

# PING-PONG IN HADAMARD MANIFOLDS

SUBHADIP DEY, MICHAEL KAPOVICH, AND BEIBEI LIU

ABSTRACT. In this paper, we prove a quantitative version of the Tits alternative for negatively pinched manifolds  $X$ . Precisely, we prove that a nonelementary discrete isometry subgroup of  $\text{Isom}(X)$  generated by two non-elliptic isometries  $g, f$  contains a free subgroup of rank 2 generated by isometries  $f^N, h$  of uniformly bounded word length. Furthermore, we show that this free subgroup is convex-cocompact when  $f$  is hyperbolic.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Let  $X$  be an  $n$ -dimensional negatively curved Hadamard manifold, with sectional curvature ranging between  $-\kappa^2$  and 1, for some  $\kappa \geq 1$ . The main result of this note is the following quantitative version of the Tits alternative for  $X$ , which answers a question asked by Filippo Cerocchi during the Oberwolfach Workshop “Differentialgeometrie im Grossen”, 2017, see also [10]:

**Theorem 1.1.** *There exists a function  $\mathcal{L} = \mathcal{L}(n, \kappa)$  such that the following holds: Let  $f, g$  be non-elliptic isometries of  $X$  generating a nonelementary discrete subgroup  $\Gamma$  of  $\text{Isom}(X)$ . Then there exists an element  $h \in \Gamma$  whose word length (with respect to the generators  $f, g$ ) is  $\leq \mathcal{L}$  and a number  $N \leq \mathcal{L}$  such that the subgroup of  $\Gamma$  generated by  $f^N, h$  is free of rank two.*

One can regard this theorem as a quantitative version of the Tits alternative for discrete subgroups of  $\text{Isom}(X)$ . For other forms of the quantitative Tits alternative we refer to [2, 5, 6, 8].

After replacing  $g$  with the element  $g' := gfg^{-1}$ , and noticing that the subgroup generated by  $f, g'$  is still discrete and nonelementary, we reduce the problem to the case when the isometries  $f$  and  $g$  are conjugate in  $\text{Isom}(X)$  which we will assume from now on.

The proof of Theorem 1.1 breaks into two cases which are handled by different arguments:

**Case 1.**  $f$  (and, hence,  $g$ ) has translation length bounded below by some positive number  $\lambda$ . We discuss this case in Section 4.

**Case 2.**  $f$  has translation length bounded above by some positive number  $\lambda$ . We discuss this case in Section 5.

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**Remark 1.2.** 1. For the constant  $\lambda$  we will take  $\varepsilon(n, \kappa)/10$ , where  $\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$  is a positive lower bound for the Margulis constant of  $X$ .

2. We need to use a power of  $f$  only in Case 1, while in Case 2 we can take  $N = 1$ .

We also note that if  $f$  is hyperbolic, the free group  $\langle f^N, h \rangle$  constructed in our proof is convex-cocompact. See Proposition 3.15 and Corollary 4.9. One can also show that this subgroup is geometrically finite if  $f$  is parabolic but we will not prove it.

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## 2. DEFINITIONS AND NOTATION

In a metric space  $(Y, d)$ , we will be using the notation  $B(a, R)$  to denote the open  $R$ -ball centered at  $a \in Y$ , and the notation  $\bar{N}_R(A)$  to denote the closed  $R$ -neighborhood of a subset  $A \subset X$ . By

$$d(A, B) := \inf\{d(a, b) : a \in A, b \in B\}$$

we denote the minimal distance between subsets  $A, B \subset Y$ .

If  $(Y, d)$  is a geodesic  $\delta$ -hyperbolic metric space or a CAT(0) space, then  $\partial_\infty Y$  will denote the visual boundary equipped with the visual topology, and we write  $\bar{Y} := Y \cup \partial_\infty Y$ . If  $Y$  is proper then  $\bar{Y}$  is a compactification of  $Y$ . Given a pair of points  $x, y$  in  $(Y, d)$ , we will use the notation  $xy$  to denote a geodesic segment in  $Y$  connecting  $x$  to  $y$ . For general  $\delta$ -hyperbolic spaces this segment is *not* unique, but, since any two such segments are within distance  $\delta$  from each other, this abuse of notation is harmless. We let  $|xy| = d(x, y)$  denote the length of  $xy$ . Given points  $A, B, C \in Y$ , we let  $\triangle ABC$  denote a geodesic triangle in  $Y$  with the vertices  $A, B, C$ . Similarly, if  $y \in Y, \xi \in \partial_\infty Y$ , then  $y\xi$  will denote a geodesic ray emanating from  $y$  and asymptotic to  $\xi$ .

A subset  $A$  of  $Y$  is called  $\lambda$ -*quasiconvex* if every geodesic segment  $xy$  with the end-points in  $A$  is contained in  $\bar{N}_\lambda(A)$ .

A subset  $A$  in a metric space  $Y$  is called *starlike* with respect to a point  $a \in A$  if for every  $y \in A$  every geodesic segment  $ya$  is contained in  $A$ . More generally, if  $Y$  is  $\delta$ -hyperbolic or a CAT(0) space then  $A \subset Y$  is called *starlike* with respect to a point  $\xi \in \partial_\infty Y$  if for every  $y \in A$  every geodesic ray  $y\xi$  is contained in  $A$ .

Throughout the paper,  $X$  will denote an  $n$ -dimensional Hadamard manifold with sectional curvature ranging between  $-\kappa^2$  and  $-1$ , unless otherwise stated. Let  $d$  denote the Riemannian distance function on  $X$ . We use  $\partial_\infty X$

to denote the visual boundary of  $X$ , and  $\bar{X} := X \cup \partial_\infty X$  the visual compactification of  $X$ . Let  $\text{Isom}(X)$  denote the isometry group of  $X$ . We use  $\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$  to denote a fixed positive lower bound on the Margulis constant for  $X$ ; this number is known to depend only on  $n$  and  $\kappa$ , see e.g. [1].

Given a pair of points  $p, q$  in  $X$  we let  $H(p, q)$  denote the closed half-space in  $X$  given by

$$H(p, q) = \{x \in X : d(x, p) \leq d(x, q)\}.$$

Then  $\text{Bis}(p, q) = \text{Bis}(q, p) := H(p, q) \cap H(q, p)$ , is the equidistant set of  $p, q$ .

We use the notation  $\text{Hull}(A)$  for the closed convex hull of a subset  $A \subset X$  which is the intersection of all closed convex subsets of  $X$  containing  $A$ .

For each isometry  $g$  of  $X$  we define its *translation length*  $\tau(g)$  as

$$\tau(g) = \inf_{x \in X} d(x, g(x)). \quad (2.1)$$

Isometries of  $X$  are classified in terms of their translation lengths, see Section 3.3.

A discrete subgroup  $\Gamma < \text{Isom}(X)$  is called *elementary* if either it fixes a point in  $\bar{X}$  or preserves a geodesic in  $X$ .

### 3. PRELIMINARY MATERIAL

**3.1. Some CAT(-1) computations.** Let  $X$  be a CAT(-1) space. Recall that the hyperbolicity constant of  $X$  is  $\leq \delta = \cosh^{-1}(\sqrt{2})$ .

