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The Law and Practice of Shareholder Inspection Rights: A Comparative Analysis of China and the United States

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The Law and Practice of Shareholder Inspection Rights: A Comparative Analysis of China and the United States

Robin Hui Huang* & Randall S. Thomas**

ABSTRACT

Shareholder inspection rights allow a shareholder to access the relevant documents of the company in which they hold an interest, so as to address the problem of information asymmetry and reduce the agency costs inherent in the corporate structure. While Chinese corporate governance and American corporate governance face different sets of agency cost problems, this Article shows that shareholder inspection rights play an important role in both China and the United States. On the books, while shareholder inspection rights in both countries are broadly similar, there are some important differences on issues such as the proper purpose requirement. The empirical analysis of this Article further sheds light on how inspection rights operate on the ground. A good number of inspection cases are filed in both China and in Delaware. These cases are resolved by the courts relatively quickly. While inspection rights in both countries are frequently used as a presuit discovery device, the types of subsequent litigation that can be filed in each country are quite different. Efforts are made to explain, and draw implications from, the similarities and differences on shareholder inspection rights between the two countries.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The shareholder's right to inspect corporate documents has a long history, originating in the common law in the 1700s.¹ In the United States, all states have now codified shareholder inspection rights, albeit with some significant differences amongst them.² Drawing upon overseas experiences such as the US law, China introduced the concept of shareholder inspection rights in broad terms when its first national company law was enacted in 1993 and has since continued to improve the regime, particularly in the 2005 company law revision.³

Shareholder inspection rights allow a shareholder to access the documents of the company in which they hold an interest, so as to address the problem of information asymmetry and reduce the agency costs inherent in the corporate structure. By inspecting corporate documents, the shareholders can obtain relevant information to monitor the company's performance, evaluate the company's financial status, and determine whether and how to take proper action such as a proxy fight to replace the incumbent management team or a derivative suit against directors and others who cause harm to the company.

As is well recognized in comparative corporate law scholarship, agency problems, and thus the strategies used to deal with them, differ systematically across jurisdictions.⁴ There are three main agency problems in a company, namely the conflict between the shareholders and the managers, the conflict between the majority shareholders and the minority shareholders, and the conflict between the shareholders and the nonshareholder stakeholders such as creditors, employees, and customers. In the United States, where the publicly traded company is characterized by dispersed ownership, the shareholder–manager conflict is the main type of agency problem. In contrast, in China, where the ownership of shares is more concentrated in the hands of majority shareholders, whether the state or wealthy families, the second agency problem is more severe. In

1. Randall S. Thomas, *Improving Shareholder Monitoring of Corporate Management by Expanding Statutory Access to Information*, 38 ARIZ. L. REV. 331, 337 (1996).

2. Browning Jeffries, *Shareholder Access to Corporate Books and Records: The Abrogation Debate*, DRAKE L. REV. 1087, 1093 (2011).

3. Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Gongsifa (中华人民共和国公司法) [Company Law of the People's Republic of China], Standing Comm. Nat'l People's Cong., Oct. 27, 2005 (effective Jan. 1, 2006) [hereinafter 2005 PRC Company Law]. The law underwent major changes in 2005, and relatively minor changes in 1999, 2004, 2013 and 2018. Hence, it is customarily abbreviated as the 2005 Company Law.

4. See generally REINIER KRAAKMAN ET AL., *THE ANATOMY OF CORPORATE LAW: A COMPARATIVE AND FUNCTIONAL APPROACH* 29–48 (3d ed. 2017) (discussing this issue in-depth in chapter two: "Agency Problems and Legal Strategies").

both contexts, shareholder inspection rights can play an important role in generating relevant information needed for controlling agency problems, but variations may exist due to institutional differences.

This Article thus aims to compare shareholder inspection rights in China and the United States, which is mostly represented by Delaware, the preeminent corporate law jurisdiction in the United States. In doing so, this Article not only examines the law on the books but also the law in practice. Part II and Part III provide detailed discussions of the law and the practice of shareholder inspection rights in China and Delaware respectively. Part IV conducts a China–United States comparison of the key aspects of shareholder inspection rights, and then tries to explain the similarities and differences between them. It finishes with some brief conclusions.

II. SHAREHOLDER INSPECTION RIGHTS UNDER CHINESE LAW

A. *The Legal Framework*

The Chinese regime for shareholder inspection rights can be traced back to the first national company law of the PRC, namely the 1993 PRC Company Law.⁵ The relevant provisions therein, however, were very brief and general, simply stating that the shareholders have the right to inspect certain materials such as the minutes of the shareholders' meetings and the financial reports.⁶ The 1993 Company Law underwent several minor amendments before it was overhauled in 2005 and was thus called the 2005 PRC Company Law, which is still in force today despite some minor revisions thereafter.⁷ The 2005 PRC Company Law represents a significant improvement over its 1993 predecessor, providing more details on the regime of shareholder inspection rights.⁸ However, over the years, even the 2005 PRC Company Law proved to be inadequate in relation to shareholder inspection rights.

On August 25, 2017, the Supreme People's Court (SPC) promulgated the long-awaited fourth judicial interpretation on the 2005 Company Law (2017 Judicial Interpretation), which went into effect on September 1, 2017.⁹ A total of six provisions in this

5. Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Gongsifa (中华人民共和国公司法) [Company Law of the People's Republic of China], Standing Comm. Nat'l People's Cong., Dec. 29, 1993 (effective July 1, 1994) [hereinafter 1993 PRC Company Law].

6. *Id.* at art. 32, 110.

7. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3.

8. *Id.* at arts. 33, 97.

9. Zuigaorenminfayuan Guanyu Shiyong Zhonghua Renming Gongsifa Ruogan Wenti De Guiding Si (最高人民法院关于适用〈中华人民共和国公司法〉若干问题的规定

instrument are devoted to inspection rights litigation, providing more guidance on how the cases should be brought and heard.¹⁰ The key features of shareholder inspection rights under the Chinese law are summarized below.

First, shareholder inspection rights are regulated differently according to the type of companies concerned. There are two main types of companies allowed under the Chinese company law, namely the limited liability companies (LLC) and the joint stock limited companies (JSC).¹¹ The 2005 PRC Company Law as last amended in 2018 sets out two provisions, namely §33¹² and §97,¹³ to stipulate shareholder inspection rights in the context of LLCs and JSCs separately.

Second, there are no statutory restrictions on the eligibility of the shareholder to exercise inspection rights, such as the requirements of a minimum shareholding level and specified holding period. According to the 2017 Judicial Interpretation, if a shareholder of a company files for inspection rights under §33 or §97 of the 2005 PRC Company Law, the court should accept the case.¹⁴ But if the

(14)) [The Fourth Judicial Interpretation of the Supreme People's Court on Various Issues Concerning the Application of the PRC Company Law], Aug. 25, 2017 (effective Sept. 1, 2017) [hereinafter 2017 Judicial Interpretation]. In China, the judicial interpretation as issued by the SPC carries the force of law.

10. *Id.* at §§ 7–12.

11. From a comparative law perspective, the Chinese LLC is broadly similar to the close corporation in the US or the private company in British Commonwealth jurisdictions, while the JSC corresponds to the publicly held corporation or the public company in the Anglo-American world. Internationally, the term “corporation” in the US is the counterpart of the term “company” commonly used in many British Commonwealth jurisdictions as well as in China. For convenience, the two terms are used interchangeably in this paper, unless specifically indicated.

12. This provision states that: “A shareholder shall have the right to review and duplicate the company's articles of association, the minutes of the meetings of the shareholders assembly, the resolutions of the board of directors, the resolutions of the board of supervisors, as well as the financial and accounting reports of the company. A shareholder may request to consult the accounting books of the company. To do that, the shareholder shall submit a written request to the company and explain his purposes. Where the company deems, on reasonable grounds, that it is for illegitimate purposes that the shareholder requests to consult its accounting books, which may damage the lawful interests of the company, the company may refuse to provide its accounting books to the shareholder to consult, and shall, within 15 days from the date the shareholder submits the written request, give a written reply to the shareholder and state its reasons. Where the company refuses to provide its accounting books, the shareholder may request the people's court to demand the company to provide such books.” 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at art. 33.

13. This provision states that: “Shareholders shall have the right to consult the company's articles of association, the roster of the shareholders, the stubs of corporate bonds, the minutes of the meetings of the shareholder assembly, the resolutions adopted at the meetings of the board of directors and of the board of supervisors, and the financial and accounting reports, and shall have the right to put forward proposals or raise questions about the business operation of the company.” *Id.* at art. 97.

14. 2017 Judicial Interpretation, *supra* note 9, at § 7.

company produces evidence that the plaintiff does not have the status of shareholder at the time of pleading, the court should dismiss the case. There is an exception, however, under which if a former shareholder can produce *prima facie* evidence that their interests were harmed at the time when they held shares, they also have the right to inspect relevant materials falling within their shareholding period.¹⁵

Third, the materials subject to inspection rights are divided into different categories. The first category consists of the company's bylaws, the minutes of the shareholders' meetings, the resolutions of the board of directors' meetings, the resolutions of the board of supervisors' meetings, as well as the financial reports.¹⁶ The second category is the accounting books of the company.¹⁷ Ambiguity may arise here as to whether the term "accounting books" includes original accounting vouchers and whether the inspection right can extend to other materials not listed in the law, such as contracts. For the purpose of this Article, original accounting vouchers and other materials are treated as belonging to the third and fourth categories of materials discussed in the text above, respectively.

For LLCs, the shareholder can request both the first and second categories of materials.¹⁸ By contrast, only the first category of materials is explicitly provided for the shareholders of JSCs.¹⁹ However, there are two additional items listed for JSC shareholders, namely the stock ledger and the stubs of corporate bonds, which are not available to LLC owners.²⁰

Fourth, a bifurcated approach is taken to setting out the prerequisites for exercising inspection rights, depending on what category of materials the shareholder is trying to access. Basically, for the first category of materials, access is more liberal without any explicit prerequisites laid down in the law.²¹ In contrast, as the second category of materials is more sensitive, there are both

15. *Id.*

16. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at § 1, arts. 33, 97.

17. *Id.*

18. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, art. 33.

19. Presumably, as many JSCs are listed companies and thus are required to publicly disclose accounting information, there is usually little need to resort to inspection rights litigation to get these documents.

20. The stubs of corporate bonds are the original record of the bonds that the company has issued, and a shareholder would want to inspect them to verify the truthfulness of the corporate bonds. In China, only JSCs can issue corporate bonds, hence the right to inspect the stubs is only provided to JSC owners. For the stock ledger, it is generally unnecessary to seek it in the context of LLCs where the number of shareholders is normally small and shareholders tend to know each other well. In any event, the shareholder register of LLCs can be readily available from the company registrar and there is little need for inspection rights litigation.

21. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at art. 33.

procedural and substantive restrictions. To start with, the shareholder needs to submit a written request for this type of information, which shall state a proper purpose.²² Then, if the company has legitimate reasons to believe that the shareholder's request for inspecting the accounting books is for an improper purpose and may impair the legitimate interests of the company, it may reject the request of the shareholder to inspect the books.²³ If the company chooses to reject the request, it must do so within fifteen days after the shareholder submits a written request, and give the shareholder a written reply to explain the rejection.²⁴ Finally, once the company refuses the shareholder's request, the shareholder may apply to the appropriate court for an order compelling production.²⁵ If the court supports the shareholder's request, the judgment should clearly specify what materials the shareholder can inspect as well as when and where to inspect those materials.²⁶

The difficult and perennial question here is what constitutes an "improper purpose" on the part of the requesting shareholder. The 2017 Judicial Interpretation sheds some light on this issue, enumerating four circumstances where an improper purpose may be found.²⁷ The first three circumstances are specific, while the fourth is a catch-all provision.²⁸

Finally, several other rules are designed to strike a balance between protecting legitimate use of and preventing abuse of shareholder inspection rights. For example, a shareholder cannot be substantially deprived of their inspection rights by the company's bylaws or any agreement between shareholders.²⁹ Further, if a director or a senior executive of a company fails to perform duties in making or preserving the company's documents and materials covered within the shareholder inspection rights, and this act causes harm to a shareholder, the officer/director can be held personally

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.*

26. 2017 Judicial Interpretation, *supra* note 9, at § 10.

27. *Id.* at § 8.

28. *Id.* This provision states that: "(1) The shareholder is engaged in any business in substantial competition with the main business of the company for the shareholder's own account or on behalf of any other person, except as otherwise specified by the company's bylaws or agreed upon by all shareholders. (2) The shareholder's consultation of the company's accounting books for the information of any other person may damage the company's lawful interests. (3) During the three years before the day when the shareholder files a request with the company for consultation of accounting books, the shareholder once consulted the company's accounting books for the information of any other person, causing damage to the company's lawful interests. (4) Any other circumstances showing that the shareholder has an illicit purpose." *Id.*

29. *Id.* at § 9.

liable to compensate the shareholder.³⁰ However, if a shareholder of a company divulges any trade secret of the company it learned of from exercising its inspection right, and this disclosure causes damage to the company's lawful interests, then the shareholder can be held liable to compensate for the relevant losses suffered by the company.³¹

Although China has gradually set up a relatively complete legal framework for shareholder inspection rights, there are still many unanswered questions. For instance, can the inspection right be exercised by a beneficial owner whose shares are held in a voting trust or by a nominee on their behalf? What is the full extent of the materials that can be inspected? What is the content of the "improper purpose" restriction? What is meant by a substantial deprivation of the shareholder's inspection right? To shed light on how the shareholder inspection right has been exercised in China, this Article conducts an empirical study of how courts have treated inspection right cases.

B. *Empirical Inquiry on Chinese Inspection Rights*

1. Overview

How is China's inspection rights regime applied in practice? To answer this question, this Article examines all inspection cases across the country for a roughly six-year period of January 1, 2012, to August 31, 2017.³² This Article uses an authoritative and widely used electronic database for Chinese law, *Bei Da Fa Bao*,³³ employing search terms based on the relevant legislative provisions.

30. *Id.* at § 12.

31. *Id.* at § 11.

32. Ideally, because the 2017 Judicial Interpretation became effective on 1 September 2017, we would like to examine cases before and after this event separately. Unfortunately, the 2017 Judicial Interpretation has been in effect for a very short period of time, so we will need to wait for more data to assess its effect. Hence, our empirical analysis is focused on the cases filed before it took effect.

33. *Bei Da Fa Bao*, CHINA LAW INFO, <http://Chinalawinfo.com> (last visited Jan. 22, 2019) [<https://perma.cc/5B88-F3DY>] (archived Feb. 16, 2020).

Table C1:³⁴ Distribution of Total Cases from 2012 to 2017

Year	Number of cases	Percentage of all cases
2017 ³⁵	2440	32.34%
2016	2109	27.95%
2015	1347	17.99%
2014	990	13.12%
2013	395	5.24%
2012	264	3.46%
Total	7545	100%

As illustrated in Table C1, the number of cases has increased steadily and significantly over the years. A total of 7545 cases were found over the six-year period of 2012 to 2017. Geographically, in untabulated data, this Article finds that Jiangsu Province had the most cases (1048), followed by Shanghai (895), Guangdong province (634), Zhejiang province (548), and Beijing (518), all of which are considered to be economically developed regions in China.

In order to reduce the number of cases to a more manageable volume for analysis, this Article uses a random sampling to extract a sample of 193 cases.³⁶ These cases are used for the rest of the empirical inquiry in this Article.

2. The Hearing Time Length

Table C2 provides information on the number of days between the date of the initial court filing and the date of the final judgment.

34. All the tables on the Chinese cases have a prefix code of "C" (China).

35. It should be noted that in Table C1, the number of cases in 2017 means the cases in the whole year of 2017, because the purpose of Table C1 is to compare the number of cases on a yearly basis. As noted in the text above, however, the study period of our research ends on August 31, 2017, so the year of 2017 mentioned in the empirical data in the tables below means the period from January 2017 to August 2017, unless otherwise indicated.

36. There is an empirical study published in 2013 on China's inspection rights cases which randomly selected a sample of 192 cases out of all cases adjudicated from 2006 to 2011 across China. See Jianwei Li, *Research on Shareholder Inspection Rights Litigation*, 2 ZHONGGUO FAXUE [CHINA LEGAL SCIENCE] 83 (2013). Our study chooses a more recent research period of 2012 to 2017 when China's inspection rights regime has become more mature, using a random sampling exercise to get a similar-sized sample of 193 cases. For more information on the random sampling methodology and a comparison of our study findings with those of other earlier studies, see Robin Hui Huang, *Shareholder Inspection Rights in China: An Empirical Inquiry* (2019) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).

In China, a civil case should normally be closed within six months of its filing date, and a six-month extension is available in special circumstances and upon the approval of the president of the court.³⁷ Further extension is possible with the approval of the next higher court.³⁸ These limits have a strong effect on the time for resolving inspection cases.

Table C2 shows that during the whole period of 2012 to 2017, the mean delay is around 101.46 days (around 3.38 months), while the median delay is roughly 81 days (2.7 months). The mean and median of the number of days taken to close an inspection case in China are both six months, illustrating that the Chinese courts tended to adjudicate these cases quite quickly.

The authors also conducted a longitudinal study of whether there is any change in the time length of the case over the years. It seems that apart from 2012 and 2017, the mean and median of the number of days taken to close an inspection case are relatively stable.

Table C2: Number of Days between Court Filing and Final Outcome

Year	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Median	Maximum
2017	135.708	106.41	14	111.5	408
2016	70.933	40.259	13	72	175
2015	103.04	70.639	18	82	248
2014	94.913	56.991	25	69	354
2013	112.833	71.899	25	114.5	195
2012	91.333	42.730	51	86	170
Total	101.46	77.091	13	81	408

3. The Shareholding Levels of Plaintiff Shareholders

In China, the shareholders have varying governance powers, depending on their shareholding levels, which may impact their use of inspection rights. To understand this point, it is useful to first briefly discuss these powers. To begin with, shareholders individually, or collectively, holding 3 percent or more of the shares of the company have the power to put forward an interim proposal at the

37. Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Minshi Susongfa [Civil Procedure Law of the People's Republic of China] art. 135, President of the People's Republic of China, Apr. 9, 1991 (amended 2007, 2012, and 2017) (effective June 27, 2017).

38. *Id.*

shareholders' assembly for discussion.³⁹ Second, the shareholders separately, or collectively, holding 10 percent or more of the shares of the company can ask for an interim shareholders' assembly session to be held.⁴⁰ Further, shareholders that hold 10 percent or more of the voting rights are empowered to ask the people's court to dissolve the company if the company's operations result in heavy losses for the shareholders and its problems cannot be solved by any other means.⁴¹ Third, under the Chinese law, the shareholders individually, or in the aggregate, holding 30 percent or more of shares are considered to be controlling shareholders.⁴²

Table C3 displays data on plaintiffs' shareholding percentage for our sample. The bulk of cases are brought by shareholders holding between 10 percent and 30 percent. In other words, inspection right suits provide a remedy mainly for minority shareholders.

It is worth noting that up to ten of the 193 cases were filed by plaintiffs holding 50 percent or more of their company's shares. This is surprising because those shareholders presumably had control over their companies and there should be no need for them to resort to inspection right suits to get relevant information. Upon closer examination, these ten cases share a common feature that ownership and management of the company are relatively separated, that is, the minority shareholder is the legal representative and executive director of the company, while the majority shareholder acts as a supervisor or sometimes has no management position.⁴³

When a majority–minority shareholder conflict arises, the majority may not easily solve the issue through the exercise of its voting power.⁴⁴ For one thing, the position of legal representative has important power to represent the company to sign contracts and bring suits, and can only be removed by a special resolution of the shareholders' meeting, which requires approval by two-thirds or more

39. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at art. 102. Under the Chinese company law, the shareholders' meeting in JSCs is called the shareholders' assembly. *Id.*

40. *Id.* at art. 100(3).

41. *Id.* at art. 182.

42. Zhonghua Renming Gongheguo Zhenquan Fa [Securities Law of the People's Republic of China] § 65, Standing Comm. Nat'l People's Cong., Dec. 29, 1998 (amended 2004, 2005, 2013, 2014, and 2019) (effective July 1, 1999).

43. See, e.g., Liu Ye v. Shanghai Xinxin Gongmao Co., Qing Min Er (Shang) Chu Zi No. 163 (Shanghai Municipality Qingpu Dist. Ct. 2014); Chen Fuqian v. Tianjin Minchuang Jiancai Shichang Co., Chen Min Chu Zi No. 3128 (Tianjin Municipality Beicheng Dist. Ct. 2014); Zhongshang Zichan Pinggu Co v. Luo Donghao (Appeal), Chang Min Si Zhong Zi No. 175 (Jilin Province Changchun City Intermediate Ct. 2015).

44. For the same reason, derivative actions have also been found to be brought by majority shareholders in China. See Robin Hui Huang, *Shareholder Derivative Litigation in China: Empirical Findings and Comparative Analysis*, 27 BANKING & FIN. L. REV. 619, 634 n.54 (2012) [hereinafter Huang, *Derivative Litigation*].

of the voting rights.⁴⁵ In most of the cases, the majority shareholder held more than half but less than two-thirds of voting powers. Further, directors usually serve a term of three years and can be reelected.⁴⁶ Finally, in practice, even if the majority shareholder may succeed in exercising its voting power to change the legal representative or executive director, the former legal representative or executive director (the minority shareholder) may refuse to hand over company seals and documents. Hence, the majority shareholder may have to bring inspection right suits to obtain relevant information.

Table C3: What Was the Plaintiff's Shareholding Level?

Shareholding level	Number	Percentage
Less than 3%	16	8.21%
More than 3% and less than 10%	18	9.23%
More than 10% and less than 30%	58	29.74%
More than 30% and less than 50%	42	21.38%
More than 50%	10	5.13%
Not clear	51	26.15%
Total	193	100%

4. The Features of Defendant Companies

Table C4 presents information on the types of defendant companies involved in the sample cases. Only four of the defendant companies are JSCs; the rest are overwhelmingly LLCs.⁴⁷ In addition, there are a small number of other types of business entities such as joint ventures and even private schools.⁴⁸

45. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at art. 43.

46. *Id.* at art. 45.

