

Preface

The Asia Art Center in Beijing's 798 Art District is proud to present the inaugural exhibition of a spectacular new series of sculptural works by Li Chen. Titled *Soul Guardians: In an Age of Disasters and Calamities*, the exhibition consists of three large-scale installations. If Li Chen has produced singular bronzes of exceptional harmony in the past, the present sculptural installations are designed for a world marked by natural and man-made disasters, warfare, decay, and global ecological calamity. Our world is unsafe and full of mishap, the pace of uncertainty ever greater, the gods are no longer benign. Yanluo, the God of Death and Ruler of the Underworld (Di Yu) passes judgment on the Dead. But it is his minions who take center stage in Li Chen's installation. The Judge of the Underworld holds a brush in one hand and a book listing every soul and the allotted time of death in the other. Two eyes, two mouths, two brushes, two books of the dead are visible as he vibrates in anger and retribution. Two large figures three meters tall and coated in gold leaf, Mind-Taking Guard and Soul-Taking Guard, flank the Judge of the Underworld and bear down on the viewer. One has a concave mirror in his hand reaching out towards us, the other mirror is convex. We are invited to sit on a small red chair at the foot of the Judge. Are we to be sucked into the purgatory of the realm of the dead? Two other spectacular Guards, suspended from the ceiling, also bear down on the viewer. The Lord of Wind, black and voluminous in his power, and the Lord of Fire, red with flames protruding from bodily orifices and his flesh, represent two of the four natural phenomena (Wind, Fire, Thunder and Rain). Have they come to rescue us, or to purge us?

The second equally powerful installation in Li Chen's *Soul Guardians* exhibition refers to the Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water). Each element represents the traditional five cardinal points in Chinese culture and is associated with factual geographical China as well as a heavenly creature (Dragon in the East, Phoenix in the South, Qilin in the Middle, Tiger in the West and Tortoise in the North). In the third and final room of the exhibition Li Chen shows for the first time the highly elaborate wooden structures he creates in the process of producing his sculptures. Equally dramatic, these remarkable, skeleton-like figures of the Mind-Taking Guard and the Soul-Taking Guard exude a power of their own in their severe reduction. They still bear traces of the clay which was used in the casting process, creating intimations of death and decay. In commenting of the startling new direction of his work Li Chen noted: "Everything is uncertain and has an illusionary sense of value in this age of disaster." When visitors enter the exhibition hall, they can instantly experience the thousand-year-old ancient spirits of China with an astonishing vision of modern art.