**Lemma 3.1.** *Let  $\triangle A_1 A_2 C$  be a triangle in  $X$  such that  $\angle A_1 C A_2 \geq \pi/2$ . Then*

$$|A_1 A_2| \geq |A_1 C| + |A_2 C| - 2\delta.$$

*Proof.* Let  $D \in A_1 A_2$  be the point closest to  $C$ . Then at least one of the angles  $\angle A_i C D, i = 1, 2$  is  $\geq \pi/4$ . The CAT(-1) property and the dual cosine law for the hyperbolic plane imply that

$$\cosh(|CD|) \sin\left(\frac{\pi}{4}\right) \leq 1,$$

i.e.

$$|CD| \leq \cosh^{-1}(\sqrt{2}) = \delta.$$

The rest follows from the triangle inequalities.  $\square$

**Corollary 3.2.** *Suppose that  $x, x_+, \hat{x}_+, x'_+$  are points in  $X$  which lie on a common geodesic and appear on this geodesic in the given order. Assume that*

$$d(\hat{x}_+, x'_+) \geq d(x, x_+) + 2 \cosh^{-1}(\sqrt{2}).$$

*Then  $H(x_+, \hat{x}_+) \subset H(x, x'_+)$ .*

*Proof.* We observe that the CAT(-1) condition implies that for each  $z$  equidistant from  $x_+, \hat{x}_+$  we have

$$\angle z x_+ \hat{x}_+ \leq \pi/2, \quad \angle z \hat{x}_+ x_+ \leq \pi/2.$$

Hence,

$$\angle xx_+z \geq \pi/2, \quad \angle x'_+\hat{x}_+z \geq \pi/2.$$

Then the lemma and the triangle inequality implies that

$$d(z, x) \leq d(z, x'_+).$$

and, thus,

$$\text{Bis}(x_+, \hat{x}_+) \subset H(x, x'_+).$$

Since every geodesic connecting  $w \in H(x_+, \hat{x}_+)$  to  $x'_+$  passes through some point  $z \in \text{Bis}(x_+, \hat{x}_+)$ , it follows that

$$d(x, w) \leq d(w, x'_+). \quad \square$$

### 3.2. Quasiconvex and starlike subsets.

**Lemma 3.3.** *Starlike subsets in a  $\delta$ -hyperbolic space  $Y$  are  $\delta$ -quasiconvex.*

*Proof.* We prove this for subsets  $A \subset Y$  starlike with respect to  $a \in A$ ; the proof in the case of starlike subsets with respect to  $\xi \in \partial_\infty Y$  is similar and is left to the reader. Take  $z_1, z_2 \in A$ . Then, by the  $\delta$ -hyperbolicity,

$$z_1 z_2 \subset \bar{N}_\delta(az_1 \cup az_2) \subset \bar{N}_\delta(A). \quad \square$$

Suppose now that  $X$  is a Hadamard manifold of negatively pinched curvature as above. Then, according to [4, Proposition 2.5.4], there exists  $\mathfrak{q} = \mathfrak{q}(\kappa, \lambda)$  such that for every  $\lambda$ -quasiconvex subset  $A \subset X$  we have

$$\text{Hull}(A) \subset \bar{N}_\mathfrak{q}(A). \quad (3.1)$$

In particular:

**Proposition 3.4.** *For every starlike subset  $A$  in a Hadamard manifold  $X$  of negatively pinched curvature, the closed convex hull  $\text{Hull}(A)$  is contained in the  $\mathfrak{q} = \mathfrak{q}(\kappa, \delta)$ -neighborhood of  $A$ .*

In what follows, we will suppress the dependence of  $\mathfrak{q}$  on  $\kappa$  and  $\delta$  since these are fixed for our space  $X$ .

**3.3. Classification of isometries.** Let  $X$  be a negatively curved Hadamard manifold. Isometries of  $X$  are classified into three types according to their translation lengths  $\tau$ , see [1, 2].

1. An isometry  $g$  of  $X$  is *hyperbolic* if  $\tau(g) > 0$ . Equivalently, the infimum in (2.1) is attained and is positive. In this case, the infimum is attained on a  $g$ -invariant geodesic, called the *axis* of  $g$ , and denoted by  $A_g$ .

2. An isometry  $g$  of  $X$  is *elliptic* if  $\tau(g) = 0$  and the infimum in (2.1) is attained; the set where the infimum is attained is a totally geodesic submanifold of  $X$  fixed pointwise by  $g$ .

3. An isometry  $g$  of  $X$  is *parabolic* if the infimum in (2.1) is not attained. In this case, the infimum is necessarily equal to zero.

Thus, only parabolic and elliptic isometries have zero translation lengths. For any  $g \in \text{Isom}(X)$  and  $m \in \mathbb{Z}$  we have

$$\tau(g^m) = |m|\tau(g). \quad (3.2)$$

The following theorem provides an alternative characterization of types of isometries of  $X$ , see [7].

**Theorem 3.5.** *Suppose that  $g$  is an isometry of  $X$ . Then:*

- (1)  $g$  is hyperbolic if and only if for some (equivalently, every)  $x \in X$  the orbit map  $N \rightarrow g^N x$  is a quasiisometric embedding  $\mathbb{Z} \rightarrow X$ .
- (2)  $g$  is elliptic if and only if for some (equivalently, every)  $x \in X$  the orbit map  $N \rightarrow g^N x, N \in \mathbb{Z}$  has bounded image.
- (3)  $g$  is parabolic if and only if for some (equivalently, every)  $x \in X$  the orbit map  $N \rightarrow g^N x, N \in \mathbb{Z}$  is proper and

$$\lim_{N \rightarrow \infty} \frac{d(x, g^N(x))}{N} = 0.$$

If  $f, g$  are hyperbolic isometries of  $X$  generating a discrete subgroup of  $\text{Isom}(X)$ , then either the ideal boundaries of the axes  $A_f, A_g$  are disjoint or  $A_f = A_g$ , (see [3], the argument for negatively curved Hadamard manifolds is similar).

**3.4. Margulis cusps and tubes.** Take  $g \in \text{Isom}(X)$ . For each  $\varepsilon \geq \tau(g)$  we define the following nonempty closed convex subset of  $X$ :

$$T_\varepsilon(g) = \{x \in X \mid d(x, g(x)) \leq \varepsilon\}.$$

Of primary importance are subsets  $T_\varepsilon(g)$  for  $\varepsilon < \varepsilon(n, \kappa)$ . For any two isometries  $g, h$  of  $X$  we have

$$T_\varepsilon(hgh^{-1}) = h(T_\varepsilon(g)). \quad (3.3)$$

In particular, if  $g, h$  commute, then  $h$  preserves  $T_\varepsilon(g)$ .

For parabolic isometries  $g$  of  $X$  define the *Margulis cusp*

$$\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g) := \bigcup_{i \in \mathbb{Z} - \{0\}} T_\varepsilon(g^i).$$

(The same definition works for elliptic isometries of  $X$ , except the above region is not called a *cusp*.) This subset is  $\langle g \rangle$ -invariant.

Suppose that  $g$  is a hyperbolic isometry of  $X$ . Define  $m_g$  to be the (unique) positive integer such that

$$\tau(g^{m_g}) \leq \varepsilon/10, \quad \tau(g^{m_g+1}) > \varepsilon/10, \quad (3.4)$$

and set

$$\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g) := \bigcup_{1 \leq i \leq m_g} T_\varepsilon(g^i) \subset X.$$

If  $\tau(g) > \varepsilon/10$ , then  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g) = \emptyset$ .