47. Most of the JSCs concerned here were not listed on the two national stock exchanges, namely the Shanghai Stock Exchange and the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, but rather on regional stock exchanges such as the Tianjing Equity Exchange. *See, e.g.,* Huang Tianyi v. Hubei Wudang Liquor Co., E Danjiangkou Min Chu Zi No. 01768 (Hubei Province Danjiangkou City Ct. 2014).

48. *See, e.g.,* Shanghai Jiahua Enterprise Ltd. v. Shanghai Jiahua Continuing Education School, Shanghai Municipality 1st Intermediate Ct. (2016). This case was included in *Zuigao Renmin Fayuan Gongbao* [*Supreme People's Court Gazette*] 2 (2019), holding that although private schools do not take the company form in China, their organizers can bring inspection right suits in a way by analogy with the company law.

Why are there so few inspection right suits for JSCs? For one thing, the JSCs, particularly those that are listed companies, have a heightened level of disclosure duties because they are subject to the securities law, making it unnecessary for their shareholders to resort to inspection right suits. Moreover, as discussed in subpart IIA, unlike LLC shareholders, JSC shareholders are not empowered to inspect company accounting books under the Chinese company law. Further, JSC shareholders can inspect, but are not allowed to copy, the relevant company documents without filing an inspection suit.

Table C4: What Was the Type of the Defendant Company?

Company type	Number	Percentage
LLC	183	94.81%
JSC	4	2.07%
Others	6	3.12%
Total	193	100%

Table C5 shows that very few defendants were State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). One possible reason why it can be harder to gain access to nonpublic information of SOEs is that it can be considered by the court to be too politically sensitive.

Table C5: Was the Defendant Company a SOE?

SOE	Number	Percentage
Yes	9	4.66%
No	183	94.82%
Unclear	1	0.52%
Total	193	100%

5. The Types of Materials Requested for Inspection

Table C6 examines what information the plaintiffs asked for in their inspection suits and whether their requests were approved by the court. As discussed earlier, the information requested can be broadly divided into four categories. In practice, the plaintiffs usually request documents from more than one category in a case, which explains why the total number of entries in Table C6 is significantly higher than the number of inspection right suits in the sample. In adjudicating the case, the court will look at the multiple requests

separately and make decisions accordingly. This Article calculates the rate of support for each category separately.

Table C6: What Materials Were Requested?

Types of Materials requested for inspection	Number	Percent age	Appro ved by Court	Not approved	Appro val rate
First category (stockholder list etc.)	164	34.10%	141	23	85.98%
Second category (accounting books)	172	35.76%	132	40	76.74%
Third category (original accounting vouchers)	109	22.66%	68	41	62.39%
Fourth category (contracts, client list etc.)	36	7.48%	5	31	13.89%
Total	481	100%	346	135	71.93%

As Table C6 shows, for the 193 sample cases, there are 481 total information requests. Within the four categories of information requested, the second category (accounting books) was most frequently requested (35.76 percent), closely followed by the first category (34.10 percent). The fourth category was requested the least (7.48 percent).

Out of the total 481 requests, 346 requests were approved by the court, making the average approval rate 71.93 percent. However, this rate varies greatly amongst the different categories of information. Not surprisingly, the first category has the highest support rate (85.98 percent), since it is clearly allowed under Article 33 for LLCs and Article 97 for JSCs. The major reason for rejecting a request for the first category of information is that the plaintiffs were found not to be the shareholders of the defendants.

The second category of information gets the second-highest support rate (76.74 percent). Again, Article 33 clearly allows access to

the second category of information, but there is a procedural prerequisite, that is, the plaintiff should send a prior written request to the company. In some cases, the plaintiff shareholder lost simply because they failed to satisfy this procedural requirement.

The support rate of the third category of information is also quite high (62.39 percent). In general, the courts consider original accounting vouchers to be covered under inspection right provisions. The failure of the plaintiff shareholders in those unsupported suits is usually either due to their lack of shareholder status or because they did not fulfill the procedural prerequisite as noted above. In contrast, the request for the fourth category of information was seldom supported (13.89 percent), as the courts generally consider it to fall outside the scope of the inspection right provisions.

6. The “Improper Purpose” Defense

Table C7 illustrates how the defense of improper purpose has been used by the defendant company in certain inspection right suits. Overall, the improper purpose defense was raised in fifty-nine cases, representing 30.57 percent of all cases. As discussed earlier, the 2017 Judicial Interpretation provides guidance on the meaning of improper purpose by listing four types of improper purposes.⁴⁹ Amongst the three specific types of improper purposes enumerated therein, the first type was most frequently raised (32.76 percent), while there is no case raised about the second type, and only one case claimed to be of the third type.

As the fourth type is a catch-all category of “other circumstances,” this Article further divides this group into four subcategories used by the defendant company in some sample cases. The first subcategory was very general and was raised in twenty-nine cases, accounting for almost half of all cases.

Table C7: What Improper Purposes Were Claimed by Defendants as Defenses to Requests for Accounting Books?

Types of claimed improper purposes	Number	Percent age	Approv ed	Not appr oved	Appr oval rate

49. 2017 Judicial Interpretation, *supra* note 9, at § 8.

The shareholder is engaged in any business in substantial competition with the main business of the company	19	32.2%	1	18	5.26%
The shareholder is seeking inspection rights to provide information to others	0	0			0
The shareholder did seek inspection rights to provide information to others within the past three years	1	1.69%	0	1	0
Other circumstances	39	66.1%	0	39	0
The shareholder may damage the interest of the company	29	49.15%	0	29	0
The shareholder may affect the normal operation of	4	6.78%	0	4	0

the company					
There is improper purpose	4	6.78%	0	4	0
The shareholder seeks to get information as evidence in another case	2	3.39%	0	2	0
Total	59	100%	1	58	1.69%

Note that the defendant company was successful with this defense in only one case. There are several possible reasons for this lack of success. First, it is very difficult for the defendant company to establish an improper purpose on the part of the plaintiff shareholder. The only successful case is *Jianghan vs. Qichang Xingli Haimen Railway Materials Ltd*, where the defendant company proved that the plaintiff shareholder was involved in another company that had the same business and the same target clients as the defendant company so that the first specific type of improper purpose applied.⁵⁰ Generally, if the plaintiff shareholder engages in a business which is not the same as the defendant company, the court is unlikely to find that the first specific type of improper purpose applies.⁵¹

Furthermore, for the catch-all provision, this Article finds that the defendant company just makes a general claim without giving concrete evidence. This helps explain why all of them were not approved by the court. Finally, before the promulgation of the 2017 Judicial Interpretation, it was less clear what might constitute improper purposes, and sometimes, the court did not even find an improper purpose when the requesting shareholder is engaged in a business in substantial competition with the main business of the

50. *Jianghan v. Qichang Xingli Haimen Ry. Materials Ltd.*, Su 0684 Min Chu No. 1029 (Jiangsu Province Haimen City Ct. 2016).

51. *See, e.g., Zhang Zhenping v. Beijing Heshi Lianchuang Culture Promotion Ltd.*, Jing 0114 Min Chu No. 12911 (Beijing Municipality Changping Dist. Ct. 2017). In this case, the defendant claimed that the shareholder was engaged in a business in substantial competition with the main business of the company, but the court rejected it because evidence showed that plaintiff shareholder's spouse ran a company whose business scope only overlapped partly with the defendant company.

company.⁵² The new statute should change this once it is fully implemented.

7. Substantial Deprivation of Inspection Rights

As discussed earlier, it is stipulated in China that a shareholder of a company cannot be substantially deprived of their inspection rights by the company's bylaws or any agreement between shareholders.⁵³ Table C8 shows how the "substantial deprivation" rule has been applied. Out of the total 193 sample cases, defendants raised the substantial deprivation issue in only three cases, only one of which found it to have occurred. The inference to be drawn here is that companies rarely restrict the shareholders' inspection right through their bylaws or in a shareholders' agreement in China. Finally, it is important to note that the restrictions in dispute are mainly based on the confidentiality issue, and thus are functionally similar to the defense of improper purpose, which also includes leaking information to others.

Table C8: Frequency Distribution of Circumstances of Substantial Deprivation

Forms of disputed substantial deprivation	Number of cases	Percentage	Not substantial deprivation	Substantial deprivation
Company constitution	1 ⁵⁴	33.33%	1	0

52. See, e.g., Yang Jianbing & Ma Haoran v. Jiangsu Province Huaian City Guoyuan Taxation Firm, Pu Shang Chu Zi No. 00513 (Jiangsu Province Huaian City Qingpu Dist. Ct. 2015). In this case, the plaintiff shareholders left the company and joined another company in the same business. The court held that the non-competition rule applied to directors and not shareholders under the Chinese law, and that there was no evidence to suggest improper purposes on the part of plaintiff shareholders. Had the case occurred after the 2017 Judicial Interpretation, the mere fact of plaintiff shareholders engaging in business competition could suffice to find improper purposes.

53. 2017 Judicial Interpretation, *supra* note 9, at § 9.

54. Wujing v. Nanjing Xinliansheng Ltd., Xi Shang Chu Zi No. 286 (Jiangsu Province Nanjing City Xixia Dist. Ct. 2013). In this case, the company's bylaw required that the shareholder should make a written request and a confidentiality commitment before exercising the inspection right. Under the bylaw, the company could also refuse the inspection request of the shareholder who has leaked the company's secrets before. The court held that the restrictions in the bylaw were reasonable and did not constitute substantive deprivation.

Shareholder resolution	2	66.67%	1 ⁵⁵	1 ⁵⁶
Total	3	100%	2	1

8. Subsequent Cases

Table C9 presents the information on “subsequent cases,” namely the cases filed by the same plaintiffs against the same defendants after the inspection right cases. The purpose here is to find out whether the inspection right cases in China were filed by the plaintiffs as a tool to investigate the company and to collect relevant evidence to bring subsequent cases.

Table C9: Subsequent Cases Filed

Year	Sam ple case s	Sub seq uen t suit s	Clas s acti on	Deriv ative suits	Appra isal suits	Liqui datio n suits	Othe r suits
2017	40	1	0	0	0	0	1
2016	52	8	0	0	1	5	2
2015	47	11	0	0	3	3	5
2014	37	3	0	0	1	2	0
2013	9	0	0	0	0	0	0
2012	8	1	0	0	1	0	0
Total	193	24	0	0	6	10	8

55. Yang Jianbing & Ma Haoran v. Jiangsu Province Huaian City Guoyuan Taxation Firm, Pu Shang Chu Zi No. 00513 (Jiangsu Province Huaian City Qingpu Dist. Ct. 2015). In this case, the company’s bylaw provided that the company can disallow a shareholder to exercise the inspection rights for the purpose of protecting its business secrets. The court did not hold this to be invalid, but nevertheless ordered the defendant company to provide information because it failed to produce evidence that the plaintiffs’ request for information was for improper purposes.

