

**REVIEWER #2:**

The authors develop a novel population downscaling approach that apply stacking ensemble learning and geospatial big data to produce 100-m population grids data. The RF, XGBoost, and LightGBM are combined to stack ensemble learning. Results show high accuracy and the proposed downscaling approach indeed provide a valuable option for producing gridded population datasets. However, there are still some problems to solve.

Response:

Many thanks for your valuable suggestions and we deeply improved the manuscript according to your comments.

1. The Introduction is well written. However, the author still need to add some research progress about the population estimation. The author should also add more about the machine learning method and ensemble learning method, and their comparison.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We added recent research progress about the population estimation and the comparison between machine learning and ensemble learning.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 54-56 and 69-75.

[Apart from estimating population grids at the national scale in China, recent similar efforts have been made for individual cities and provinces (Guo et al., 2023a; Yang et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023). Additionally, several global gridded population datasets are available for China, including LandScan and WorldPop (Bright and Coleman, 2000; Tatem, 2017).]

[Ensemble learning is a technique in machine learning and focuses on combining multiple algorithms to improve the overall performance and robustness of predictions (Dong et al., 2020). Stacking learning is considered to be one of the most effective ensemble learning techniques due to its utilization of a training mechanism to merge the predictions of individual machine learning algorithms (Costache and Bui, 2019). Ensemble learning has been widely recognized its merits in various applications (Dong et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2023). For instance, Yao et al. (2022) demonstrated the stacking ensemble learning outperformed typical individual machine learning algorithms in evaluating flash flood susceptibility.]

2. In line 110, the authors used the NTL data, and resample it into 100m. The authors should clarify the method for resampling.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We added the used method (i.e., bilinear resampling method) in the revised manuscript.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 113-115 and 130-131.

[A projection transformation was conducted and the bilinear resampling process was further implemented to convert it into a 100-m Tencent user density image, as illustrated in Figure 2 (a).]

[The original VIIRS NTL image, initially at a resolution of 500-m, was resampled by the bilinear algorithm to a 100-m NTL image as one covariate, as depicted in Figure 2 (d).]

3. There are some expressions that should be more rigorous, such as “100 grid” in line 105 should be “100m grid”

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We revised these typos.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 120.

4. The authors used the DEM and Slope features from ALOS data for the population downscaling. However, did DEM and Slope features have strong correlation with population density. In west of China, such as Chongqing, population also distributed in areas with large elevation and slope.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We followed previous studies on global and national population grid estimations and DEM and slope features may be associated with population distribution. It is indeed that the two features do not have strong correlation with population distribution according to the results of feature importance for the two features. Even though, machine learning algorithms are different from linear regression and they can automatically reduce the impact of independent variables that are not strongly correlated to dependent variable. We also added the descriptions for this issue.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 140-141.

[Digital elevation model (DEM) data are widely used in population downscaling, such as the WorldPop dataset (Tatem, 2017; Stevens et al., 2015) and the gridded population estimations in China (Cheng et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2019; Tu et al., 2022).]

5. The authors applied the inhabited area data to enhance the accuracy of gridded population estimates. The authors should clarify the data and method to extract the inhabited area. There are also some errors for this step, and how to minimize this problem.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We added the calculation of the inhabited area.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 160-161 and 175-178.

[According to the inhabited area definition (Baynes et al., 2022; Tu et al., 2022), these areas should contain at least one none-zero human activity-related covariates.]

[(2) Extracting the inhabited area. Six 100-m covariates (i.e., Tencent user density, POI density, road density, NTL image, building height, and percentage of built area) were used to generate the gridded inhabited area. According to the definition of inhabited area, this was calculated using the logic operations of the Map Algebra tool in ArcMap. If a grid contains at least one none-zero value in each of the six covariates, the grid is designated as the inhabited area.]

6. The training data and test data are essential for the population estimation. The authors should introduce more about this.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

The training and tests were described in Section 2.1. According to your comment, we also added the description for training and test sets.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 96-99.

[That is to say, all counties in Figure 1 (a) and the towns in Figure 1 (b) were combined to train the base models and the stacking ensemble learning for estimating population grids. The remaining 15% of town-level census data were formed as the test set, as depicted in Figure 1 (c). The test samples were randomly distributed across China, indicating their feasibility for evaluating the fitted models.]