Since the subgroup  $\langle g \rangle$  is abelian, in view of (3.3), we obtain:

**Lemma 3.6.** *The subgroup  $\langle g \rangle$  preserves  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)$  and, hence, also preserves  $\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g))$ .*

By convexity of the distance function, for any isometry  $g \in \text{Isom}(X)$ ,  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)$  is convex. In particular,  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)$  is a starlike region with respect to any fixed point  $p \in \bar{X}$  of  $g$  for general  $g$ , and with respect to any point on the axis of  $g$  if  $g$  is hyperbolic. As a corollary to Lemma 3.3, one obtains,

**Corollary 3.7.** *For every isometry  $g \in \text{Isom}(X)$ , the set  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)$  is  $\delta$ -quasiconvex.*

Proposition 3.4 then implies

**Corollary 3.8.** *For every isometry  $g \in \text{Isom}(X)$ ,*

$$\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)) \subset \bar{N}_{\mathfrak{q}}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)),$$

where  $\mathfrak{q}$  is as in Proposition 3.4.

For a more detailed discussion of the regions  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)$ , see [4, 14].

**3.5. Displacement estimates.** In this subsection, we let  $X$  be a  $\text{CAT}(-1)$  geodesic metric space. For each pair of points  $A, B \in \mathbb{H}^2$  and each circle  $S \subset \mathbb{H}^2$  passing through these points, we let  $\widehat{AB}^S$  denote the (hyperbolic) length of the shorter arc into which  $A, B$  divide the circle  $S$ .

**Lemma 3.9.** *If  $d(A, B) \leq D$  then for every circle  $S$  as above, then the length  $\ell$  of  $\widehat{AB}^S$  satisfies the inequality:*

$$d(A, B) \leq \ell \leq \frac{2\pi \tanh(D/4)}{1 - \tanh^2(D/4)}.$$

*Proof.* The first inequality is clear, so we verify the second. We want to maximize the length of  $\widehat{AB}^S$  among all circles  $S$  passing through  $A, B$ . We claim that the maximum is achieved on the circle  $S_o$  whose center  $o$  is the midpoint of  $AB$ . This follows from the fact that given any other circle  $S$ , we have the radial projection from  $\widehat{AB}^{S_o}$  to  $\widehat{AB}^S$  (with the center of the projection at  $o$ ). Since this radial projection is distance-decreasing (by convexity), the claim follows. The rest of the proof amounts to a computation of the length of the hyperbolic half-circle with the given diameter.  $\square$

**Lemma 3.10.** *There exists a function  $c(D)$  so that the following holds. Consider an isosceles triangle  $ABC$  in  $X$  with  $d(A, C) = d(B, C)$ ,  $d(A, B) \leq D$ , and an isosceles subtriangle  $A'B'C$  with  $A' \in AC, B' \in BC$ ,  $d(A, A') = d(B, B') = \tau$ . Then*

$$d(A', B') \leq c(D)e^{-\tau}.$$

*Proof.* In view of the  $\text{CAT}(-1)$  assumption, it suffices to consider the case when  $X = \mathbb{H}^2$ . We will work with the unit disk model of the hyperbolic plane where  $C$  is the center of the disk as in Figure 1. Let  $\alpha$  denote the angle  $\angle(ACB)$ . Set  $T := d(C, A) = d(C, B)$ . For points  $A_t \in CA, B_t \in CB$  such that  $d(C, A_t) = d(C, B_t) = t$  we let  $l_t$  denote the hyperbolic length of the (shorter) circular arc  $\widehat{A_t B_t} = \widehat{A_t B_t}^{S_t}$  of the angular measure  $\alpha$ , centered

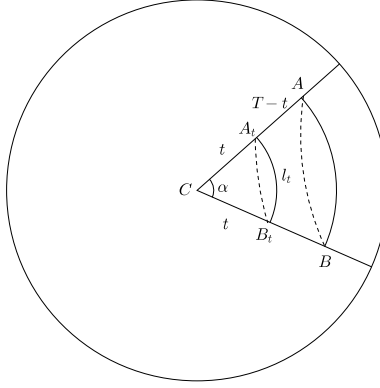


FIGURE 1

at  $C$  and connecting  $A_t$  to  $B_t$ . (Here  $S_t$  is the circle centered at  $C$  and of the hyperbolic radius  $t$ .) Let  $R_t$  denote the Euclidean distance between  $C$  and  $A_t$  (same for  $B_t$ ). Then

$$l_t = \frac{2\alpha R_t}{1 - R_t^2},$$

$$R_t = \tanh(t/2).$$

Thus, for  $\tau = T - t$ ,

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{l_t}{l_T} &= \frac{R_t}{R_T} \frac{1 - R_T^2}{1 - R_t^2} \leq \frac{1 - R_T^2}{1 - R_t^2} \leq 2 \frac{1 - R_T}{1 - R_t} \\ &= 2 \frac{1 - \tanh(T/2)}{1 - \tanh(t/2)} = 2 \frac{e^t + 1}{e^T + 1} = 2 \frac{e^{-T} + e^{-\tau}}{e^{-T} + 1} \leq 4e^{-\tau}. \end{aligned}$$

In other words,

$$d(A_t, B_t) \leq l_t \leq 4e^{-\tau} l_T.$$

Combining this inequality with Lemma 3.9, we obtain

$$l_t \leq 4e^{-\tau} \frac{2\pi \tanh(d(A, B)/4)}{1 - \tanh^2(d(A, B)/4)} \leq 4e^{-\tau} \frac{2\pi \tanh(D/4)}{1 - \tanh^2(D/4)}.$$

Lastly, setting  $A' = A_t, B' = B_t, A = A_T, B = B_T$ , we get:

$$d(A', B') \leq 4 \frac{2\pi \tanh(D/4)}{1 - \tanh^2(D/4)} e^{-\tau} = c(D) e^{-\tau}. \quad \square$$

**Corollary 3.11.** *There exists a function  $\mathfrak{r}(\varepsilon)$  such that for any hyperbolic isometry  $h \in \text{Isom}(X)$  with translation length*

$$\tau(h) = l \leq \varepsilon/10,$$

*if  $A \in X$  satisfies  $d(A, h(A)) = \varepsilon$ , then there exists  $B \in X$  such that  $d(B, h(B)) = \varepsilon/3$ ,  $d(A, B) \leq \mathfrak{r} = \mathfrak{r}(\varepsilon)$  and  $B$  lies of the shortest geodesic segment connecting  $A$  to the axis  $A_h$  of  $h$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $C \in A_h$  be the closest point to  $A$  in  $A_h$ . By the convexity of the distance function, there exists a point  $B \in AC$  such that  $d(B, h(B)) = \varepsilon/3$ . Suppose that  $d(A, B) = d(h(A), h(B)) = t$  and  $d(A, C) = d(h(A), h(C)) = T$  as shown in Figure 2. Then  $d(C, h(A)) \leq T + l \leq T + \varepsilon/10$ . There exist points  $D, E$  in the segment  $h(A)C$  such that  $d(C, D) = d(C, B) = T - t$ ,  $d(h(A), E) = t$  and  $d(A', C) = d(A, C) = T$ .