56. Jiang Xuyang v. Sichuan Rongyi Holding Ltd., Chuan 0191 Min Chu No. 4142 (Sichuan Province Chengdu City High-Tech Development Dist. Ct. 2017). In this case, the defendant company passed a shareholder resolution that because the requesting shareholder was involved in another case against the company, he would lose his inspection rights. The court found this shareholder resolution to constitute “substantial deprivation,” holding that “the shareholders’ inspection rights are the inherent rights of the shareholders, and should not be restricted through shareholder agreements or other means.” *Id.*

As Table C9 shows, during the study period, the subsequent suit rate varied from year to year. Overall, there were twenty-four subsequent suits in relation to the 193 sampled cases, with the subsequent suit rate being 12.4 percent. Further, this Article groups subsequent suits into four categories, namely derivative suits, appraisal suits, liquidation suits, and other suits which are mainly related to disputes over validity of shareholders' resolutions, distribution of dividend, and capital contribution by shareholders. In stark contrast with the United States, derivative suits and class actions are not found in China.⁵⁷ There were up to ten liquidation suits and six appraisal suits, representing 41.7 percent and 25 percent of all subsequent suits, respectively.

III. SHAREHOLDER INSPECTION RIGHTS UNDER DELAWARE LAW⁵⁸

A. Overview

Under Section 220 of the Delaware General Corporation Law (DGCL), shareholders have a mandatory right to seek stocklists or books and records.⁵⁹ The information available for inspection is extensive and includes "documents relating to allegedly wrongful transactions."⁶⁰ This right is so central to shareholder ownership that it cannot be removed by amending the corporation's charter.⁶¹ However, this right is not absolute, and questions of standing and proper purpose limit the abilities of a shareholder to demand documents.⁶²

First, to have standing to demand inspection of corporate records, a stockholder must either be a holder of the record or the beneficial owner of the stock (i.e., a voting trustee).⁶³ While the courts are

57. This issue will be further discussed and explained later. See *infra* Part IV.C.

58. All of the tables in this section are taken from James D. Cox, Kenneth J. Martin & Randall S. Thomas, *The Paradox of Delaware's "Tools at Hand" Doctrine: An Empirical Investigation*, BUS. LAW. (forthcoming summer 2020).

59. DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 8, § 220 (West 2010).

60. Randall S. Thomas & Kenneth J. Martin, *Using State Inspection Statutes for Discovery in Federal Securities Fraud Actions*, 77 B.U. L. REV. 69, 84 (1997). Other examples include "corporate accounting records; minutes of all meetings of the shareholders, board of directors, and board committees; stocklist materials; the corporation's certificate of incorporation' corporate bylaws; written communications to shareholders; and copies of resolutions creating one or more classes of stock." *Id.* at 72 n.11.

61. Cedarview Opportunities Master Fund v. Spanish Broad. Sys. Inc., No. 2017-0785-ABD, 2018 WL 4057012, at *53-55 (Del. Ch. Aug. 27, 2018).

62. Tit. 8, §§ 220(c)(1)-(c)(3).

63. *Id.* at § 220(a)(1). If the stockholder is a beneficial owner or an attorney or agent of the stockholder, proper documentation is required. DONALD J. WOLFE, JR. &

generally lenient in regards to standing, plaintiffs who have already cashed out or exchanged their shares in a merger may not have standing.⁶⁴ Second, shareholders bear the burden of “demonstrat[ing] a proper purpose for making such a demand.”⁶⁵ Section 220 defines a “proper purpose” as “a purpose reasonably related to such person’s interest as a stockholder.”⁶⁶ Case law has established a long list⁶⁷ of proper purposes including: (1) investigating corporate mismanagement;⁶⁸ (2) ascertaining the value of stock;⁶⁹ (3) soliciting support for derivative action;⁷⁰ (4) investigating the independence of special litigation committees;⁷¹ and (5) communicating with other stockholders in order to effectuate management policy changes.⁷² However, the Court of Chancery has discretion to refuse demands that it finds to have an improper purpose.⁷³ Thus, in *Norfolk County Retirement System v. Jos. A. Bank Clothiers, Inc.*, the court noted that the primary purpose of the request “must not be adverse to the corporation’s best interest.”⁷⁴

MICHAEL A. PITTENGER, CORPORATE AND COMMERCIAL PRACTICE IN DELAWARE COURT OF CHANCERY § 9.07[a][2][i][B] (2d ed. 2018).

64. See *Weingarten v. Monster Worldwide, Inc.*, No. 12931-VCG, 2017 WL 752179, at *7 (Del. Ch. Feb. 27, 2017) (dismissing the case for lack of standing because the plaintiff was no longer a shareholder at the time the challenged merger took place). For further discussion on standing, see WOLFE & PITTENGER, *supra* note 63, at § 9.07[b].

65. *King v. VeriFone Holdings, Inc.*, 12 A.3d 1140, 1145 (Del. 2011).

66. Tit. 8, § 220(b).

67. For more on established proper purposes, see EDWARD P. WELCH ET AL., *FOLK ON THE DELAWARE GENERAL CORPORATION LAW* § 220.05 (6th ed., 2014); WOLFE & PITTENGER, *supra* note 63, at § 9.07[e][1].

68. See *Sec. First Corp. v. U.S. Die Casting & Dev. Co.*, 687 A.2d 563, 567 (Del. 1997) (“It is well established that investigation of [corporate] mismanagement is a proper purpose for a § 220 books and records inspection.”) (alteration in original).

69. *CM & M Grp., Inc. v. Carroll*, 453 A.2d 788, 792 (Del. 1982) (citing *State ex rel. Rogers v. Sherman Oil Co.*, 117 A. 122, 125 (Del. 1922); *State ex rel. Brumley v. Jessup & Moore Paper Co.*, 77 A.2d 16, 20 (Del. 1910)).

70. See *State ex rel. Bloch v. Sentry Safety Control Corp.*, 24 A.2d 587, 590 (Del. Super. Ct. 1942); *State ex rel. Foster v. Standard Oil Co. of Kansas*, 18 A.2d 235, 238 (Del. Super. Ct. 1941); *Compaq Comput. Corp. v. Horton*, 631 A.2d 1 (Del. 1993) (holding that a shareholders request to inspect a corporation’s stock ledger with the purpose of identifying other shareholders who may be interested was a proper purpose under the statutory requirements).

71. *Grimes v. DSC Commc’ns Corp.*, 724 A.2d 561, 566 (Del. Ch. 1998); *La. Mun. Police Emp.’s Ret. Sys. v. Morgan Stanley & Co.*, No. 5682-VCL, 2011 Del. Ch. LEXIS 42, at *1 (Del. Ch. Mar. 4, 2011).

72. See *Marathon Partners L.P. v. M&F Worldwide Corp.*, No. 018-N, 2004 Del. Ch. LEXIS 101, at *30 (Del. Ch. July 30, 2014) (holding that communicating with other shareholders in order to effect a change in management policies is a “proper purpose” for a shareholder’s demand to inspect corporate records).

73. See *State ex rel. Healy v. Superior Oil Corp.*, 13 A.2d 453, 456 (Del. Super. Ct. 1940).

74. *Norfolk Cty. Ret. Sys. v. Joseph A. Bank Clothiers Inc.*, No. 3443-VCP, 2009 Del. Ch. LEXIS 20, at *16 (Del. Ch. Feb. 12, 2009) (citing *Grimes v. DSC Commc’ns Corp.*, 724 A.2d 561, 565 (Del. Ch. 1998)).

If a shareholder's books and records request is denied or ignored, the shareholder may, after five days, bring a claim against the corporation in the Court of Chancery.⁷⁵ When demanding books and records, the requesting shareholder bears the burden of demonstrating a proper purpose for their request.⁷⁶ As a Section 220 action is essentially a tool for the shareholder to gather information of potential wrongdoing,⁷⁷ the shareholder need only demonstrate evidence that there is a *credible basis* of possible mismanagement warranting further investigation.⁷⁸ This standard carries "the lowest possible burden of proof"⁷⁹ to enable plaintiffs that may lack sufficient evidence to bring a claim directly to make requests that may lead to additional discovery of potential management wrongdoing.

However, despite this light burden of proof, the Delaware courts have understood the inspection rights to be a balancing act between the rights of stockholders and the corporation. First, the Delaware courts have stated that the credible basis standard does not allow for "fishing expeditions."⁸⁰ Second, even when a plaintiff's Section 220 action is successful, her inspection rights are limited to those documents that are "necessary and essential" to achieving her stated purpose.⁸¹ Furthermore, a stockholder's inspection right does not

75. DEL. CODE ANN. § 220(c) (West 2010).

76. Thomas & Martin, *supra* note 60, at 85.

77. See *Seinfeld v. Verizon Comm'ns, Inc.*, 909 A.2d 117, 118, 123 (Del. 2006) (emphasis added). A stockholder is "not required to prove by a preponderance of the evidence that waste and [mis]management are actually occurring." Stockholders need only show, by a preponderance of the evidence, a credible basis from which the Court of Chancery can infer there is possible mismanagement that would warrant further investigation—a showing that "may ultimately fall well short of demonstrating that anything wrong occurred." *Id.* at 123 (alteration in original). The credible basis requirement thus qualifies by rendering more specific the showing that the shareholder meets the "proper purpose" requirement set forth in DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 8, § 220(b) (West 2010). Some states have followed Delaware in similarly conditioning record requests on alleging a "credible basis" of misconduct when records are sought as a possible prelude for a shareholder suit. See, e.g., *Arctic Fin. Corp. v. OTR Express, Inc.*, 38 P.3d 701, 704 (Kan. 2002); *Cain v. Merck & Co.*, 1 A.3d 834, 842–43 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 2010) (finding guidance from Delaware to conclude that unsupported allegations of mismanagement do not present a proper purpose). Other courts adhere to the more general "proper purpose: standard but closely scrutinize the request for information supporting the presence of wrongdoing. See, e.g., *Chitwood v. Vertex Pharm., Inc.*, 71 N.E.3d 492, 501 (Mass. 2017) ("[R]equest granted if there is 'reasonable inference . . . that would tend to indicate the existence of corporate wrongdoing or mismanagement.'").

78. See *Norfolk Cty. Ret. Sys.*, 2009 Del. Ch. LEXIS 20, at *17.

79. *Id.* (quoting *Melzer v. CNET Networks, Inc.*, 934 A.2d 912, 917 n.19 (Del. Ch. 2007)).

80. *Seinfeld*, 909 A.2d at 122.