7. The stacking ensemble learning is the important part of this work. What is the technical innovation of proposed method when compared with other method. What is the technical reference for similar studies.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We added the technical innovation and our advantages in the revised manuscript.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 352-357.

[This study offers three main advantages compared to previous studies. First, we employed stacking ensemble learning to leverage the strengths of three popular machine learning algorithms (i.e., random forest, XGBoost, and LightGBM) and it can improve the overall performance and robustness of the gridded population estimation. Previous studies on estimating population grids often relied on a single machine learning algorithm and random forest was the most common choice (Cheng et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2019). The results in Table 2 show that PopSE had better performance than the three base models, including random forest.]

8. The discussion part should be deeper about the methods, result comparison, advantages and disadvantages, model transferability, validation, future research prospect and etc.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We improved the discussion parts to add the advantages and future works for this work. Meanwhile, Section 5.2 was improved in depth.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 352-362 and 375-379.

[This study offers three main advantages compared to previous studies. First, we employed stacking ensemble learning to leverage the strengths of three popular machine learning algorithms (i.e., random forest, XGBoost, and LightGBM) and it can improve the overall performance and robustness of the gridded population estimation. Previous studies on estimating population grids often relied on a single machine learning algorithm and random forest was the most common choice (Cheng et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2019). The results in Table 2 show that PopSE had better performance than the three base models, including random forest. Second, we utilized a variety of geospatial big datasets to predict accurate population grids and delineate the inhabited area to enhance population estimation. Previous studies often lacked either abundant covariates or detailed inhabited area data for national-scale population grid estimation (Cheng et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2020c). Third, the proposed PopSE and geospatial big data were used to generate a 100-meter gridded population dataset from China's seventh census. This dataset outperformed two widely-used gridded population datasets (i.e., LandScan and WorldPop).]

[Future work could benefit from incorporating more sophisticated and powerful algorithms into PopSE. Meanwhile, the use of high-quality covariates is crucial for generating accurate gridded population datasets. With the increasing availability of higher-resolution data, integrating more of these high-quality covariates can further enhance the accuracy of gridded population datasets. In

addition, the proposed method can be applied to other regions and time periods for generating gridded population datasets.]

9. The figure should be improved. For figure4, the text is too large. Figure 5 should clarify more about the ensemble learning. Figure 7 should be more standard and beautiful. Figure 8 should show the comparison between existing products and estimated results, not only the existing products. The unit of y-axis in Figure 10 should be clarified.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We revised the text size in Figure 4. We added description for Figure 5 to clarify the PopSE. We revised Figure 7 and Figure 9 to be standard. The result of the proposed PopSE is shown in Figure 6 and existing two products are shown in Figure 8 for the comparison. There is no unit of y-axis in Figure 10 as the value in y-axis is the feature importance.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 223-226.

[As shown in Figure 5, each base model was trained using four-fold training data and the fitted base model generated the prediction of the out-of-fold data. After five iterations, the five predictions from each base model were combined to form new features for the meta model. The new feature set from the three base models was then used to fit the meta model, completing the stacking ensemble learning process.]