Then  $d(A, A') \leq \varepsilon + l \leq 11\varepsilon/10$ . By Lemma 3.10,  $c(11\varepsilon/10)$  (defined in that lemma) satisfies

$$d(B, D) \leq c(d(A, A'))e^{-t} \leq c(11\varepsilon/10)e^{-t}.$$

Similarly, by taking the point  $A'' \in h(A)C$  satisfying  $d(A'', h(A)) = T$ ,  $d(h(C), A'') \leq 2l$ , considering the isosceles triangle  $\triangle h(C)A''h(A)$  and its subtriangle  $\triangle h(B)Eh(A)$ , we obtain:

$$d(h(B), E) \leq c(2l)e^{t-T}.$$

Since  $l \leq \varepsilon/10$  and  $d(B, h(B)) = \varepsilon/3$ , convexity of the distance function implies that  $T - t > t$ . Thus,

$$\begin{aligned} \varepsilon/3 = d(B, h(B)) &\leq d(B, D) + d(D, E) + d(E, h(B)) \\ &\leq c(11\varepsilon/10)e^{-t} + l + c(2l)e^{t-T} \leq c(11\varepsilon/10)e^{-t} + \frac{\varepsilon}{10} + c(\varepsilon/5)e^{-t}, \end{aligned}$$

which simplifies to

$$\frac{7}{30}\varepsilon \leq (c(11\varepsilon/10) + c(\varepsilon/5))e^{-t},$$

and consequently

$$d(A, B) = t \leq \mathfrak{r}(\varepsilon) := \log \left( [c(11\varepsilon/10) + c(\varepsilon/5)] \frac{30}{7} \varepsilon^{-1} \right). \quad \square$$

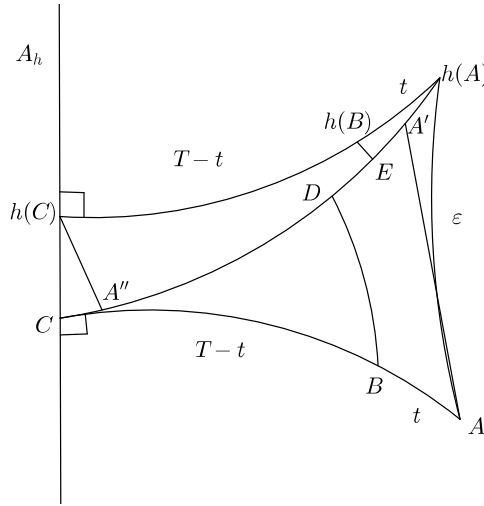


FIGURE 2



**3.6. Local-to-global principle for quasigeodesics in  $X$ .** For a piecewise-geodesic path consisting of alternating ‘long’ arcs and ‘short’ segments such that adjacent geodesic segments meet at the angles  $\geq \pi/2$ , we construct a quasigeodesic in  $X$  by making the long segments sufficiently long, given a lower bound on the lengths of the short arcs. More precisely, according to [14, Proposition 7.3]:

**Proposition 3.12.** *There are functions  $\lambda = \lambda(\varepsilon) \geq 1, \alpha = \alpha(\varepsilon) \geq 0$  and  $L = L(\varepsilon) > \varepsilon > 0$  such that the following holds. Suppose that  $\gamma = \cdots \gamma_{-1} * \gamma_0 * \gamma_1 * \cdots * \gamma_n \dots \subseteq X$  is a piecewise geodesic path such that:*

- (1) *Each geodesic arc  $\gamma_j$  has length either at least  $\varepsilon$  or at least  $L$ .*
- (2) *If  $\gamma_j$  has length  $< L$ , then the adjacent geodesic arcs  $\gamma_{j-1}$  and  $\gamma_{j+1}$  have lengths at least  $L$ .*
- (3) *All adjacent geodesic segments meet at the angles  $\geq \pi/2$ .*

*Then  $\gamma$  is a  $(\lambda, \alpha)$ -quasigeodesic in  $X$ .*

### 3.7. Ping-pong.

**Proposition 3.13.** *Suppose that  $g, h \in \text{Isom}(X)$  are parabolic/hyperbolic elements with equal translation lengths  $\leq \varepsilon/10$ , and*

$$d(\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)), \text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(h))) \geq L, \quad (3.5)$$

*where  $L = L(\varepsilon/10)$  is as in Proposition 3.12. Then  $\Phi := \langle g, h \rangle < \text{Isom}(X)$  is a free subgroup of rank 2.*

*Proof.* To simplify notation, for a non-elliptic element  $f \in \text{Isom}(X)$ , we denote  $\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(f))$  by  $\widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(f)$ .

Using Lemma 3.6, (3.3), and the definition of  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon$ , we obtain

$$d(\widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(g), g^k \widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(h)) = d(\widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(g), \widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(h)) \geq L, k \in \mathbb{Z}.$$

Our goal is to show that every nonempty word  $w(g, h)$  represents a non-trivial element of  $\text{Isom}(X)$ . It suffices to consider cyclically reduced words  $w$  which are not powers of  $g, h$ .

We will consider a cyclically reduced word

$$w = w(g, h) = g^{m_k} h^{m_{k-1}} g^{m_{k-2}} h^{m_{k-3}} \dots g^{m_2} h^{m_1}, \quad (3.6)$$

words with the last letter  $g$  are treated by relabeling. Since  $w$  is cyclically reduced and is not a power of  $g, h$ , the number  $k$  is  $\geq 2$  and all of the  $m_i$ 's in this equation are nonzero.

For each  $N \geq 1$  we define the  $r$ -suffix of  $w^N$  as the following subword of  $w^N$ :

$$w_r = \begin{cases} g^{m_r} h^{m_{r-1}} g^{m_{r-2}} h^{m_{r-3}} \dots g^{m_2} h^{m_1}, & r \text{ even} \\ h^{m_r} g^{m_{r-1}} h^{m_{r-2}} \dots g^{m_2} h^{m_1}, & r \text{ odd} \end{cases} \quad (3.7)$$

where, of course,  $m_i \equiv m_j$  modulo  $N$ . Since  $w$  is reduced, each  $w_r$  is reduced as well.

We will prove that the map

$$\mathbb{Z} \rightarrow X, \quad N \mapsto w^N x$$

is a quasiisometric embedding. This will imply that  $w(g, h)$  is nontrivial. In fact, this will also show that  $w(g, h)$  is hyperbolic, see Theorem 3.5.

Let  $l = yz$  be the unique shortest geodesic segment connecting points in  $\widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(g)$  and  $\widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(h)$ , where  $y \in \widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(g)$  and  $z \in \widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(h)$ . For  $r \geq 0$ , we denote  $w_r l$ ,  $w_r y$  and  $w_r z$  by  $l_r$ ,  $y_r$  and  $z_r$ , respectively. In particular,  $y_0 = y$ ,  $z_0 = z$  and  $l_0 = l$ .

Since  $l$  is the shortest segment between  $\widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(g)$ ,  $\widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(h)$  and these are convex subsets of  $X$ , for every  $y' \in \widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(g)$  (resp.  $z' \in \widehat{\mathcal{T}}_\varepsilon(h)$ ),

$$\angle y'yz \geq \pi/2, \quad (\text{resp. } \angle yzz' \geq \pi/2). \quad (3.8)$$

Since  $g$  and  $h$  have equal translation lengths,  $h$  is parabolic (resp. hyperbolic) if and only if  $g$  is parabolic (resp. hyperbolic). When both of them are hyperbolic, since  $y$  and  $z$  are not in the interior of  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g)$  and  $\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(h)$ , respectively,  $d(y, g^i y), d(z, h^j z) \geq \varepsilon$ , for all  $1 \leq i \leq m_g, 1 \leq j \leq m_h$ . Also, when  $i > m_g, j > m_h$ , it follows from (3.2) and (3.4) that

$$\min(d(y, g^i y), d(z, h^j z)) \geq \frac{\varepsilon}{10}.$$

Moreover, when both  $g$  and  $h$  are parabolic,  $d(y, g^i y), d(z, h^j z) \geq \varepsilon$ , for all  $1 \leq i, 1 \leq j$ . Therefore, in the general case,

$$\min(d(y, g^i y), d(z, h^j z)) \geq \frac{\varepsilon}{10}, \quad \forall i \geq 1, \forall j \geq 1. \quad (3.9)$$