81. *Saito v. McKesson HBOC, Inc.*, 806 A.2d 113, 115 (Del. 2002) (citation omitted); see also *Helmsman Mgmt. Servs., Inc. v. A & S Consultants, Inc.*, 525 A.2d 160, 167 (Del. Ch. 1987). In addition to stating a proper purpose, a stockholder seeking

allow it “wide ranging discovery that would be available in support of litigation.”⁸² Rather “it is restricted to inspection of the books and records needed to perform the task.”⁸³ In certain cases, Delaware courts have further required plaintiffs seeking a Section 220 action to “make specific and discrete identification, *with rifled precision*, of the documents sought.”⁸⁴

In addition to these limitations, the Court of Chancery has broad discretion in limiting or conditioning an inspection.⁸⁵ One limiting factor requires that the books and records “address the ‘crux of the shareholder’s purpose’ and that the information ‘is unavailable from another source.’”⁸⁶ Furthermore, in some cases, when nonpublic information is sought,⁸⁷ the Delaware courts have upheld as reasonable defendants’ requests that a stockholder sign a confidentiality agreement.⁸⁸ Documents obtained under a Section 220 action that are subject to a confidentiality agreement “will be treated as confidential unless and until disclosed in the course of litigation or pursuant to some other legal requirement.”⁸⁹

a Section 220 inspection must satisfy certain form and manner requirements outlined in the statute. *See West Coast Mgmt. & Capital, LLC v. Carrier Access Corp.*, 914 A.2d 636, 641 (Del. Ch. 2006) (citing *Highland Select Equity Fund, L.P. v. Motient Corp.*, 906 A.2d 156, 163 (Del. Ch. 2006)) For example, a stockholder is required to serve a “written demand under oath stating the purpose thereof . . . directed to the corporation at its registered office in [Delaware] or at its principal place of business.” Tit. 8, § 220(b). If the corporation refuses to permit the demanded inspection or fails to respond “to the demand within 5 business days after the demand has been made, the stockholder may apply to the Court of Chancery for an order to compel such inspection.” *Id.* at § 220(c). When filing a Section 220 complaint, the plaintiff stockholder is required to attach proof of being a stockholder of record. *Id.*

82. *Saito*, 806 A.2d at 114.

83. *BBC Acquisition Corp. v. Durr-Fillauer Med., Inc.* 623 A.2d 85, 88 (Del. Ch. 1992).

84. *Brehm v. Eisner*, 746 A.2d 244, 266 (Del. 2000) (emphasis added).

85. Tit. 8, § 220(c). The Court of Chancery’s imposition of a condition or limitation is determined on a “case-by-case and ‘fact specific’” basis. *United Techs. Corp. v. Treppel*, 109 A.3d 553, 558 (Del. 2014) (quoting *Espinoza v. Hewlett-Packard Co.*, 32 A.3d 365, 372 (Del. 2011)).

86. *Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Ind. Elec. Workers Pension Trust Fund IBEW*, 95 A.3d 1264, 1271 (Del. 2014) (quoting *Espinoza v. Hewlett-Packard Co.*, 32 A.3d 365, 372 (Del. 2011)).

87. 1 R. FRANKLIN BALOTTI & JESSE A. FINKELSTEIN, *THE DELAWARE LAW OF CORPORATIONS & BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS* § 7.48 (3d ed. 2018).

88. *Disney v. Walt Disney Co.*, 857 A.2d 444, 447–48 (Del. Ch. 2004).

89. *Stone v. Ritter*, No. 1570-N, 2005 Del. Ch. LEXIS 146, at *4 (Del. Ch. Sept. 26, 2005); *see also Disney*, 857 A.2d at 450 (“[A] stockholder making a books and records demand can expect that documents designated as confidential pursuant to a reasonable confidentiality agreement will remain confidential unless the stockholder concludes that grounds exist to initiate litigation and the court in which the proceeding is brought determines to include those documents in the public record.”).

B. *The Tools at Hand Doctrine*

The usefulness of a Section 220 request for books and records as a discovery tool was not initially apparent to plaintiffs in Delaware. In the 1980s and 1990s, shareholder plaintiffs rarely utilized the inspection statute to request books and records.⁹⁰ Even when a Section 220 request was made, the large majority of them were for stocklists.⁹¹ Thus, according to an empirical study conducted by one of the authors, from 1981 to 1994 only fifty-three books and records cases were filed, while a total of ninety-one stocklist cases were brought during the same time period.⁹²

But Section 220 can be useful as a pre-filing discovery tool by plaintiffs. To understand how Section 220 acts in this fashion, it is important to first understand the plaintiff shareholder's problem in filing breach of fiduciary duty cases. If they suspect management misconduct, plaintiffs can either bring a class action claim, alleging indirect injuries to the shareholder, or a derivative claim, alleging indirect harm to the shareholders due to an injury to the corporation.⁹³ In the case of a derivative lawsuit, as the corporation is directly injured, a plaintiff is required to first request that the board bring the action.⁹⁴ The directors then decide whether the corporation should file a suit against the alleged wrongdoers, who are usually the very directors themselves.⁹⁵ However, in Delaware, if a plaintiff brings a demand for a derivative suit to the board, she concedes the board's independence and authority to pursue the action, waiving her future ability to litigate the claim.⁹⁶

90. Thomas & Martin, *supra* note 60, at 90.

91. *Id.* at 90, 102–07. However, the study presented may not accurately reflect the actual breakdown in Section 220 requests. This is largely because when a demand is made, companies are incentivized to produce some documents than to reject the investor's demand, forcing a lawsuit. For a discussion on why companies are incentivized to accede to shareholder demands, see Kevin Shannon, Corp. Litig. Partner, Potter Anderson Corroon LLP, Trending Developments: Dealing with Books and Records Inspection Demands at the Third Annual Symposium on Corporate Law (Oct. 12, 2018) (oral presentation). Therefore, studies are largely limited to those Section 220 requests that end up in court.

92. Thomas & Martin, *supra* note 60, at 102–07.

93. For a more extensive summary of the distinction between a derivative and direct suit, please see *In re Activision Blizzard, Inc. Stockholders Litig.*, 124 A.3d 1025, 1044–52 (Del. Ch. 2015).

94. DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 8, § 141 (West 2010). “When a corporation suffers harm, the board of directors is the institutional actor legally empowered under Delaware law to determine what, if any, remedial action the corporation should take, including pursuing litigation against the individuals involved.” *In re China Agritech Inc.*, No. 7163-VCL, 2013 Del. Ch. LEXIS 132, at *36 (Del. Ch. May 21, 2013).

95. Delaware accordingly has its own process to review that the directors actually reviewed whether bringing litigation against the wrongdoing managers was in the best interest of the corporation.

96. *Grimes v. Donald*, 673 A.2d 1207, 1216, 1218–19 (Del. 1996).

If plaintiffs decide to avoid the demand process, their demand excusal complaint must show with particularized facts that making demand on the board is futile.⁹⁷ However, under Delaware law, plaintiffs in a derivative suit are “not entitled to discovery to assist their compliance with the particularized pleading requirement of Rule 23.1 in a case of demand refusal.”⁹⁸ Therefore, unless the facts required to meet the pleading requirement are publicly available, the plaintiffs will probably be unable to bring a derivative suit against the management.

In *Rales v. Blasband*,⁹⁹ the Delaware Supreme Court, acknowledging this barrier to discovery, urged derivative plaintiffs to use their Section 220 inspection rights to uncover corporate information to meet the particularized facts requirement for demand excusal.¹⁰⁰ This seminal case provides the basis for shareholders to employ Section 220, the so-called tools at hand,¹⁰¹ as a form of presuit discovery. A few years later, in *Grimes v. Donald*,¹⁰² the Delaware Supreme Court reiterated the importance of utilizing Section 220 to establish demand futility.¹⁰³ There, the court, finding that the derivative plaintiff failed to establish futility, dismissed the case and stated, “[i]f the stockholder cannot plead such assertions consistent with Chancery Rule 11, after using the ‘tools at hand’ to obtain the necessary information before filing a derivative action, then the stockholder must make a pre-suit demand on the board.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the pleas of the Delaware courts, Section 220’s use as a presuit discovery tool was largely unappreciated by the Delaware plaintiff’s bar until the turn of the century. Finally, the message seemed to get through. In *Brehm v. Eisner*, the shareholders claimed that the Disney board breached its fiduciary duty when it approved “an extravagant and wasteful” employment contract with Michael Ovitz and then agreed to a nonfault termination of Ovitz fourteen months later, which entitled him to a \$140 million payout.¹⁰⁵ Despite allegations of misconduct based on publicly available information, the complaint failed to survive a motion to dismiss, in large part, due to

97. This requires them to show enough to “create a reasonable doubt either that: (1) a majority of the board is independent for purposes of responding to the demand or refusing the rule; or (2) the challenged action is protected by the business judgment rule.” Thomas & Martin, *supra* note 60, at 82.

98. *Scatter Corp. v. Chicago Stock Exch., Inc.*, 701 A.2d 70, 77 (Del. 1997).

99. *Rales v. Blasband*, 634 A.2d 927 (Del. 1993).

100. See *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 816 (Del. 1984) (explaining that the test of Chancery Rule 23.1 for demand excusal requires alleging particularized facts).

101. See *Rales*, 634 A.2d at 934–35 n.10 (explaining that Section 220 can be used as an information-gathering tool in the derivative context).

102. *Grimes v. Donald*, 673 A.2d 1207, 1216 (Del. 1996) (en banc).

103. *Id.*

104. *Id.*

105. *Brehm v. Eisner*, 746 A.2d 244, 248 (Del. 2000).

the discovery stay.¹⁰⁶ On appeal, the plaintiffs argued that the Delaware discovery stay was unfair and made pleading demand futility impossible.¹⁰⁷ However, the Delaware Supreme Court rejected these claims, stating:

Plaintiffs may well have the “tools at hand” to develop the necessary facts for pleading purposes. For example, plaintiffs may seek relevant books and records of the corporation under Section 220 of the Delaware General Corporation Law, if they can ultimately bear the burden of showing a proper purpose and make specific and discrete identification, with rifled precision, of the documents sought. Further, they must establish that each category of books and records is essential to the accomplishment of their articulated purpose for the inspection.¹⁰⁸

The sentiment in *Brehm* has become a fixture in Delaware courts.¹⁰⁹ In fact, the Court of Chancery has warned that lawyers who fail to use the presuit discovery tool do so at their own peril.¹¹⁰ Since then, the use of Section 220 as a presuit discovery tool has dramatically increased.¹¹¹

C. Section 220 and Merger Litigation

Prior to 2014, the shareholder-friendly standards in the M&A context created by *Revlon*¹¹² and *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*¹¹³

106. *Id.* at 267.

107. *Id.* at 266.

108. *Id.* at 266–67.

109. *See, e.g.*, King v. VeriFone Holdings, Inc., 12 A.3d 1140, 1145 (Del. 2011); Seinfeld v. Verizon Commc'ns, Inc., 909 A.2d 117, 120 (Del. 2006). In *Verizon*, the Delaware Supreme Court stated: More than a decade ago, we noted that “[s]urprisingly, little use has been made of Section 220 as an information-gathering tool in the derivative [suit] context.” Today, however, stockholders who have concerns about corporate governance are increasingly making a broad array of Section 220 demands. The rise in books and records litigation is directly attributable to this Court’s encouragement of stockholders, who can show a proper purpose, to use the “tools at hand” to obtain the necessary information before filing a derivative action. Section 220 is now recognized as “an important part of the corporate governance landscape.” *Seinfeld*, 909 A.2d at 120 (alteration in original). Some commentators have argued that Section 220 demands are “especially relevant when shareholders in a company assert what are now commonly referred to as ‘Caremark claims.’” Frank R. Schirripa & Daniel B. Rehns, *Is the Delaware Section 220 Tango Worth the Wait?*, AM. BAR ASS’N (Oct. 3, 2017), <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/committees/class-actions/articles/2017/fall2017-delaware-section-220-tango.html> [<https://perma.cc/W9PH-J8AH>] (archived Jan. 31, 2020).

110. *See* Mizel v. Connelly, No. 16638, 1999 Del. Ch. LEXIS 157, at *2 (Del. Ch. Aug. 2, 1999).

