Morphology Problems

Tibeto-Burman *ma 'NEGATIVE' > 'QUESTION PARTICLE'

     Simon (1942) noted that the -m of Classical Tibetan interrogative ham was ultimately to be derived from the negative marker Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) *ma- ~ *mi 'NEGATIVE'. DeLancey (1978a,b) laid out the path that the derivation must have taken. The *ma 'NEGATIVE' is found abundantly attested throughout Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan and unquestionably reconstructs to the earliest stages of the language family. The *ma 'INTERROGATIVE', however, is an innovation whose origins are to be found in the syntax and semantics of disjunctive questions.

     With reference to a language in the Sinitic branch of Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST), Chao [Zhao] (1947:40-41) describes Cantonese disjunctive questions (yes-no questions) as involving a choice between alternatives. The most elaborate question is the A-not-A question which spells out the alternative between something and its negative:

     nee zek-mu-zek in ah?
     you smoke-not-smoke in ah
     'Do you smoke?'

The least elaborate disjunctive question again has a positive sentence but the negative disjunct is represented by only a single particle: *mah, mhe, a,* or *ah*. Etymologically the first two particles are related to the negative marker *ma. Semantically, Chao describes the tagged on final particle as equivalent to the French n'est-ce pas?

     What sequence of steps did the *ma 'Negative' take in developing from a negative to the interrogative particles shown below? Does the distributional evidence support the sequence you posit? The answer should, at most, be three or four sentences.

Southern Chin			Central Chin		
Khami	-mo	'Y/N; Q'	Lushei	-em/-m@	'Y/N; Q'
Khimi	-mei	'Y/N; Q'	Haka (Lai)	m@	'Y/N; Q'
			Bawm-Zo	-mê	'Y/N; Q'
Lahker Branch					
Lahker	-ma	'Y/N; Q'	Northern Chin		
			Tiddim Chin	-hiam	'Y/N; Q'
Old Kuki Branch			Siyin	zia:m	
Langrong	-m@	'Y/N; Q'	(=Siyang)	mo	'Y/N; Q'
Hrangkhol	-mo	'Y/N; Q'	Thado		'Y/N; Q'
Hallam	-m@	'Y/N; Q'			
Tsiru	-mo	'Y/N; Q'	Western Branch		
Aimol	-mo	'Y/N; Q'	Empeo	-me	'Y/N; Q'
Kolhreng	-mo	'Y/N; Q'			
Kom	-mo	'Y/N; Q'	Eastern Naga Branch		
Purum	-mo		Angami	-ma	'Y/N'
			Rengma	-mu	'Y/N'
Mikir Branch					
Mikir	má	'Y/N; Q'	Northern Naga Branch		'Y/N'

Table 1:   The distribution of interrogative particles < PST *ma 'NEGATIVE'
        'Y/N' = occurs in Yes-No questions; 'Q' = occurs in Wh- questions