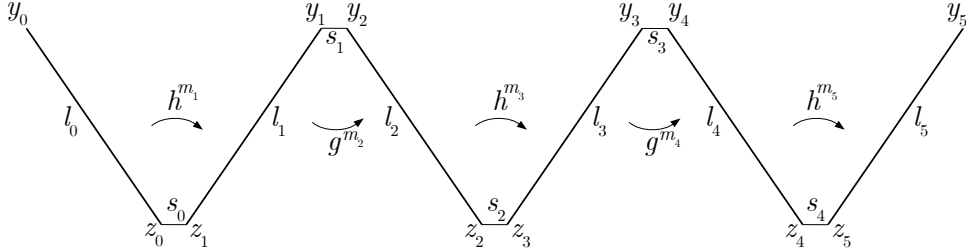


FIGURE 3

Let  $s_r$  be the segment

$$s_r = \begin{cases} y_r y_{r+1}, & \text{when } r \text{ is odd} \\ z_r z_{r+1}, & \text{when } r \text{ is even} \end{cases}.$$

See the arrangement of the points and segments in Figure 3.

Let  $\tilde{l}_N$  be the concatenation of the segments  $l_r$ 's and  $s_r$ 's as shown in Figure 3,  $0 \leq r \leq kN$ . According to (3.9), the length of each segment  $s_r$  is at least  $\varepsilon/10$ , while by the assumption, the length of each  $l_r$  is  $\geq L = L(\varepsilon/10)$ . Moreover, according to (3.8), the angle between any two consecutive segments in  $\tilde{l}_N$  is at least  $\pi/2$ . Using Proposition 3.12, we conclude that  $\tilde{l}_N$  is a  $(\lambda, \alpha)$ -quasigeodesic.

Consequently,

$$d(w^N x, x) \geq \frac{1}{\lambda} \left( \sum_{i=0}^{kN-1} |s_i| + NkL \right) - \alpha \geq \frac{kL}{\lambda} N - \alpha. \quad (3.10)$$

From this inequality it follows that the map  $\mathbb{Z} \rightarrow X, N \mapsto w^N x$  is a quasi-isometric embedding.  $\square$

**Remark 3.14.** In fact, this proof also shows that every nontrivial element of the subgroup  $\Phi < \text{Isom}(X)$  is either conjugate to one of the generators or is hyperbolic.

For the next proposition and the subsequent remark, one needs the notions of *convex-cocompact* and *geometrically finite* subgroups of  $\text{Isom}(X)$ . We refer to [4] for several equivalent definitions, see also [13, section 1]. For now, it suffices to say that a subgroup  $\Gamma$  in  $\text{Isom}(X)$  is *convex-cocompact* if it is finitely generated and for some (equivalently, every)  $x \in X$ , the orbit map  $\Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma x \subset X$  is a quasiisometric embedding, where  $\Gamma$  is equipped with a word metric.

**Proposition 3.15.** *Let  $g, h \in \text{Isom}(X)$  be hyperbolic isometries satisfying the hypothesis of Proposition 3.13. Then the subgroup  $\Phi = \langle g, h \rangle < \text{Isom}(X)$  is convex-cocompact.*

*Proof.* We equip the free group  $\mathbb{F}_2$  on two generators (denoted  $g, h$ ) with the word metric corresponding to this free generating set. Since  $g, h$  are hyperbolic, by (3.2) the lengths of the segments  $s_r$ 's in the proof of Proposition 3.13 are  $\geq \tau |m_{r+1}|$ , where

$$\tau = \tau(g) = \tau(h).$$

Then, for  $N = 1, r = k$ , and a reduced but not necessarily cyclically reduced word  $w$ , the inequality (3.10) becomes

$$d(wy, y) \geq \frac{1}{\lambda} \left( \sum_{i=0}^{k-1} |s_i| \right) - \alpha \geq \frac{\tau}{\lambda} |w| - \alpha, \quad (3.11)$$

where  $|w| \geq |m_1| + |m_2| + \cdots + |m_k|$  is the (word) length of  $w$ . Therefore, the orbit map  $\mathbb{F}_2 \rightarrow \Phi y \subset X$  is a quasiisometric embedding.  $\square$

**Remark 3.16.** One can also show that if  $g, h$  are parabolic then the subgroup  $\Phi$  is geometrically finite. We will not prove it in this paper since a proof requires further geometric background material on geometrically finite groups.

#### 4. CASE 1: DISPLACEMENT BOUNDED BELOW

In this section we consider discrete nonelementary subgroups of  $\text{Isom}(X)$  generated by two hyperbolic elements  $g, h$  whose translation lengths are equal to  $\tau \geq \lambda$ . Our goal is to show that in this case the subgroup  $\langle g^N, h^N \rangle$  is free of rank 2 provided that  $N$  is greater than some constant depending

only on the Margulis constant of  $X$  and on  $\lambda$ . The strategy is to bound from above how ‘long’ the axes  $A_g, A_h$  of  $g$  and  $h$  can stay ‘close to each other’ in terms of the constant  $\lambda$ . Once we get such an estimate, we find a uniform upper bound on  $N$  such that Dirichlet domains for  $\langle g^N \rangle, \langle h^N \rangle$  (based at some points on  $A_g, A_h$ ) have disjoint complements. This implies that  $g^N, h^N$  generate a free subgroup of rank two by a classical ping-pong argument.

Let  $\alpha, \beta$  be complete geodesics in the Hadamard manifold  $X$ . These geodesics eventually will be the axes of  $g$  and  $h$ , hence, we assume that these geodesics do not share ideal end-points. Let  $x_-x_+$  denote the (nearest point) projection of  $\beta$  to  $\alpha$  and let  $y_-y_+$  denote the projection of  $x_-x_+$  to  $\beta$ . Let  $x, y$  denote the mid-points of  $x_-x_+$  and  $y_-y_+$  respectively.

Then

$$L_\beta := d(y_-, y_+) \leq L_\alpha := d(x_-, x_+).$$

Fix some  $T \geq 0$ , and let  $\hat{x}_-\hat{x}_+$  and  $\hat{y}_-\hat{y}_+$  denote the subsegments of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  containing  $x_-x_+$  and  $y_-y_+$  respectively, such that

$$d(x_\pm, \hat{x}_\pm) = T, \quad d(y_\pm, \hat{y}_\pm) = T. \quad (4.1)$$

We let  $U_\pm$  and  $V_\pm$  denote the ‘half-spaces’ in  $X$  equal to  $H(\hat{x}_\pm, x_\pm)$  and  $H(\hat{y}_\pm, y_\pm)$  respectively. See Figure 4.