111. Cox, Martin & Thomas, *supra* note 58, at 28–29 tbl. 1.

112. Robert B. Thompson & Randall S. Thomas, *The New Look of Shareholder Litigation: Acquisition-Oriented Class Actions*, 57 VAND. L. REV. 133, 147 (2004) (“Defendants have had much more trouble under the standards set forth in *Revlon v. MacAndrews & Forbes.*”).

incentivized plaintiffs to file mergers and acquisitions (M&A) lawsuits immediately following announcement of all proposed deals.¹¹⁴ In this environment, class action suits were filed quickly so Section 220 litigation could not be completed fast enough to be useful.¹¹⁵ Over time, the increased filing of frivolous deal suits in Delaware pressured the Delaware legislature and judiciary to take action in the M&A sphere. As explained below, the Delaware courts responded with decisions which helped rein in frivolous deal litigation and created an environment that encouraged the use of Section 220.

1. *Revlon* and *Corwin*

Corwin v. KKR Financial Holdings LLC endorsed the use of shareholder ratification as a cleansing device to dismiss deal litigation against directors.¹¹⁶ There the Delaware Supreme Court found that in an arms-length M&A transaction with no explicit conflict of interest for directors, a fully informed noncoercive vote of approval by the disinterested stockholders would lead it to review the actions of the target's board of directors under the business judgment rule.¹¹⁷ By making it easier for directors to receive deferential review, *Corwin* mitigated the flood of deal litigation.¹¹⁸

2. *Weinberger* and *MFV*

Prior to 2014, in cases of self-dealing by controlling shareholders, the courts reviewed the actions of the shareholder under the entire fairness doctrine.¹¹⁹ Most famously applied in *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*,¹²⁰ this heightened standard of judicial review made it difficult for defendants to dismiss cases using pretrial motions. This gave all shareholder plaintiffs' claims value in the settlement process, incentivizing plaintiffs to bring even weak cases.¹²¹

113. *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 701 (Del. 1981).

114. One study found that the vast majority of acquisition-oriented class actions were filed within three days of public announcement of the deal. See Thompson & Thomas, *supra* note 112, at 182–83 tbl. 9.

115. *See id.*

116. *Corwin v. KKR Fin. Holdings LLC*, 125 A.3d 304, 311 (Del. 2015).

117. *Id.* at 308–09.

118. For a discussion on the significance of *Corwin*, see James D. Cox & Randall S. Thomas, *Delaware's Retreat: Exploring Developing Fissures and Tectonic Shifts in Delaware Corporate Law*, 42 DEL. J. CORP. L. 323, 336–40 (2018).

119. See *Sinclair Oil Corp. v. Levien*, 280 A.2d 717, 720 (Del. 1971) (finding that the Petitioner must meet the test of intrinsic fairness which “involves both a high degree of fairness and a shift in the burden of proof.”).

120. *Weinberger v. UOP, Inc.*, 457 A.2d 712 (Del. 1981).

121. *In re Cox Commc'ns, Inc. S'holders Litig.*, 879 A.2d 604, 605 (Del. Ch. 2005).

The Delaware Supreme Court addressed this problem in *Kahn v. M&F Worldwide (MFW)*.¹²² There, despite the presence of a typical self-dealing squeeze out of minority shareholders, the court applied the business judgment standard.¹²³ It justified its decision by relying on the dual approvals the transaction required from an independent special committee and from a fully informed, uncoerced majority of the minority shareholder vote.¹²⁴

3. Modern Usage of the Tools at Hand

The upshot of this shift towards applying the business judgment rule meant that the actions of many directors and controlling shareholders in M&A deals went virtually unreviewed by the Delaware courts. Since shareholders almost always approve the deal,¹²⁵ litigants generally attack director actions by arguing that the shareholder vote was not fully informed. When a shareholder litigant can show that the vote was not fully informed, the courts will apply a heightened judicial standard.¹²⁶ However, in order to survive a motion to dismiss, plaintiffs must, prior to discovery, plead facts which sufficiently show that they would be entitled “to recover under any reasonably conceivable set of circumstances susceptible of proof.”¹²⁷ Only once the plaintiff can identify the deficiency in disclosure will the burden shift to the defendant.¹²⁸ However, it is extremely difficult for plaintiffs to meet this requirement relying solely on public information.¹²⁹ Section 220 has provided an essential discovery tool for plaintiffs in merger litigation.¹³⁰

For example, in *Appel v. Berkman*, the plaintiff was able to discover the omission of material facts that helped it survive a motion to dismiss.¹³¹ There, the plaintiff challenged the disclosures in a cash

122. *Kahn v. M&F Worldwide Corp.*, 88 A.3d 635 (Del. 2014).

123. *Id.* at 638.

124. *Id.* at 644–47.

125. See James D. Cox, Tomas J. Mondino & Randall S. Thomas, *Understanding the (Ir)Relevance of Shareholder Votes on M&A Deals*, 69 DUKE L.J. 503, 511–13 (2019).

126. See *id.* at 542–44.

127. *In re Books-A-Million, Inc. Stockholders Litig.*, No. 11343-VCL, 2016 WL 5874974, at *21 (Del. Ch. Oct. 10, 2016).

128. See *In re Solera Holdings, Inc. Stockholder Litig.*, No. 11524-CB, 2017 WL 57839, at *9 (Del. Ch. Jan. 5, 2017).

129. The need for pre-filing discovery has been heightened in light of the Delaware Supreme Court’s decision in *Flood v. Synutra Int’l, Inc.*, 195 A.3d 754 (Del. 2018).

130. However, some plaintiffs’ counsels have been skeptical about the value of Section 220 proceedings as a substitute for discovery in an M&A case. See Joel E. Friedlander, *Vindicating the Duty of Loyalty: Using Data Points of Successful Stockholder Litigation as a Tool for Reform*, 72 BUS. LAW. 623, 648 (2017).

131. *Appel v. Berkman*, No. 12844-VCMR, 2017 Del. Ch. LEXIS 503, at *6 (Del. Ch. July 13, 2017), *rev’d*, 180 A.3d 1055, 1064 (Del. 2018). The Chancery Court’s

sale of the company to a private equity firm in a “two-step merger transaction involving a front-end tender offer followed by a back-end merger under Section 251(h).”¹³² While the transaction was pending, the plaintiff requested books and records from the company.¹³³ Once the transaction was completed, the company fulfilled the plaintiff’s request.¹³⁴ It was through this request that the plaintiff had the grounds to plead an omission of material facts—among other things the company’s founder, largest shareholder, and current chairman, had abstained from approving the transaction.¹³⁵ As a result, the Delaware Supreme Court reversed and remanded the Chancery Court’s decision, holding that the omission was material and necessary to make the disclosures not misleading.¹³⁶

Similarly, *Morrison v. Berry* shows the pivotal role a Section 220 books and records request can have in overcoming the “cleansing” effect of *Corwin* ratification.¹³⁷ There the information uncovered in an inspection case allowed plaintiff to file a breach of fiduciary duty claim against the corporate directors in connection with the sale of the company to a private equity firm in a friendly tender offer.¹³⁸ While the tender offer was pending, the plaintiff filed a Section 220 action seeking books and records from the company.¹³⁹ The company refused the plaintiff’s request, and the tender offer closed with a majority of shares tendered.¹⁴⁰ When the plaintiff brought her Section 220 demand to court, she successfully obtained the requested documents.¹⁴¹

This request uncovered a smoking gun; among other things, an email revealed that Ray Berry, the company’s founder, had already entered into an agreement to sell to the private equity firm and intended to thwart sales to other bidders.¹⁴² This was not disclosed to the shareholders.¹⁴³ The Delaware Supreme Court, finding that the vote was not fully informed, as information material to a voting shareholder was not disclosed, reversed and remanded the Chancery Court’s dismissal of the case.¹⁴⁴

decision that defendants were entitled business judgment rule under *Corwin* was reversed by the Delaware Supreme Court.

132. *Appel v. Berkman*, 180 A.3d 1055, 1057 (Del. 2018).

133. *Id.* at 1059.

134. *Id.*

135. *Id.* at 1057.

136. *Id.* at 1064–65.

137. *Morrison v. Berry*, 191 A.3d 268, 277 (Del. 2018).

138. *Id.* at 284–85.

139. *Id.* at 273.

140. *Id.*

141. *Id.*

142. *Id.* at 273–74.

143. *Id.* at 276–77.

144. *Id.* at 287.

Furthermore, Section 220 can play a crucial role in litigating cases where a controlling shareholder may seek to utilize *MFW* protections. An ultimately unsuccessful use of Section 220 can be seen in *Olenik v. Lodzinski*, where plaintiffs were able to employ the tools at hand to obtain information.¹⁴⁵ However, they were ultimately dismissed as they could still not establish that defendants had made a material misstatement or omission.¹⁴⁶ As illustrated by the cases above, Section 220 has proven to be an important means for plaintiffs seeking presuit discovery in an M&A transaction. As shown in the next Part, the use of this right has increased dramatically since decision in *Brehm*.¹⁴⁷

D. Empirical Data on the Use of Section 220¹⁴⁸

In an earlier paper, one of the authors collected data on all Section 220 cases filed in the Delaware Chancery Court from 2004–2018.¹⁴⁹ Table D1 provides a description of the Section 220 cases filed during 2004–2018. There were only eight cases where the plaintiffs solely sought the stocklist. The vast majority of cases made requests only for books and records, while a significant number of other cases asked for both books and records as well as the stocklist. There is significant variation in the number of cases filed annually, ranging from a low of twenty-nine to a high of sixty-seven.

Table D1:¹⁵⁰ Section 220 Filings in Delaware Chancery Court to Obtain Stockholder List and/or Books and Records

Year filed	Number of cases	Stocklist only	Books and records only	Both stocklist and books and records
2004	49	2	30	17
2005	57	0	37	20
2006	40	3	27	10

145. *Olenik v. Lodzinski*, No. 2017-0414-JRS, 2018 WL 3493092, at *3–4 (Del. Ch. July 20, 2018).

146. *Id.* at *4.

147. See Cox, Martin & Thomas, *supra* note 58, at 28–29 tbl. 1 (illustrating a large increase in Section 220 claims between 2004 and 2018).