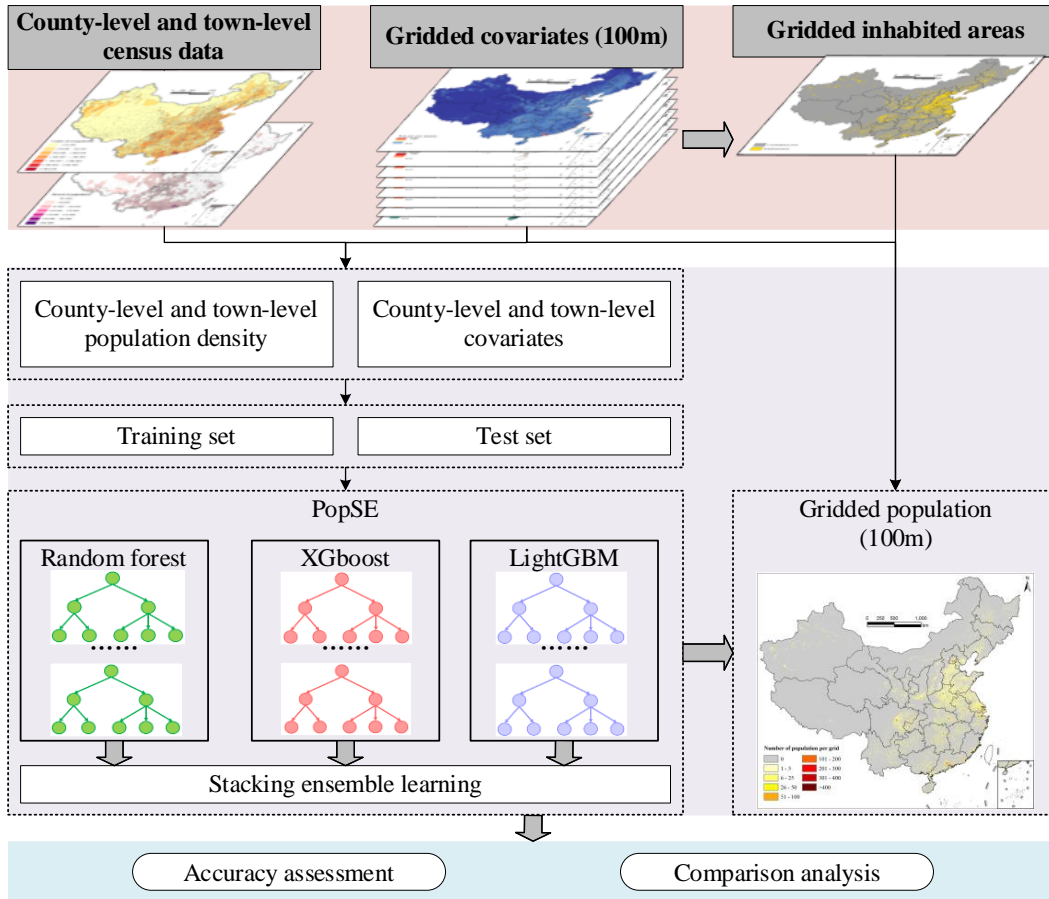


Figure 4: Framework of generating population grids for China.

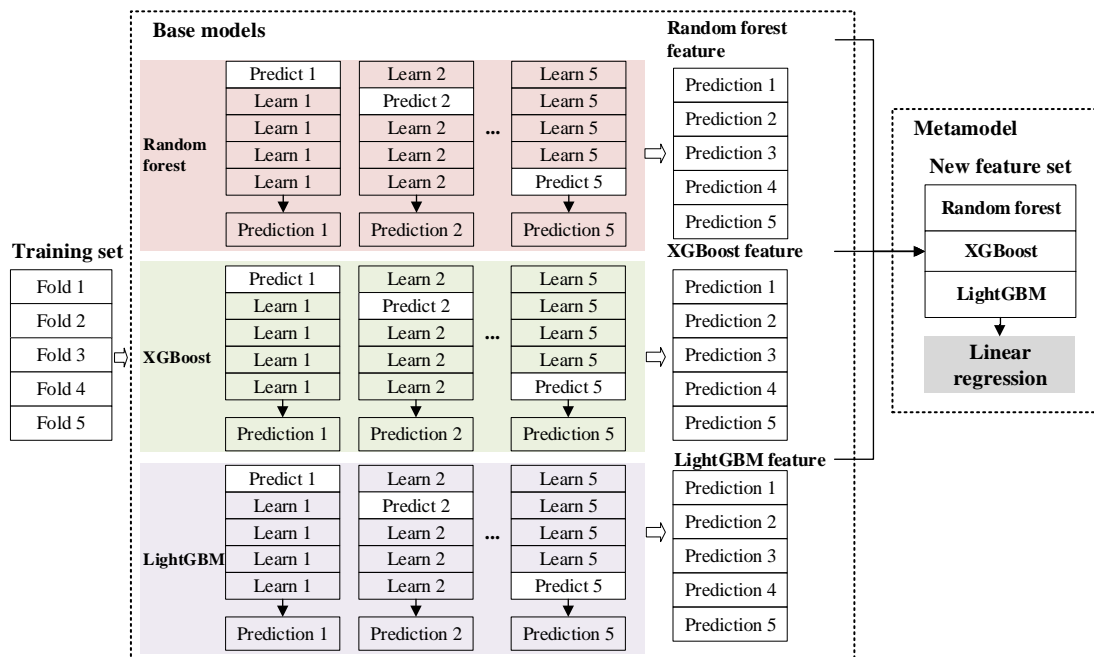


Figure 5: Procedure of PopSE.