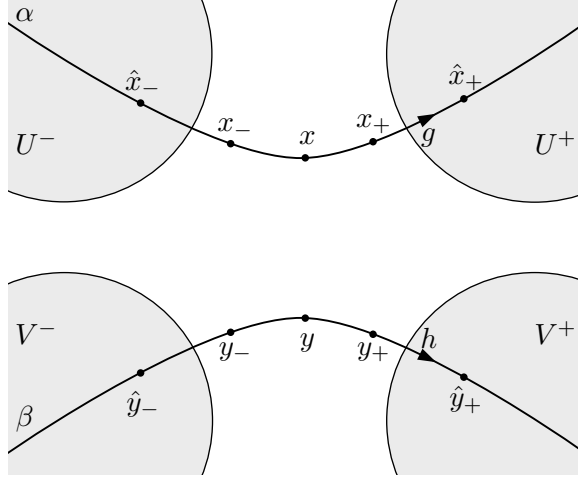


FIGURE 4

The following is proven in [2, Appendix]:

**Lemma 4.1.** *If  $T \geq 5$  then the sets  $U_\pm, V_\pm$  are pairwise disjoint.*

Suppose now that  $g, h$  are hyperbolic isometries of  $X$  with the axes  $\alpha, \beta$  respectively, and equal translation length  $\tau(g) = \tau(h) = \tau \geq \lambda > 0$ . We

let  $\Gamma = \langle g, h \rangle < \text{Isom}(X)$  denote the, necessarily nonelementary (but not necessarily discrete), subgroup of isometries of  $X$  generated by  $g$  and  $h$ .

As an application of the above lemma, as in [2, Appendix], we obtain:

**Lemma 4.2.** *If  $N\tau \geq L_\alpha + 5 + 2\delta$  then the half-spaces  $H(g^{\pm N}x, x)$ ,  $H(h^{\pm N}y, y)$  are pairwise disjoint.*

*Proof.* The inequality

$$N\tau \geq L_\alpha + 5 + 2\delta \geq L_\beta + 5 + 2\delta.$$

implies that the quadruples

$$(x, x_+, \hat{x}_+, g^N(x)), (x, x_-, \hat{x}_-, g^{-N}(x)), (y, y_+, \hat{y}_+, h^N(y)), (y, y_-, \hat{y}_-, h^{-N}(y))$$

satisfy the assumptions of Corollary 3.2 where  $\hat{x}_\pm$  and  $\hat{y}_\pm$  are given by taking  $T = 5$  in (4.1). Therefore, according to this corollary, we have

$$H(g^{\pm N}(x), x) \subset U^\pm, \quad H(h^{\pm N}(y), y) \subset V^\pm.$$

Now, the assertion of the lemma follows from Lemma 4.1.  $\square$

**Corollary 4.3.** *If*

$$N\tau \geq L_\alpha + 5 + 2\delta \tag{4.2}$$

*then the subgroup  $\Gamma_N < \Gamma$  generated by  $g^N, h^N$  is free with the basis  $g^N, h^N$ .*

*Proof.* We have

$$g^{\pm N} (H(h^{-N}(y), y) \cup H(h^{+N}(y), y)) \subset H(g^{\pm N}x, x)$$

and

$$h^{\pm N} (H(g^{-N}(x), x) \cup H(g^{+N}(x), x)) \subset H(h^{\pm N}y, y).$$

Thus, the conditions of the standard ping-pong lemma (see e.g. [9, 11]) are satisfied and, hence,  $\Gamma_N$  is free with the basis  $g^N, h^N$ .  $\square$

Let  $\eta = d(\alpha, \beta)$  denote the minimal distance between  $\alpha, \beta$  and pick some  $\eta_0 > 0$  (we will eventually take  $\eta_0 = 0.01\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$ ). Let  $\beta_0 = z_-^0 z_+^0 \subset \beta$  be the (possibly empty!) maximal closed subinterval such that the distance from the end-points of  $\beta_0$  to  $\alpha$  is  $\leq \eta_0$ . Thus,  $\beta_0 \subset \bar{N}_{\eta_0}(\alpha)$ .

**Remark 4.4.**  $\beta_0 = \emptyset$  if and only if  $\eta_0 < \eta$ .

Let  $\alpha_0 = x_-^0 x_+^0$  denote the projection of  $\beta_0$  to  $\alpha$ , let  $2L_0$  denote the length of  $\alpha_0$ . Hence, the intervals  $\alpha_0, \beta_0$  are within Hausdorff distance  $\eta_0$  from each other.

Furthermore,  $\angle\beta(-\infty)z_-^0 x_-^0 \geq \pi/2$  and  $\angle\beta(-\infty)z_+^0 x_+^0 \geq \pi/2$ ; see Figure 5. Hence, according to [14, Corollary 3.7], for

$$L_1 = \sinh^{-1} \left( \frac{1}{\sinh(\eta_0)} \right),$$

we have

$$d(x_-, x_-^0) \leq L_1, \quad d(x_+, x_+^0) \leq L_1.$$

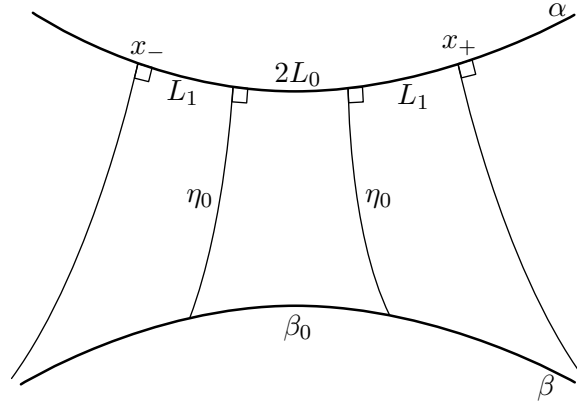


FIGURE 5

Thus, the interval  $x_-x_+$  breaks into the union of two subintervals of length  $\leq L_1 = L_1(\eta_0)$  and the interval  $\alpha_0$  of the length  $2L_0$ . In other words,  $L_\alpha = 2(L_0 + L_1)$ .

Most of our discussion below deals with the case when the interval  $\beta_0$  is nonempty.

Our goal is to bound from above  $L_\alpha$  in terms of  $\lambda, \eta_0$  and the Margulis constant  $\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$  of  $X$ , provided that  $\eta_0 = 0.01\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$  and  $\Gamma$  is discrete.

**Lemma 4.5.** *Let  $S \subset \Gamma$  be the subset consisting of elements of word-length  $\leq 4$  with respect to the generating set  $g, h$ . Let  $P_-P_+ \subset \alpha_0$  be the middle subinterval of  $\alpha_0$  whose length is  $\frac{2}{9}L_0$ . Assume that  $\tau \leq d(P_-, P_+)$ . Then for each  $\gamma \in S$  the interval  $\gamma(P_-P_+)$  is contained in the  $3\eta_0$ -neighborhood of  $\alpha_0$ .*

*Proof.* The proof is a straightforward application of the triangle inequalities taking into account the fact that the Hausdorff distance between  $\alpha_0$  and  $\beta_0$  is  $\leq \eta_0$ .  $\square$

Then, arguing as in the proof of [12, Theorem 10.24]<sup>1</sup>, we obtain that each of the commutators

$$[g^{\pm 1}, h^{\pm 1}], \quad [h^{\pm 1}, g^{\pm 1}]$$

moves each point of  $P_-P_+$  by at most

$$28 \times 3\eta_0 \leq 100\eta_0.$$

Therefore, by applying the Margulis Lemma as in the proof of [12, Theorem 10.24], we obtain:

<sup>1</sup>In fact, the argument there is a variation on a proof due to Culler-Shalen-Morgan and Bestvina, Paulin

**Corollary 4.6.** *If  $\Gamma$  is discrete and  $\eta_0 = 0.01\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$ , then*

$$\tau \geq \frac{2}{9}L_0 = \frac{1}{9}(L_\alpha - 2L_1).$$

**Corollary 4.7.** *If  $\Gamma$  is discrete and  $\tau \geq \lambda$ , then the subgroup  $\langle g^N, h^N \rangle = \Gamma_N < \Gamma$  is free of rank 2 whenever one of the following holds:*

*i. Either  $L_\alpha \leq 3L_1$  and*

$$N \geq \frac{5 + 2\delta + 3L_1}{\lambda}.$$

*ii. Or  $L_\alpha \geq 3L_1$  and*

$$N \geq 27 + \frac{9(5 + 2\delta)}{L_1}.$$

*Proof.* In view of Corollary 4.3, it suffices to ensure that the inequality (4.2) holds.