148. This section draws heavily on an earlier study by one of the authors. *Id.* at tbls. 1, 3.

149. *Id.*

150. All the tables on the Delaware law have a prefix code of “D” (Delaware).

2007	34	0	21	13
2008	33	1	20	12
2009	29	1	23	5
2010	35	1	20	14
2011	38	0	27	11
2012	38	0	31	7
2013	56	0	47	9
2014	67	0	51	16
2015	48	0	39	9
2016	52	0	36	16
2017	61	0	48	13
2018	62	0	53	9
Total	699	8	510	181

It is interesting to contrast these values with those developed in an earlier study, which compiled similar data for 1981–1994.¹⁵¹ Since that time, there has been a large increase in the number of Section 220 filings. For example, stocklist filings increased substantially from ninety-one cases in the earlier study to 189¹⁵² in the more recent time period. Even more strikingly, books and records request cases increased from fifty-three requests in the earlier study to 691 corporate actions in the more recent time period.¹⁵³

What happened in these cases? In untabulated results, the more recent empirical study finds that there are eighty-two court decisions in the plaintiffs' favor in books and records cases and an additional

151. Thomas & Martin, *supra* note 60, at 73.

152. This is the sum of stock list only cases plus stock list and books and records cases.

153. See *supra* Part III.C (there are an additional 154 LLC/LP cases).

forty-three settlements where the parties state that the plaintiff is getting books and records. In thirty-six more cases, the court dismissed the action without awarding the plaintiff books and records, and in another twenty-one cases the plaintiff dismissed its case stating that it was not being given books and records. Summarizing the publicly available information about outcomes, plaintiffs were successful 125 times (eighty-two decisions plus forty-three explicitly productive settlements) and had fifty-seven failures (thirty-six court dismissals plus twenty-one settlements without documents). The largest set of cases (465) have indeterminate outcomes because the plaintiff dismissed its case without clearly indicating that it received books and records. For this group of cases, it is impossible to classify them as wins or losses based on publicly available information. Some experienced Delaware lawyers indicated that in their experience the plaintiff generally receives some documents in this situation, although not necessarily all that they request.¹⁵⁴

Table D2 shows the number of days between the initial court filing and the final outcome in the case (DELAY), as well as the number of pages plaintiffs, defendants, and the court filed. DELAY generally favors defendants because a “subsequent derivative lawsuit could end up being dismissed on the grounds that other plaintiffs have already litigated the issue.”¹⁵⁵ DELAY provides a measure of how long the plaintiffs are delayed before bringing any subsequent merits-based litigation. For books and records cases, the mean delay is around ten months (312 days), while the median delay is approximately six months (193 days).¹⁵⁶

Table D2: Descriptive Statistics of Variables Associated with Request for Books and Records

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Median	Maximum
DELAY	312	367.01	0	193	2,666

154. Some of these settlements are in response to judicial pressure to resolve cases without unnecessary litigation, while others may arise because the filing of the Section 220 cases acts as “a shot across the bow,” leading the defendant to seek to resolve the underlying dispute.

155. Michael Greene, *Books and Records Disputes Getting Longer, More Complex*, BLOOMBERG BNA (May 5, 2016) (interviewing Megan McIntyre).

156. These values are similar to those obtained in the earlier study. We did not separately calculate the differences in delay for stock list and books and records cases in the second study.

PLTPAGES	182	288.9	7	77	2,597
DEFPAGES	152	315.8	0	32	3192
COURTPAG	46	78.1	0	18	579
TOTPAGES	380	593.2	9	144	5,781
PLT%TOTA	58.1%	21.1%	7.7%	59.0%	100.0%

Variable definitions are as follows:

DELAY	Number of days between complaint filing and outcome dates.
PLTPAGES	Number of pages filed by plaintiff.
DEFPAGES	Number of pages filed by defendant.
COURTPAG	Number of pages filed by the court.
TOTPAGES	Total number of pages filed: plaintiff + defendant + court.
PLT%TOTA	Percentage of total litigation pages filed by plaintiff.

Page filings, which provide some indication of the intensity of the litigation effort by the parties and the court, show some interesting differences from those compiled in the earlier study. For example, recent plaintiffs file more than twice as many pages as plaintiffs in the first study, while recent defendants file almost three times as much as defendants from the earlier period. This trend is true for both mean and median filings. The court itself produces a substantial number of documents with an average of almost forty-six pages, showing significant court involvement.

These data illustrate one very important point: books and records cases are not summary proceedings in many instances. The long case resolution times and the increased level of filing activity for both plaintiffs and defendants support that finding. Plaintiffs argue that defendants have turned books and records litigation into litigation of the possible merits of the suit to shareholders using it as a quick and easy pre-filing discovery tool.¹⁵⁷ This is true despite the fact that, “the Court of Chancery has rebuked ‘a continuing tendency’

157. At a recent practitioner conference, a leading plaintiffs’ lawyer made the further point that defendants are paid by the hour in books and records cases, whereas plaintiffs’ counsel frequently has to bear its own costs in bringing these cases and is only compensated for their work if they successfully bring a subsequent merits-based lawsuit.

to use a section 220 suits for 'broad defensive as well as offensive purposes. . . .'¹⁵⁸

Finally, Table D3 examines how frequently books and records cases lead to the filing of a subsequent action involving the same defendant corporation, and, if so, whether the case raised derivative claims, class action claims, individual claims, or other types of claims.

Table D3: Frequency Distribution by Year of Section 220 Cases Where a Subsequent Case Is Filed by Plaintiff

	All subsequent related suits	Derivative suits	Class actions	Individual actions	Receiver appointment actions	Appraisal suits
2004	16	13	6	3	0	0
2005	20	12	11	3	0	1
2006	2	0	0	1	1	0
2007	3	2	1	1	0	0
2008	7	4	1	3	0	0
2009	4	3	1	1	0	0
2010	3	1	0	1	1	0
2011	11	5	1	5	1	0
2012	7	4	3	1	0	0
2013	12	8	2	3	0	0
2014	16	13	5	2	0	1
2015	12	9	3	2	1	0
2016	7	3	1	2	0	1
2017	10	5	4	2	0	0
2018	3	1	1	1	0	0
Totals	133	83	40	31	4	3

Table D3 shows that Section 220 cases have led to the filing of 133 subsequent merits-based lawsuits over our sample period. Comparing the number of subsequent suits (133) to the number of all books and records cases in the second study (699), about 19 percent of all books and records cases result in the filing of a subsequent merits-

158. EDWARD P. WELCH ET AL., *FOLK ON THE DELAWARE GENERAL CORPORATION LAW: FUNDAMENTALS* 421 (3d ed. 1994) (quoting *Mite Corp. v. Heil-Coli Corp.*, 256 A.2d 855, 857-58 (Del. Ch. 1969)).

based lawsuit.¹⁵⁹ Of the total number of subsequent cases, twenty-seven raise both derivative and class claims and one raises both class and appraisal claims resulting in an overlap so that the totals at the bottom of Table D3 exceed the number 133. Keeping this overlap in mind, the authors find about sixty-two percent of the subsequent actions are derivative suits (some of which contain class action claims too), roughly thirty percent are class actions (some of which contain derivative claims too), and approximately twenty-three percent raise individual claims, with few other types of cases mixed in. Overall, these data are consistent with the claim that the tools-at-hand doctrine is having its greatest impact on derivative suit litigation. M&A suits are filed much more quickly so Section 220 cases are less useful. This suggests Delaware needs to rethink how it contains rapid filing of deal litigation if it wants to encourage the use of Section 220 as a deal litigation improvement device.

E. Important Limitations on Section 220

Despite the important role that Section 220 plays in presuit discovery, the Delaware legislatures and judiciary have placed some significant restrictions on it. Recognizing the potential abuse of the tools at hand, the judiciary has allowed corporations to supplement the proper purpose requirement for inspection rights with “reasonable” conditions. Generally, “conditions that are in the interests of the corporation and its shareholders generally [have been] allowed.”¹⁶⁰ For example, if a stay of discovery in an existing derivative action is in place, the Chancery has limited production of books and records so as to avoid sharing of information with anyone involved in the pending derivative action.¹⁶¹ Second, if books and records are requested as presuit discovery to support a possible derivative complaint or direct action, the court has limited inspections to only those documents required for a “well-pleaded complaint.”¹⁶²

Additionally, the Delaware courts have allowed companies to condition fulfillment of an inspection request on potential plaintiffs

159. Alternatively, we could calculate this fraction by dividing the number of subsequent suits (126) by the number of cases alleging mismanagement (437) and find that twenty-nine percent of cases where the plaintiff is investigating wrongdoing result in subsequent litigation.

160. Michael Greene, *Del. Companies Placing More Conditions on Records Demands*, BLOOMBERG BUREAU OF NAT'L AFFAIRS 1 (Aug. 24, 2016) (on file with author) (quoting Professor Lawrence Hamermesh).

161. See *Freund v. Lucent Techs.*, No. 18893, 2003 Del. Ch. LEXIS 3, at *17 (Del. Ch. Jan. 9, 2003).

162. *Kaufman v. CA, Inc.*, 905 A.2d 749, 753 (Del. Ch. 2006); see also *Saito v. McKesson, HBOC, Inc.*, 806 A.2d 113, 115 (Del. 2002).

signing confidentiality agreements containing forum selection provisions. Thus, in *United Techs. Corp. v. Treppel*, the defendant conditioned fulfillment of a plaintiff's book and records request on signing a confidentiality agreement containing a forum selection provision.¹⁶³ The plaintiff refused, and the Chancery Court found for the plaintiff but, the Delaware Supreme Court disagreed, holding that "the Court of Chancery erred in concluding it lacked the statutory authority to impose its own preclusive limitation here."¹⁶⁴ It reasoned that as a textual reading of the statute did not limit the Chancery Court's authority to restrict the use of books and records, it had wide discretion to "shape the breadth and use of inspections under [Section] 220 to protect the legitimate interests of Delaware corporations."¹⁶⁵

The Delaware courts have also found that an "incorporation condition" is reasonable, as it balances the interests of the parties and the court.¹⁶⁶ This condition incorporates by reference the entire books and records production into any subsequent derivative action complaint.¹⁶⁷ It allows the court to review the actual documents to ensure plaintiffs do not "cherry-pick" documents to support their complaints.¹⁶⁸ However, some in the plaintiffs' bar argue that this allows the defendant to misconstrue the record to their benefit.¹⁶⁹

Finally, some companies have conditioned stock options on employees waiving their books and records inspection rights.¹⁷⁰ Whether such a waiver will be upheld by the court, however, is currently unclear.¹⁷¹ While restrictive, these conditions seem to reasonably address potential abuse of Section 220.

In conclusion, Section 220 provides shareholders with a very important right that helps balance the interests of all parties involved—plaintiffs have the ability to demand information in preparing their complaint, while defendants are protected from fishing expeditions and overly litigious shareholders, and the court is able to maintain judicial economy. However, despite the acclaim of this doctrine, recent decisions have imposed additional restrictions on it.

163. *United Techs. Corp. v. Treppel*, 109 A.3d 553, 556 (Del. 2014).

164. *Id.* at 559.

165. *Id.*

166. *See Amalgamated Bank v. Yahoo!, Inc.*, 132 A.3d 752, 797 (Del. Ch. 2016).

167. *Id.* at 796.

168. *Id.* at 797–98.

169. Greene, *supra* note 160 (quoting Mark Lebovitch).

170. *See* Rolfe Winkler, *Startup Employees Invoke Obscure Law to Open up Books*, WALL ST. J. (May 25, 2016), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/startup-employees-invoke-obs-cure-law-to-open-up-books-1464082202> [https://perma.cc/6V6K-6ZY6] (archived Jan. 31, 2020).

171. *See id.* (quoting Richard Grimm).

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A. *General Observations*

Both China and Delaware provide for shareholder inspection rights and many similarities can be seen between them in terms of the law on the books and the law in practice. By providing access to relevant information, inspection rights serve as an effective mechanism to deal with different types of agency problems in the company: not only the manager–shareholder conflict, which is the most serious agency problem in the United States, but also the conflict between majority and minority shareholders, which mainly plagues the corporate governance system in China.

