



How to Become a Tea Club Warrior

Phuong-Mai Bui-Quang (PMBQ)

by [Kat Avila](#)

Big Butt Panda was the reason I became acquainted with Phuong-Mai Bui-Quang (PMBQ) at **Anime Expo** 2002. The panda is not in the comic **Tea Club** but is one of PMBQ's bear designs. PMBQ was sitting in Artist Alley with two members of Bay Area Artists, Unite! (BAAU), a group of about 50 artists who meet once a month and who launch an annual comic anthology at **FanimeCon**. I bought a promotional ashcan of **Tea Club**, which debuted the following September with **Icarus Publishing**. Since that time, PMBQ has moved from Artist Alley to the Exhibit Hall to promote her comic and to sell clothing with her comic designs.

PMBQ describes **Tea Club** as a "comedy/action/romance sort of story." Hana Neko, or Haneko, is a cat girl with quick reflexes. Haneko began as PMBQ's web site mascot, then she was paired with a talking bear and became the star of **Tea Club**. In the first story arc, Haneko is a freshman at Tallan University and Mr. Bear is the president of the university's tea club. This is a unique tea club where members train for ceremonial battle and the winner is the competitor who can maintain enough composure to execute a tea ceremony and serve tea while being attacked by two challengers.

Simon Jones of **Icarus Publishing** said, "**Tea Club** was co-published by **PMBQ Studios** and **Icarus Publishing**. It is the only non-adult comic **Icarus** has published. **Tea Club** originated from our attempt to create a doujinshi (fan comic) printing co-op. I personally have great admiration for the fan-driven comic scene in Japan. While there are some great

comic 'zines produced in the U.S., the printing was usually done through digital print-on-demand operations, and quality was sub-par. So last year we decided to experiment by bundling doujinshi from independent creators with our own print jobs (the **AG** anthology) in order to receive discounts from professional offset printers. **Tea Club** from **PMBQ Studios** and the **REFF** anthology from **The Art Corner** were produced for this project. However, the printer decided not to honor their quoted prices at the last moment, so we could not continue the project. (**REFF** was produced, with **Icarus** absorbing one-third of the printing and shipping cost.) We decided that **Tea Club** was a great comic that deserved a wider audience, so we offered to submit the comic to **Diamond** for consideration. The comic was accepted for solicitation and we went on to co-publish five issues of **Tea Club**.

The first of five issues came out in September 2002 and the last issue in August 2003 (the comic continues online). The fourth issue has a clever cover; if you turn the issue over and upside down, it looks like you are looking at the front cover for another issue (Haneko is the actual front cover, Mr. Bear is the back cover). In the third issue, Kyle A. Carrozza's contribution was especially amusing and memorable.

Kyle A. Carrozza commented, "My goal when I wrote my **Tea Club** backup story was to do the craziest story I was capable of. I really wanted to cut loose and be hyper-cartoony in direct contrast to what **Tea Club** normally is. I feel playing with someone else's characters is kinda like doing a cover of a song: If it's not vastly different, what's the point? Anyway, I had only read the online version of **Tea Club** up to that point, and I didn't realize there would be a tea ceremony for Haneko to train for. As far as I knew, **Tea Club** was just meant for lounging around and enjoying tea while avoiding the stress of everyday college life. I'd imagine that's part of what the club's for between competitions. Anyway, since it

hadn't been explored yet, I thought it'd be fun if some of the school's other clubs interfered with each other. I came up with the sickeningly cheerful and hyper Cheer Club to directly contrast with the calmer demeanor of Haneko and Mr. Bear."

PMBQ was at this year's **Comic-Con** but not as a vendor as she just wanted to chat with publishers and to hang out with friends. Most recently she was at **Ani-Magic**, October 1-3, in Valencia, California.

Sequential Tart: *How did you get **Icarus Publishing** interested in your comic?*

PMBQ: It was a bit by accident, actually. Simon Jones, the **Icarus Publishing** founder, was trying to start an affordable self-publishing program based on some quotes that his printer had given him. I thought that this might be a great way to get a **Tea Club** one-shot printed up to sell at conventions, so I put together the issue and submitted it to him. Unfortunately, the program fell through, but Simon was intrigued by my comic. That's when he offered to help me publish it as a regular comic series. □

ST: *Are you still planning to bring issues 1-5 together into a graphic novel?*

PMBQ: I definitely am. I'm also planning on mixing in the online content, as well as creating new content. So far, it's almost enough for two graphic novels. I've been negotiating with a few publishers about it, but I don't have anything official to announce yet. I'm not ruling out self-publishing, either.

ST: *I liked your use of guest artists in **Tea Club**. Your character designs are distinct enough that they are still recognizable after other artists play with them. What were*

your reasons for including guest artists?