(i) Suppose first that  $L_\alpha \leq 3L_1$ , hence,  $L_\beta \leq 3L_1$ . Then, in view of the inequality  $\tau \geq \lambda > 0$ , the inequality (4.2) will follow from

$$N \geq \frac{5 + 2\delta + 3L_1}{\lambda}.$$

(ii) Suppose now that  $L_\alpha \geq 3L_1$ . The function

$$\frac{9(t + 5 + 2\delta)}{t - 2L_1}$$

attains its maximum on the interval  $[3L_1, \infty)$  at  $t = 3L_1$ . Therefore,

$$\frac{9(L_\alpha + 5 + 2\delta)}{L_\alpha - 2L_1} \leq 27 + \frac{9(5 + 2\delta)}{L_1}.$$

Thus, the inequality

$$\tau \geq \frac{L_\alpha - 2L_1}{9}$$

implies that for any

$$N \geq 27 + \frac{9(5 + 2\delta)}{L_1},$$

we have  $N\tau \geq L_\alpha + 5 + 2\delta$ .  $\square$

Consider now the remaining case when for  $\eta_0 := \frac{1}{100}\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$ , the subinterval  $\beta_0$  is empty, i.e.  $\eta > \eta_0 = \frac{1}{100}\varepsilon(n, \kappa)$ . Then, as above, the length  $L_\alpha$  of the segment  $x_-x_+$  is at most  $2L_1$ . Therefore, similarly to the case (i) of Corollary 4.7, in order for  $N$  to satisfy the inequality (4.2), it suffices to get

$$N \geq \frac{5 + 2\delta + 3L_1}{\lambda}.$$

To conclude:

**Theorem 4.8.** *Suppose that  $g, h$  are hyperbolic isometries of  $X$  generating a discrete nonelementary subgroup, whose translation lengths are equal to some  $\tau \geq \lambda > 0$ . Let  $L_1$  be such that*

$$\sinh(L_1) \sinh\left(\frac{1}{100}\varepsilon\right) = 1,$$

where  $\varepsilon = \varepsilon(n, \kappa)$ . Then for every

$$N \geq \max\left(\frac{5 + 2\delta + 3L_1}{\lambda}, 27 + \frac{9(5 + 2\delta)}{L_1}\right) \quad (4.3)$$

the group generated by  $g^N, h^N$  is free of rank 2.

We note that proving that (some powers of)  $g$  and  $h$  generate a free subsemigroup, is easier, see [2] and [6, section 11].

**Corollary 4.9.** *Given  $g, h$  as in Theorem 4.8, and any  $N$  satisfying (4.3), the free group  $\Gamma_N = \langle g^N, h^N \rangle$  is convex-cocompact.*

*Proof.* Let  $\mathcal{U}^\pm = H(g^{\pm N}x, x)$  and  $\mathcal{V}^\pm = H(h^{\pm N}y, y)$ . Observe that

$$g^{\pm N}(X \setminus \mathcal{U}^\mp) \subset \mathcal{U}^\pm$$

and

$$h^{\pm N}(X \setminus \mathcal{V}^\mp) \subset \mathcal{V}^\pm.$$

We let  $\mathfrak{D}_{g^N}, \mathfrak{D}_{h^N}$  denote the closures in  $\bar{X}$  of the domains

$$X \setminus (\mathcal{U}^- \cup \mathcal{U}^+), \quad X \setminus (\mathcal{V}^- \cup \mathcal{V}^+)$$

respectively and set

$$\mathfrak{D} = \mathfrak{D}_{g^N} \cap \mathfrak{D}_{h^N}.$$

It is easy to see (cf. [15]) that this intersection is a fundamental domain for the action of  $\Gamma_N$  on the complement  $\bar{X} \setminus \Lambda$  to its limit set  $\Lambda$ . Therefore,  $(\bar{X} \setminus \Lambda)/\Gamma_N$  is compact. Hence,  $\Gamma_N$  is convex-cocompact (see [4]).  $\square$

**Remark 4.10.** It is also not hard to see directly that the orbit maps  $\Gamma_N \rightarrow \Gamma_N x \subset X$  are quasiisometric embeddings by following the proofs in [14, section 7] and counting the number of bisectors crossed by geodesics connecting points in  $\Gamma x$ .

## 5. CASE 2: DISPLACEMENT BOUNDED ABOVE

The strategy in this case is to find an element  $g'$  conjugate to  $g$  (by some uniformly bounded power of  $f$ ) such that the Margulis regions of  $g, g'$  are sufficiently far apart, i.e. are at distance  $\geq L$ , where  $L$  is given by the local-to-global principle for piecewise-geodesic paths in  $X$ , see Proposition 3.13.



**Proposition 5.1.** *There exists a function*

$$\mathfrak{k} : [0, \infty) \times (0, \varepsilon] \rightarrow \mathbb{N}$$

for  $0 < \varepsilon \leq \varepsilon(n, \kappa)$  with the following property: Let  $g_1, \dots, g_k$  be nonelliptic isometries of the same type (hyperbolic or parabolic) with translation lengths  $\leq \varepsilon/10$  and

$$k \geq \mathfrak{k}(L, \varepsilon).$$

Suppose that  $\langle g_i, g_j \rangle$  are nonelementary discrete subgroup for all  $i \neq j$ . Then, there exists a pair of indices  $i, j \in \{1, \dots, k\}$ ,  $i \neq j$  such that

$$d(\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i)), \text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_j))) > L.$$

*Proof.* If all the isometries  $g_i$  are parabolic, then the proposition is established in [14, Proposition 8.3]. Therefore, we only consider the case when all these isometries are hyperbolic. Our proof follows closely the proof of [14, Proposition 8.3].

Since for all  $i \neq j$  the subgroup  $\langle g_i, g_j \rangle$  is a discrete and nonelementary, and  $\varepsilon \leq \varepsilon(n, \kappa)$ , we have

$$\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i) \cap \mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_j) = \emptyset.$$

Given  $L > 0$ , suppose that

$$d(\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i)), \text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_j))) \leq L, \quad \forall i, j \in \{1, \dots, k\}$$

Our goal is to get a uniform upper bound of  $k$ .