Inspection rights help to solve the issue of asymmetric information that is inherent in any principal–agent relationship, including those in the corporate form.¹⁷² Possession of adequate information is an important precondition for the principal to meaningfully monitor whether the agent performs appropriately, and to decide whether, and how, to take appropriate action.

Despite the general similarities, however, there are significant differences in how inspection rights are structured in the two jurisdictions. For instance, the Chinese law tends to have detailed rules on the application of inspection rights, such as the list of corporate documents that can be inspected and the list of circumstances where improper purposes on the part of the applicant shareholder can be found so as to deny them the right to inspect relevant documents. In contrast, the Delaware statute is more standards based, leaving significantly larger room for the court to exercise *ex post* review of many issues, including the scope of corporate documents produced by the defendants and any restrictions on inspection rights. This is largely due to the fact that standards cannot be effectively deployed in China, where the judiciary is not sufficiently sophisticated on business law topics and may lack independence from the state.

B. *Pro-shareholder versus Pro-management*

Perhaps because of the political power of the state and of controlling shareholders, in striking the balance between shareholders and corporate management, Chinese law is considerably more favorable to shareholders than the Delaware law. For example, while both jurisdictions require shareholders to have a proper

172. KRAAKMAN ET AL., *supra* note 4, at 29–31 (discussing the asymmetrical principal-agent relationship generally and in corporate environments).

purpose in requesting documents, the requirements under the Chinese law are less stringent than those under the Delaware law.¹⁷³ Moreover, the empirical data of this Article is consistent with the claim that Delaware seems to be more tolerant of attempts to restrict the exercise of inspection rights through the corporate charter, bylaws, or other management actions.¹⁷⁴ In fact, these differences are not unique to inspection rights; rather, in general, while the Delaware corporate law has long had the reputation of being pro-management, its Chinese counterpart has a plausible claim to shareholder-friendly law.¹⁷⁵

This difference arises in large part because corporate governance in China is a three-party game that involves not only shareholders and managers but also, crucially, the state. As a result of China's socialism, the state plays multiple roles in the corporate arena, being an intrusive regulator, a major shareholder, and a defender of "national champions" in which it may or may not hold an equity stake.¹⁷⁶ The state has traditionally held a majority of outstanding shares in, and is the controlling shareholder of, many listed companies.¹⁷⁷ Further, the state has control over, and indirect economic interests in, some of the main institutional investors in China, including the national social security funds and the funds of state-owned financial institutions such as banks, securities firms and insurance companies.¹⁷⁸ Due to the crucial role the state has in so many companies, it is unsurprising that the Chinese company law adopts a pro-shareholder stance on many issues, including inspection rights.

173. Compare Del. Code. Ann. tit. 8, § 220 (West 2010), with 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3.

174. See *supra* Parts II, III.D.

175. By 'shareholder-friendly', we mean that the corporate powers are mostly granted to the shareholders as opposed to the management. See 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at § 37 (for LLC) and § 99 (for JSC). In the US, management decisions fall within the board's exclusive authority to manage the corporation and fundamental corporate decisions such as mergers and charter amendments must be initiated by the board. In China, however, the shareholders have initiation and veto powers in relation to a wide range of matters, including management and personnel issues. Hence, under the shareholder-centric model of corporate governance in China, the main agency problem is not the shareholder-manager conflict, but the conflict between the majority shareholders and the minority shareholders.

176. See Li-Wen Lin & Curtis J. Milhaupt, *We are the (National) Champions: Understanding the Mechanisms of State Capitalism in China*, 65 STAN. L. REV. 697 (2013).

177. See ROBIN HUI HUANG, SECURITIES AND CAPITAL MARKETS LAW IN CHINA 252–53 (2014).

178. See *id.*

C. Governance Strategies versus Litigation Strategies

While Chinese inspection right cases generate useful information for bringing subsequent shareholder suits, the empirical findings in this Article show this use seems to be less frequent than in Delaware: as shown earlier, the ratio of subsequent cases to sampled cases in China is 12.4 percent, which is lower than that in the United States (17.9 percent). A plausible explanation for this difference is that China and the United States rely on different strategies for reducing agency costs in the company.

In general, the legal strategies for controlling agency costs can be broadly divided into two groups, namely governance strategies and regulatory strategies. There are strong complementarities between the structure of share ownership and the types of legal strategies relied upon most heavily to control agency costs.¹⁷⁹ In China, where the ownership of shares is highly concentrated, the shareholders face relatively low coordination costs in taking action.¹⁸⁰ Hence, it is easier for the shareholders to rely on governance strategies to control managers, and also for small shareholders to unite against majority shareholders.

By contrast, in the United States where companies normally have dispersed ownership, the coordination costs for the shareholders are higher.¹⁸¹ This inhibits shareholders' ability to engage in collective action and makes governance strategies less effective. Thus, regulatory strategies are more heavily relied upon in the form of public enforcement actions by regulators and private litigation by shareholders.¹⁸²

Unlike the Delaware board-centric company law, the Chinese company law is shareholder centric, granting the shareholder meeting powers over a wide range of corporate affairs, including the appointment and removal of directors, changing constitutional provisions, the company's capital structure, and direct decision rights over various types of major transactions.¹⁸³ Shareholders can exercise these powers to address corporate governance problems with less need for corporate litigation. Armed with information obtained from inspection right cases, the shareholders can better determine whether to appoint or remove directors; whether to ratify management decisions on key issues; whether to approve the remuneration scheme for directors; whether to exit the company by exercising their appraisal rights in suitable circumstances, or simply selling shares in

179. See KRAAKMAN ET AL., *supra* note 4, at 46.

180. See *supra* Part II.

181. See *supra* Part III.

182. See *supra* Part II.

183. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at § 37 (for LLC) and § 99 (for JSC).

the market; as well as whether and how to bring litigation against corporate management.

D. Procedural Differences in Shareholder Litigation

There are important differences in the types of subsequent shareholder litigation initiated in each of the two countries after shareholder inspection suits. Most importantly, in subsequent litigation, class actions and derivative suits are conspicuously absent in China, while they accounted for 20 percent and 46 percent of all subsequent cases filed in the United States. As will be explained below, there are good reasons for these differences.

China has a civil procedure for collective litigation, which is dubbed the Chinese-style class action, which bears some resemblance to the class action in the United States but also has some important differences.¹⁸⁴ A unique feature of Chinese-style class actions in JSCs (i.e., securities class actions) is the procedural prerequisite that in order to bring a class action for securities fraud misstatements, there must be a prior criminal judgement or administrative sanction decision by the relevant regulators, notably the China Securities Regulatory Commission.¹⁸⁵ This means that securities class actions can only follow public enforcement of securities law. As a result, the shareholder plaintiffs have ready access to relevant information generated in the prior criminal proceeding or administrative sanction decision. Indeed, the civil court can simply rely on the fact finding about securities fraud misstatements from the prior proceeding, such as false accounting records. As a result, there is a very high rate of recovery for the Chinese plaintiff shareholders in securities fraud cases.¹⁸⁶ For the purposes of this Article, this is important because there is little need for the plaintiff shareholders to resort to an inspection suit to obtain relevant information to subsequently initiate legal action.

For derivative actions, Chinese law is broadly similar to US law, but again with some important differences.¹⁸⁷ Similar to the demand requirement in the United States, the Chinese derivative suit regime

184. See Robin Hui Huang, *Rethinking the Relationship between Public Regulation and Private Litigation: Evidence from Securities Class Action in China*, 19 THEORETICAL INQUIRIES L. 333, 339–41 (2018). The key difference is that while the US-style class action adopts an opt-out rule, the Chinese-style class action follows the “opt-in” rule under which in order to become members of a class, the plaintiffs need to register with the court at the time the case is filed, or later bring suits within a prescribed time period.

185. See Robin Hui Huang, *Private Enforcement of Securities Law in China: A Ten-year Retrospective and Empirical Assessment*, 61 AM. J. COMP. L. 757, 764 (2013).

186. See *id.*

187. 2005 PRC Company Law, *supra* note 3, at art. 151.

has a presuit procedural requirement under which before actually filing a derivative suit, the plaintiff needs to first demand in writing that the company (through its board of supervisors) initiate a direct lawsuit against the alleged wrongdoers who caused harm to the company.¹⁸⁸ Once the demand has been made, the plaintiff may proceed to bring the derivative suit if the demand is rejected, or if the demand is not acted upon by the company within thirty days of its receipt.¹⁸⁹ In addition, the plaintiff shareholder can bring a derivative suit without making a demand if the failure to lodge such an action immediately will cause irreparable injury to the company.¹⁹⁰

Empirical research shows that as long as a demand is served to the company and then rejected by the company, the plaintiff shareholder can proceed with the derivative suit, regardless of the company's reason for the rejection.¹⁹¹ In other words, once it has received the demand, the company cannot stop the derivative suit from being instituted unless the company decides to bring action itself. As a result, the Chinese demand requirement seems a pure formality and the shareholder plaintiffs do not need to exercise their inspection rights to obtain information to meet the demand requirement.

In Delaware, however, a stockholder cannot pursue a derivative suit once demand on the board is made because the board is entitled to assume control of the litigation if demand is made. Rather, the plaintiff will usually plead demand futility and seek to disqualify the board from dismissing the case.¹⁹² However, in doing so, they are not entitled to discovery to get relevant information to prove demand futility,¹⁹³ and thus the so-called tools at hand doctrine has been developed in Delaware under which the plaintiffs can use the inspection rights as an information-gathering tool for the purpose of excusing a demand.¹⁹⁴ Thus, it is not surprising that there are a substantial number of subsequent actions filed in the United States, and about sixty-two percent of them are derivative suits.

V. CONCLUSION

This Article shows that shareholder inspection rights play an important role in both the Chinese and the US legal systems. It

188. *Id.*

189. *Id.*

190. *Id.*

191. See Huang, *Derivative Litigation*, *supra* note 44, at 639.

192. See Thomas & Martin, *supra* note 60, at 90–91.

193. *Scatter Corp. v. Chicago Stock Exch., Inc.*, 701 A.2d 70, 77 (Del. 1997).

194. See *Aronson v. Lewis*, 473 A.2d 805, 816 (Del. 1984); *Rales v. Blasband*, 634 A.2d 934 (Del. 1993); *Grimes v. Donald*, 673 A.2d 1207, 1216, 1218 (Del. 1996).

hypothesizes that the primary reason that the law provides for these rights, and that shareholders exercise them, is to help shareholders monitor the actions of corporate management. While Chinese corporate governance and American corporate governance face different sets of agency cost problems, improved shareholder monitoring creates important benefits in both of them.

Shareholder inspection statutes in both countries are broadly similar: each requires that investors make an initial demand on the board, state a proper purpose, and detail the documents sought. However, beneath these similarities there lurk some significant differences. For example, both countries' legal rules require that shareholders state a proper purpose, but the Chinese law creates statutory categories that are limited in scope, whereas the Delaware system relies on broad judge-made categories.

Finally, the empirical analysis of this Article also sheds light on how inspection rights operate on the ground. It finds that many inspection cases are filed in both China and in Delaware. These cases are resolved by the courts relatively quickly. While inspection rights in both countries are frequently used as a presuit discovery device, the types of subsequent litigation that can be filed in each country are quite different.