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Pollution from fuel so dirty it can only be burned on the high seas is making its way back to land — and causing premature deaths, scientists say.

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Arnulfo Franco / AP

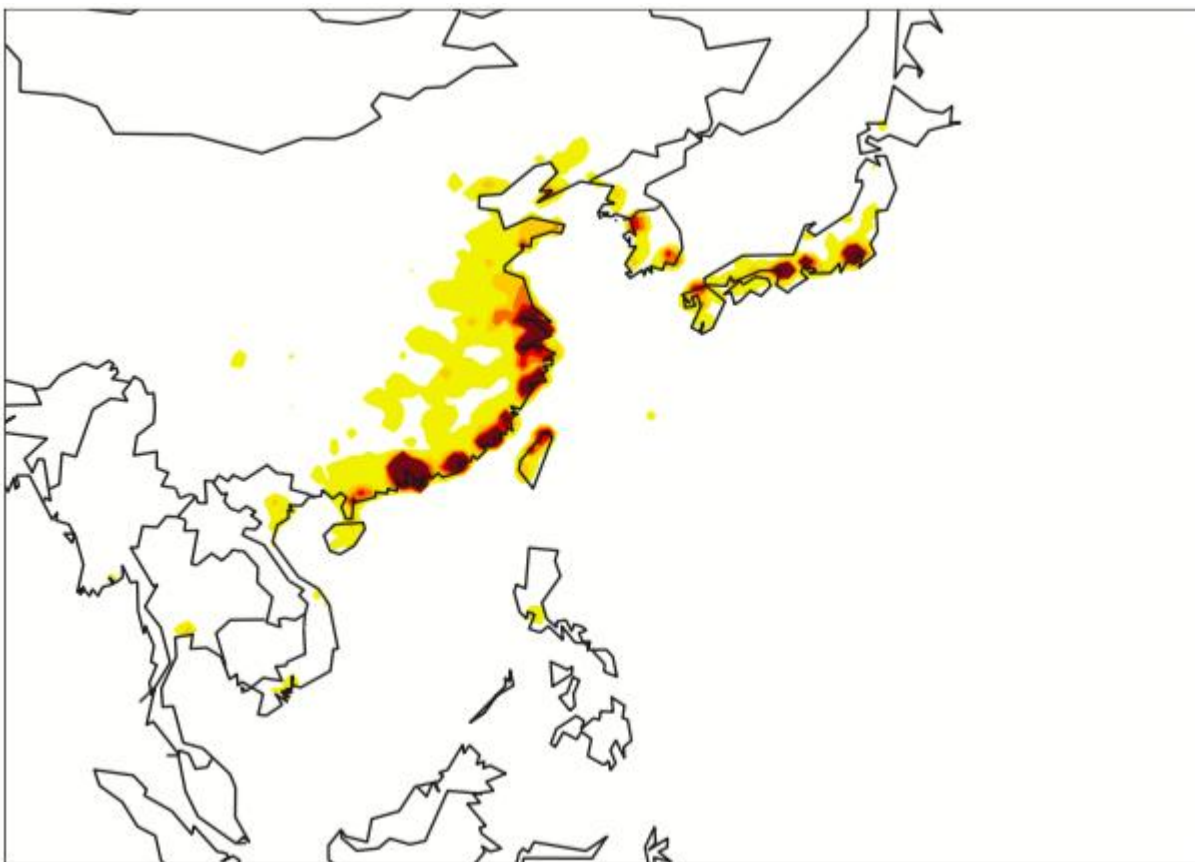
A new study shows that a spike in cheap goods shipped from East Asia has come at a hidden but deadly cost to residents there.

Massive plumes of pollution from cargo ships plying the waters off the coasts of China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan — often headed to Western markets — has led to the premature deaths of an estimated 14,500 to 37,500 people every year in those countries.

That's according to a [study](#) of ship traffic in East Asia published on Monday. The deadly pollution from these ships, researchers say, takes the form of tiny particles, often the remnants of the dirty fuels burned by cargo ships.

The thick, sludgy fuel used on many cargo ships is cheap but loaded with sulfur that, when burned, releases particles so small they can remain suspended in the air for months. Wafting over the Sea of Japan or East China Sea to coastal cities, the smoke can lead to lung and heart problems among residents.

Here's where people are prematurely dying from East Asian shipping emissions:



Red = highest concentration Huan Liu et al, Nature Climate Change / Via nature.com

Refineries make the ships' sulfur-laden fuel as one of the byproducts of lighter fuels

