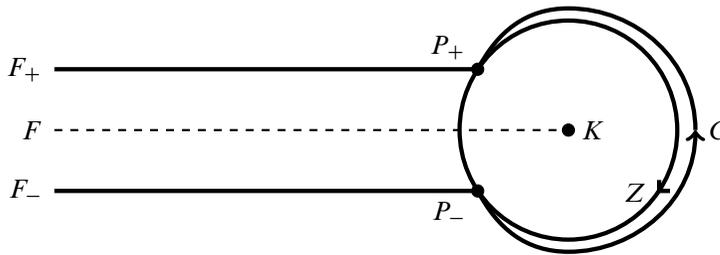


Figure 1: A cross-sectional view of a collar neighborhood of F in the knot complement X_K , where F_{\pm} represent $F \times \pm 1$, respectively. In addition, the point P_+ (resp. P_-) is the intersection point of the meridian Z and F_+ (resp. F_-).

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 α_i^- the image of a_i^- under the inclusion map

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

and denote by α_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 α_i^\pm are words in x_i as described above.

Let $\tilde{X}_K^{(n)}$ be the n^{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^{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 ∂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^{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 ρ from $\pi_1(X_K)$ to a group G and $\rho(Z^n)$ is in the center of G . Then ρ induces a group homomorphism from $\pi_1(X_K^{(n)})$ to G . In particular, if ρ is nonabelian, then the induced homomorphism is nontrivial.*

Proof Let $\rho|_{\text{ker}}$ be the restriction of ρ 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 ρ 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^{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 ρ 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, ρ 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 ρ [27].

Now assume that the representation ρ of the knot group $\pi_1(X_K)$ satisfies the property $\rho(Z^n) = \pm I$. We denote by $\tilde{\rho}$ a lifting of ρ . 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 ρ 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 ρ 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^{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^{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 ρ 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 ± 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 θ , 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 θ 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 $\theta \in [0, 1]$.

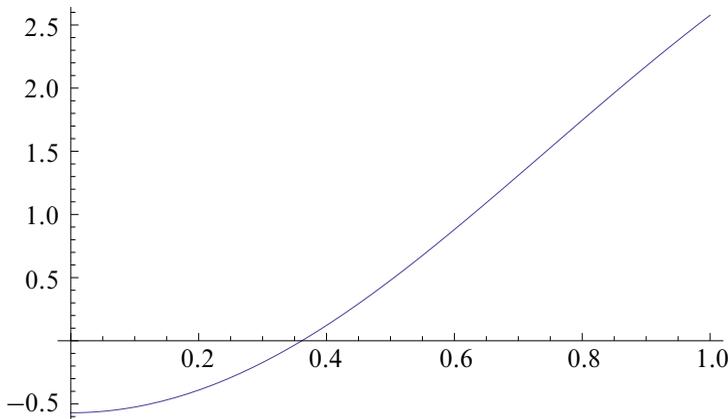


Figure 2

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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