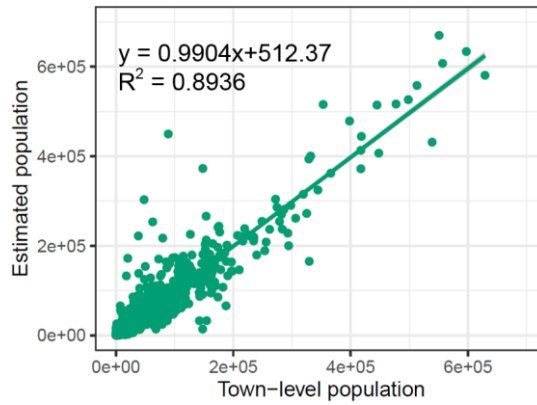


Figure 7: Accuracy of the 100-m gridded population map of China by PopSE.

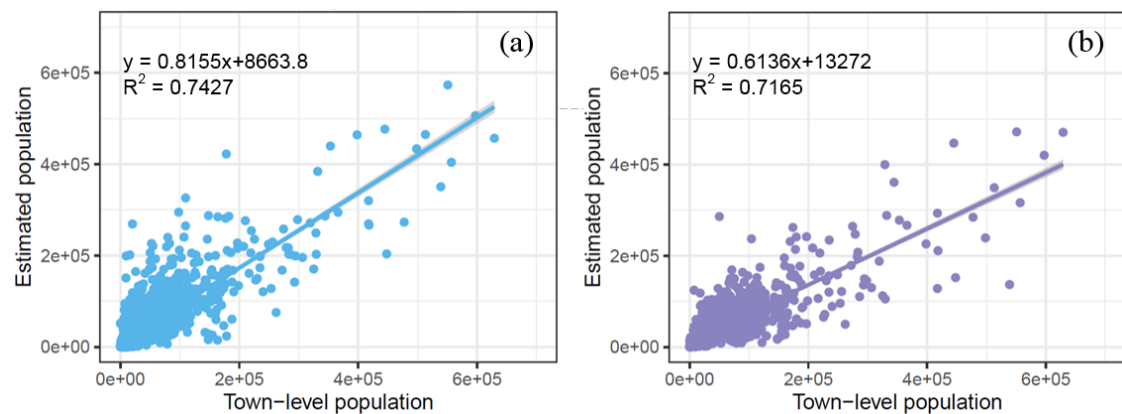


Figure 9: Accuracy of two existing gridded population maps of China in 2020. (a) WorldPop and (b) LandScan.

10. There are lots of good information and findings to highlight for the paper. What is the main contribution of this work from the perspective of technical problem. Please add accordingly in the abstract and conclusion parts.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We added the technical innovation in abstract and conclusion parts.

Added or revised contents:

Line numbers in the revised manuscript: Line 13-16 and 385-387.

[The proposed approach employs stacking ensemble learning to integrate the strengths of random forest, XGBoost, and LightGBM through fusing their predictions in a training mechanism and it

delineates the inhabited areas from geospatial big data to enhance the gridded population estimation.]

[It aimed to employ stacking ensemble learning to combine the advantages of individual base models of random forest, XGBoost, and LightGBM. By integrating the predictions of these base models, the overall performance and robustness of gridded population estimation were enhanced compared to individual algorithms.]

11. The manuscript still exhibits minor issues in language expression, including spelling and grammatical errors. For example, some sentences in the introduction are overly complex, and the transitions between different viewpoints could be made smoother.

Response:

Thanks for your suggestion.

We checked the manuscript thoroughly and we revised the errors.