Stanley Ho, a Hong Kong-born tycoon who built up a casino empire that dominates the busy and highly lucrative gambling scene in Macao, said Tuesday through a lawyer that parts of his family had obtained control of his remaining stake in the business without his consent.

Mr. Ho, who is 89 years old and has been recuperating from brain surgery since 2009, was “very disappointed

and distressed” about a transaction that effectively ceded most of his stake in the casino operations to members of his family, according to his lawyer, Gordon Oldham, senior partner of Oldham, Li & Nie, a law firm in Hong Kong.

“This is robbery,” Mr. Oldham quoted Mr. Ho as having said Tuesday after meeting with him.

He added that Mr. Ho planned to initiate legal proceedings in Hong Kong if the matter were not resolved by Wednesday.

The family members accused by Mr. Ho of wrongdoing said they had acted with his consent.

Adding spice — and considerable confusion — to the story, Mr. Ho appeared to relent only hours after these disagreements became public. In a letter to the family members in question, which was distributed to the news media by a public relations firm acting for them, Mr. Ho wrote that he had, after all, intended to make the transaction, and that he had done so voluntarily and after careful consideration.

The letter added that he was in good health, and bore a shaky signature.

Made public late on Tuesday, it added that Mr. Oldham and the law firm had been dismissed — though Bloomberg News on Wednesday morning reported that Mr. Oldham had rejected family statements that everything was settled, and said he was still acting on Mr. Ho’s instructions.

Mr. Ho is a household name in Hong Kong and Macao, the tiny former Portuguese colony on the coast of southeast China across the Pearl River Delta from Hong Kong.

The casino and hotel business Mr. Ho built up over half a century capitalized first on a gambling monopoly it once held in Macao and, more recently, on the soaring numbers of visitors from mainland China.

His business has continued to thrive despite fierce competition from rivals like the Las Vegas casino baron Sheldon G. Adelson , whose investments in the city have led to an explosion of new casinos that now stud an area called the Cotai Strip.

SJM Holdings, which operates the more than a dozen casinos set up by Mr. Ho over and is listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, has a market value of about 75 billion Hong Kong dollars, or $9.6 billion, according to Bloomberg.

And in January, Forbes magazine ranked Mr. Ho as the 13th-richest person in Hong Kong, with an estimated fortune of $3.1 billion.

Mr. Ho, his lawyer said Tuesday, has always intended to divide his fortune up equally among his four families.

A filing to the stock exchange Monday appeared to represent just such a step. The announcement said Mr. Ho's casino assets were now effectively in the hands of Action Winner and Ranillo, two companies controlled by members of the sprawling family.

Mr. Ho said early Tuesday, through Mr. Oldham, that the transaction had been made without his consent — only to do an apparent about-face, judging by the letter released later in the day.

Just another multibillion-dollar family squabble that has now been resolved? Perhaps. Or perhaps not.

Whatever the outcome of these complex twists and turns, the episode highlighted the potential pitfalls that family-controlled companies face in handing over the management and ownership of business empires to the next generation.

While this is a global phenomenon, the history of places like Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, combined with aspects of Chinese culture, means that family succession and inheritance plans are often left to fester for longer, analysts say.

Patriarchs frequently work far beyond the typical retirement age in the West, and many of Hong Kong's most prominent tycoons are in their 70s and 80s.

Often, too, Chinese entrepreneurs drag their feet in clarifying the question of who exactly will take over their empires.

This is a phenomenon that is common in Chinese culture, where estate and succession planning tend to be less proactively discussed than in Western cultures, according to a report written in 2009 by two U.S. academics, Ivan Lansberg and Kelin E. Gersick.

Source: http://news.google.com/news/url?sa=t&fd=R&usg=AFQjCNHnISZuDdHpmNj0dod_jyxTuGCunA&url=http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/business/global/26casino.html?src=busln