PMBQ: The guest artists are all good friends of mine. They've all been very supportive of my **Tea Club** endeavors, and even created gift art for me — which is very handy for use as filler art! Kyle A. Carrozza especially helped me out with his backup story in issue three. (Deadline was approaching and I had too many jobs going on at the time.) Kyle and I actually both had comic beginnings with **Antarctic Press**, where we were both published in the **Ninja High School** comic anthologies. That's how we got in touch and became friends.

ST: *When are we going to see the animated version of **Tea Club**?*

PMBQ: Probably not for a while. I would want to get the comic storyline more well established before even attempting to explore animation. I'm also too controlling of my characters to let anyone else play with them — at least for now.

ST: *You started with six clothing designs. You now have 17 girls' designs and 16 boys' designs, correct?*

PMBQ: Roughly, yes. I have a few seasonal designs, too. Actually, the designs really cater more towards "cute", which may translate into "girly" in some people's eyes. I guess a more appropriate way to phrase it is that I offer 16 designs in unisex T-shirts and 17 designs in women's fitted T-shirts.

ST: *Is that your sense of humor at work again with the girls — undies having the classic boy's brief design? Or is it just fashion?*

PMBQ: My designs are sometimes inspired when I see the garments themselves. One day, I was in the L.A. area



and visited the American Apparel warehouse (one of my wholesale T-shirt sources). When I saw the boy brief-style undies, I thought they were really cute! So, basically, I bought them because I liked them and wanted to test out the market for them. They're actually not a hot seller, but everyone thinks they're cute.

ST: *Have you thought of maybe just becoming a full-time clothes retailer?*

PMBQ: I have, but not for a while. I want to work on comics first. Besides, there's still some hope that someone might partner up with me and take over the store aspect of my studio.

ST: *Related merchandise, such as mugs and lunchboxes, can be found at **Cafepress.com**. Is there a reason there's no link to the **Tea Club** Cafeshop from the **PMBQ Studios** Online Shop (because I almost forgot about it after I got lost in the clothes)?*

PMBQ: I might put a link there in the future, but I originally left it out so people wouldn't be confused between the **PMBQ Studios** Online Shop and the **Tea Club** Cafeshop on **Cafepress**. I'll figure out what to do eventually, though.

ST: *Who came first — Big Butt Panda or the tea-drinking Mr. Bear?*

PMBQ: Big Butt Panda was first! Actually, even before Big Butt Panda was the Cupid Panda. Drawing the "Cupid Panda" comic strip helped set the tone for all the **Tea Club**-type humor, too.

ST: *Any other comics in the works? Not many artists can do humor as easily as you do.*

PMBQ: That's very kind of you to say! I think that's probably a matter of opinion. I know a lot of talented artists and storytellers. I guess each of us has our own distinct strengths. I don't really set out to be humorous. It just sort of happens in the eye of the beholder. I do have many other comic ideas floating around. They're kind of secret, though.

ST: *You do freelance design work. Can you describe some of the projects you've worked on or are working on?*

PMBQ: I basically do odd graphic design freelance jobs — illustration, brochures, web design, web banners. Pretty basic stuff. I have a lot of small business clients that ask for work every now and then. My big jobs this past year were working with **Udon Entertainment** to color backgrounds on **Marvel's *New X-Men*** (issues #155, #156) and also doing web design for an ad agency. I'm currently working a regular part-time job with that same ad agency. It's a great situation because now I have steady income and also extra time to work on **PMBQ Studios** and ***Tea Club***.

ST: *You've attended **Comic-Con** for about eight years, not as an artist or dealer, but as a fan. Why do you go?*

PMBQ: I like seeing the demonstrations of the latest animation and drawing software. I like to keep going to **Comic-Con** so I can keep up with what's going on in the industry. It's fun to see a show with all the bells and whistles, even if I don't take advantage of all of it. It's also a great way to keep in touch with my industry contacts. There are quite a few people I see there who I only see once a year, so it's good to see what they're up to. □

ST: *You graduated from New York University with a B.S. in Graphics Communication. Do you consider yourself an East Coast girl or West Coast girl? It looks like you now live in Campbell, California, since that's your P.O. Box address.*

PMBQ: I definitely loved living in New York City, but I can't see myself settling down there. A part of me always loves the hubbub of any metropolitan area. Conversely, there's a part of me that loves to be a suburban bum, vegging out at home. In the end, I guess I'll always be a California girl. You can't beat the weather.

ST: *So, what's your favorite tea?*

PMBQ: I like this instant tea called "3-in-1" tea. It has tea, milk, and sugar in a little single serving packet. It tastes surprisingly good, especially when you make it with hot milk. You can get it at most Asian grocery stores. I also enjoy a good cup of green tea when I'm eating Japanese food.



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