Consider the  $L/2$ -neighborhoods  $\bar{N}_{L/2}(\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i)))$ . They are convex in  $X$ , and have nonempty pairwise intersections. Thus, by [14, Proposition 8.2], there exists a point  $x \in X$  such that

$$d(x, \mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i)) \leq R_1 := n\delta + L/2 + \mathfrak{q}, \quad i = 1, \dots, k,$$

where  $\delta$  is the hyperbolicity constant of  $X$  and  $\mathfrak{q}$  is as in Proposition 3.4. Then

$$\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i) \cap B(x, R_1) \neq \emptyset, \quad i = 1, \dots, k.$$

For each  $i = 1, \dots, k$  take a point  $x_i \in \mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i) \cap B(x, R_1)$  satisfying  $d(x_i, g_i^{p_i}(x_i)) = \varepsilon$  for some  $0 < p_i \leq m_{g_i}$ . Since the translation lengths of the elements  $g_i^{p_i}$  are  $\leq \varepsilon/10$ , by Corollary 3.11 there exist points  $y_i \in X$  such that

$$d(y_i, g_i^{p_i}(y_i)) = \varepsilon/3, \quad d(x_i, y_i) \leq \mathfrak{r}(\varepsilon).$$

Consider the  $\varepsilon/3$ -balls  $B(y_i, \varepsilon/3)$ . Then  $B(y_i, \varepsilon/3) \subset \mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i)$  since

$$d(z, g_i^{p_i}(z)) \leq d(z, y_i) + d(y_i, g_i^{p_i}(y_i)) + d(g_i^{p_i}(y_i), g_i^{p_i}(z)) \leq \varepsilon$$

for any point  $z \in B(y_i, \varepsilon/3)$ . Thus, the balls  $B(y_i, \varepsilon/3)$  are pairwise disjoint. Observe that  $B(y_i, \varepsilon/3) \subset B(x, R_2)$  where  $R_2 = R_1 + \mathfrak{r}(\varepsilon) + \varepsilon/3$ .

Let  $V(r, n)$  denote the volume of the  $r$ -ball in  $\mathbb{H}^n$ . Then for each  $i$ ,  $\text{Vol}(B(y_i, \varepsilon/3))$  is at least  $V(\varepsilon/3, n)$ , see [4, Proposition 1.1.12]. Moreover,

the volume of  $B(x, R_2)$  is at most  $V(\kappa R_2, n)/\kappa^n$ , see [4, Proposition 1.2.4]. Let

$$\mathfrak{k}(L, \varepsilon) := \frac{V(\kappa R_2, n)/\kappa^n}{V(\varepsilon/3, n)} + 1.$$

Then  $k < \mathfrak{k}(L, \varepsilon)$ , because otherwise we would obtain

$$\text{Vol} \left( \bigcup_{i=1}^k B(y_i, \varepsilon/3) \right) > \text{Vol}(B(x, R_2)),$$

where the union of the balls on the left side of this inequality is contained in  $B(x, R_2)$ , which is a contradiction.

Therefore, whenever  $k \geq \mathfrak{k}(L, \varepsilon)$ , there exist a pair of indices  $i, j$  such that

$$d(\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_i)), \text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g_j))) > L. \quad \square$$

**Remark 5.2.** Proposition 5.1 also holds for isometries of mixed types (i.e. some  $g_i$ 's are parabolic and some are hyperbolic). The proof is similar to the one given above.

**Theorem 5.3.** *For every nonelementary discrete subgroup  $\Gamma = \langle g, h \rangle < \text{Isom}(X)$  with  $g, h$  nonelliptic isometries satisfying*

$$\tau(g) \leq \varepsilon/10 \leq \varepsilon(n, \kappa)/10,$$

*there exists  $i$ ,  $1 \leq i \leq \mathfrak{k}(L(\varepsilon/10), \varepsilon)$ , such that  $\langle g, h^i g h^{-i} \rangle$  is a free subgroup of rank 2, where  $\mathfrak{k}$  is the function given by Proposition 5.1 and  $L(\varepsilon/10)$  is the constant in Proposition 3.12.*

*Proof.* Consider isometries  $g_i := h^i g h^{-i}$ ,  $i \geq 1$ . We first claim that no pair  $g_i, g_j$ ,  $i \neq j$ , generates an elementary subgroup of  $\text{Isom}(X)$ . There are two cases to consider:

(i) Suppose that  $g$  is parabolic with the fixed point  $p \in \partial_\infty X$ . We claim that for all  $i \neq j$ ,  $h^i(p) \neq h^j(p)$ . Otherwise,  $h^{j-i}(p) = p$ , and  $p$  would be a fixed point of  $h$ . But this would imply that  $\Gamma$  is elementary, contradicting our hypothesis.

(ii) The proof in the case when  $g$  is hyperbolic is similar. The axis of  $g_i$  equals  $h^i(A_g)$ . If hyperbolic isometries  $g_i, g_j$ ,  $i \neq j$ , generate a discrete elementary subgroup of  $\Gamma$ , then they have to share the axis, and we would obtain  $h^i(A_g) = h^j(A_g)$ . Then  $h^{j-i}(A_g) = A_g$ . Since  $h^{j-i}$  is nonelliptic, it cannot swap the fixed points of  $g$ , hence, it fixes both of these points. Therefore,  $g, h$  have common axis, contradicting the hypothesis that  $\Gamma$  is nonelementary.

All the isometries  $g_i$  have equal translation lengths  $\leq \varepsilon/10$ . Therefore, by Proposition 5.1, there exists a pair of natural numbers  $i, j \leq \mathfrak{k}(L(\varepsilon/10), \varepsilon)$  such that

$$d(\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(h^i g h^{-i})), \text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(h^j g h^{-j}))) > L(\varepsilon/10)$$

where  $\mathfrak{k}(L(\varepsilon/10), \varepsilon)$  is the function as in Proposition 5.1. It follows that

$$d(\text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(h^{j-i}gh^{i-j}), \text{Hull}(\mathcal{T}_\varepsilon(g))) > L(\varepsilon/10).$$

Setting  $f := h^{j-i}gh^{i-j}$ , and applying Proposition 3.13 to the isometries  $f, g$ , we conclude that the subgroup  $\langle f, g \rangle < \Gamma$  is free of rank 2. The word length of  $f$  is at most

$$2|j - i| + 1 \leq 2\mathfrak{k}(L(\varepsilon/10), \varepsilon) + 1. \quad \square$$

## 6. CONCLUSION

Now we are in a position to complete the proof of Theorem 1.1.

*Proof of Theorem 1.1.* We set  $\lambda := \varepsilon/10$ , where  $\varepsilon = \varepsilon(n, \kappa)$  is the Margulis constant. Let  $g, h$  be non-elliptic isometries of  $X$  generating a discrete nonelementary subgroup of  $\text{Isom}(X)$ , such that  $\tau(g) = \tau(h) = \tau$ .

If  $\tau \geq \lambda$ , then by Theorem 4.8, the subgroup  $\Gamma_N < \Gamma$  generated by  $g^N, h^N$  is free of rank 2, where

$$N := \left\lceil \max \left( \frac{5 + 2\delta + 3L_1}{\lambda}, 27 + \frac{9(5 + 2\delta)}{L_1} \right) \right\rceil.$$

Here  $\delta = \cosh^{-1}(\sqrt{2})$ , and

$$L_1 = \sinh^{-1} \left( \frac{1}{\sinh(\varepsilon/100)} \right).$$

If  $\tau \leq \lambda$ , then by Theorem 5.3 there exists  $i \in [1, \mathfrak{k}(L(\lambda), \varepsilon)]$  such that  $\langle g, h^i g h^{-i} \rangle$  is free of rank 2 where  $\mathfrak{k}(L(\lambda), \varepsilon)$  is a constant as in Theorem 5.3.  $\square$

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DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS, UC DAVIS, ONE SHIELDS AVENUE, DAVIS, CA 95616,  
USA

*E-mail address:* `sdey@math.ucdavis.edu`

DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS, UC DAVIS, ONE SHIELDS AVENUE, DAVIS, CA 95616,  
USA

*E-mail address:* `kapovich@math.ucdavis.edu`

DEPARTMENT OF MATHEMATICS, UC DAVIS, ONE SHIELDS AVENUE, DAVIS, CA 95616,  
USA

*E-mail address:* `bxliu@math.ucdavis.edu`